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Craft and identity at Boncuklu Höyük: stone bead technology

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Beads are one of the rare expressions of social and personal identity that are found in the archaeological record of the Neolithic period and can also help us identify early examples of specialised craft production. Boncuklu Höyük (literally 'Beady Hill') is an early sedentary Pre-Pottery Neolithic site (late ninth to early eighth millennium BC) near Çatalhöyük in the Konya plain, where beads are being used to answer a variety of questions. How did raw materials come to the site? What were the technologies and processes involved in the production of beads? How did those who made the beads view themselves in relation to others in the community? What part did such manufacturing play in the development of specialised craft production? What are the implications of technological choices for incipient sedentary societies? And how can early craft specialisation be identified in the archaeological record?

The relatively small but very varied stone bead and pendant assemblage from Boncuklu has provided evidence for all stages of stone bead manufacture at the site, as well as showing that beads were carefully looked after and reused even when broken. The Konya plain provides an ideal setting to study the procurement of raw material as there is no natural stone found within the area, only in the bed of the river and the surrounding mountains. As a result of the methodology employed at Boncuklu, the locales in which manufacturing processes took place at the site, in and around the buildings, are clear.

This year's project is focused on identifying the technologies that were employed in bead manufacture by carrying out a series of experiments in bead production. The landscape around the site has been explored to identify the nearby sources of stone and the samples collected have been manipulated by chipping, drilling and abrading. The resulting experimental pieces will be studied by microscope to identify use-wear patterns and technological 'signatures' which can be compared with the archaeological artefacts. It is already clear that the different materials used provided different challenges for the manufacturer. For example, some of the volcanic rocks that were chosen were very hard (Moh's 5.5–7) and therefore considerably more difficult to drill and shape than the very common local limestones. The way that beads were made, the time that was taken in manufacture, the tools that were necessary and the areas of the site in which production took place provide vital clues to the place that production processes took within the daily life of the settlement. The role of craft production in incipient sedentary societies is of great importance for our understanding of the development of social differentiation as a precursor to eventual social stratification. It seems clear that increasingly specialised activities led to differentiation in roles within society and that this process may have been dynamic rather than purely linear in its progress.

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Geometric clay objects

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The Neolithic in southwest Asia was a pivotal transitional time in human history. It witnessed salient changes in settlement structure, social cohesion, subsistence activities and artistic expression. The Neolithic notably saw the appearance of the world's first sedentary farming villages, a profound development. An enigmatic feature of the Neolithic period is the appearance of small, geometric-shaped clay objects, or 'tokens', at a small number of early agricultural villages in Anatolia, Iran, Syria and north Mesopotamia towards the start of the period (ca 8000 BC). By the later Neolithic (ca mid seventh to sixth millennium BC) they are present in abundance at a large number of sites throughout southwest Asia, yet remain absent at others. Tokens continue to be present in west Asia into the second millennium BC, spreading into south Mesopotamia. A clear link between recording, administration and the objects is evident from the invention of writing in south Mesopotamia in the mid fourth millennium BC. However, until the last decade, the potential importance of these peculiar objects was frequently unrecognised, with work focused on the later objects only.

My research comprises a detailed study of the form, use and distribution (temporal and geographic) of these small, geometric clay objects, as well as the contexts in which they are found. It constitutes a novel investigation, tracing the development of the objects throughout the Neolithic period, incorporating evidence from different sites and regions. By focusing on the initial appearance of tokens I hope to re-evaluate the validity of current interpretations of their use (for example as recording devices, gaming pieces and children's toys). My study addresses key questions relating directly to the objects. Did they have immediate and symbolic meaning for people at the start of the Neolithic. Did they directly affect how people organised their lives? Were they used to represent specific commodities, being used to aid in the counting, recording, storage and distribution of goods? Wider questions focus on why tokens are only found at some sites, the characteristic features that link these settlements together and whether there was a shared symbolic system across the entire Neolithic period and southwest Asia region.

Two Turkish sites, Boncuklu Höyük and Çatalhöyük, and Tell Sabi Abyad in Syria are my main case-studies. I have undertaken fieldwork at each, recording in person detailed observations related to over 1,500 objects. Other research is being undertaken by reviewing published records, identifying other Anatolian and west Asian Neolithic sites yielding tokens, noting the presence/absence of tokens at all Neolithic sites, and recording the objects in detail where published.

Understanding the development of possible early recording systems will provide vital insights into the nature of early farming communities, as well as the emergence of writing and associated social technologies that are important features in the development of social complexity.