

Kerkenes: 20 years of research and exploration

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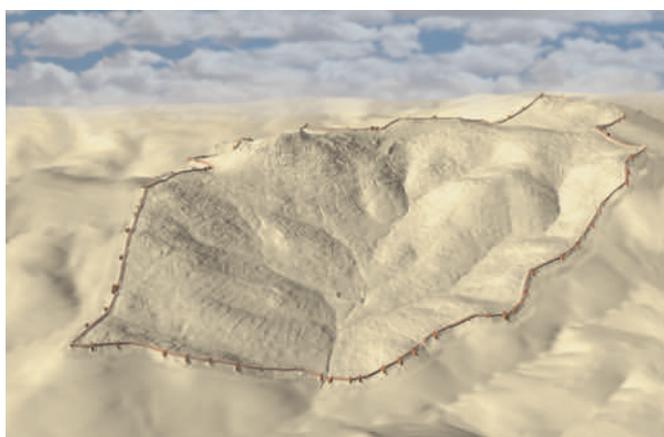
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2012 was the 20th and last year of our archaeological research at the Iron Age capital on the Kerkenes Dağ. Each year has brought surprises, re-evaluations and new perspectives. As our knowledge and understanding increased, some ideas and interpretations had to be abandoned, others modified. Final publication of excavations at the Cappadocia Gate and the Palatial Complex are well advanced, but these will not be the last word on Kerkenes, a most remarkable site that doubtless holds many more secrets which will not easily be given up.

The future of exploration is now in other hands, with Scott Branting from the University of Chicago continuing his long-term research into urban dynamics and Abdulkadir Baran from Muğla University beginning new large-scale work, both under the auspices of the Yozgat Museum. The time is thus ripe for a retrospective overview.

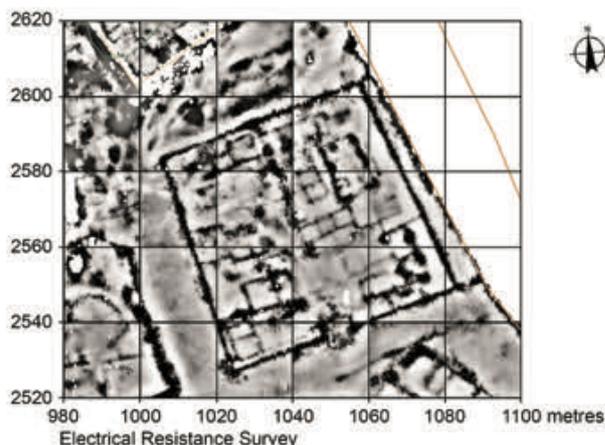
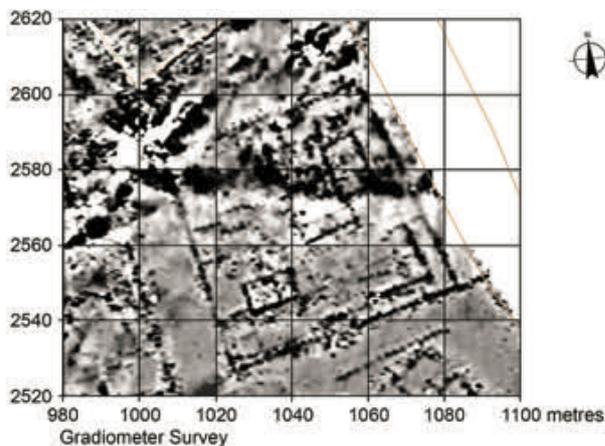


The ancient city on the Kerkenes Dağ photographed from the Cloud 9 hot-air balloon in 1993



Simulation of Kerkenes made in ArcView 3D Analyst and Adobe Photoshop with the 7km defensive circuit

In 1993 we began with remote sensing, principally photography with a tethered blimp and geophysics. Electrical resistance survey continues to be a major research tool, revealing new and unexpected imagery while the vegetation is still green each spring.



Gradiometer and electrical resistance survey images of an urban block in the northern sector of the city

Developments in technology, both hardware and software, made a huge impact on the development of the research design as well as on the everyday conduct of research. Desktops and laptops now have gigabytes of memory, software permits rapid processing of huge data sets and production of stunning graphics, digital photography has revolutionised field and laboratory practice and, were it to be redone, would make fast and simple the stitching together of photographs taken with balloons. Differential GPS allowed Scott Branting to make accurate simulations of the surface from which photographs and geophysical data can be transformed into three-dimensional images. There are however downsides, such as the cost of updating equipment and frustrations caused by incompatibility of current and old programs with new operating systems. A continual headache is the archiving of so much digital data and updating storage capacities. The World-Wide Web

made wide and rapid dissemination of results a pillar of our approach. Fundamental to the initial research design was a shift from earlier practices when it was possible to dig relatively large areas with considerable numbers of workmen. The new strategy was to conduct survey using different techniques of remote sensing over large areas supplemented by a few carefully located test trenches to help interpretation of geophysical results. As several of the remote-sensing platforms neared completion, the need to shift the focus towards excavation on a larger scale became overwhelming. However, application for a full excavation permit necessitated construction of a depot and field laboratory together with a promise of medium-term funding. These conditions were met through five years of collaboration with David Stronach and his team from the University of California, Berkeley.

The end of a first season of collaborative work was marked by a large gathering on 11 August 1999, when the path of a total solar eclipse just bypassed Kerkenes. At the next total eclipse, 6 March 2006, Kerkenes was at the centre of the track and the weather perfect. Spectators from far and near witnessed 'the day turning into night', Herodotus' description of the 585 BC Battle of the Eclipse, which, in his untrustworthy account, ended a war between Medes and Lydians.

Several lessons have been learnt or re-learned from excavation. First, and in some ways disappointingly, has been the realisation that regardless of the exceptional clarity of remote-sensing imagery, gaining an adequate understanding requires excavation on a scale commensurate with the site and the structures under investigation. Large-scale excavation, however, raises issues of conservation and preservation where regulations do not permit routine backfilling. A few small test trenches did not answer larger questions, and indeed could be misleading.

The entire city at Kerkenes was put to the torch, resulting in severe cracking and even melting of granite in walling laced with timber. Added to this ancient destruction are the vicissitudes of climate, with harsh winters and long freeze-thaw cycles. A grant from the US Ambassador's Fund for

Cultural Preservation has made possible restoration of a portion of the stone glacis at the Cappadocia Gate, and demonstrated that much more could easily be done with bottomless budgets (cover picture). Vertical walling at the gate is more challenging. The most successful approach to date has proved to be the rebuilding of wall faces in character with the original construction which included the incorporation of horizontal timbers at regular intervals. This will require maintenance, and even treated timbers are unlikely to last more than 50 years. No attempt has been made to render these walls in mud plaster, as they once were.

What, then, has been discovered, and how do these discoveries fit into a bigger picture. Here we can do no more than outline our current conclusions and remark on the most exceptional of the finds. Identification of the city with the Pteria of Herodotus has gained broad acceptance and, while it cannot be said to have been proven, no ready alternative presents itself. Archaeological evidence shows that the city was a new foundation on a low mountain, selected no doubt for its broad strategic location, the fine views it afforded, its defensible qualities and a sufficiency of water. Its foundation was an act of strength that exuded power, dominance and wealth: it was intended to intimidate. The city was protected by 7km of strong stone defences pierced by just seven gates, one of which, our Cappadocia Gate, has been fully excavated.

The date of the foundation is probably to be placed no earlier than the mid seventh century BC, after the death of King Midas. This approximate dating is supported by pottery and by sculptural style. We are on firmer ground when it comes to the date of the destruction, surely connected with the Battle of Pteria fought between Croesus and Cyrus the Great, when Pteria itself was crushed between the super-powers of the day, Lydia and Persia. Earlier, the Pterians, who as we shall see were of Phrygian origin, would have been on the side of the Medes in their conflict with Lydia, since Phrygia itself was subjugated by Croesus. Thus archaeology has shed much light on these shadowy times and hinted at events recounted, in ways difficult to evaluate, by Herodotus.



The ivory excavated in 1996, probably from a throne or a similar piece of temple furniture. Pairs of goats and sheep occupy the right side, a stag at left would have been followed by a doe and another pair of wild animals

The city does not seem to have been burnt when it was captured, although further excavation could yet demonstrate otherwise. Once alight it would have burnt for several days, the column of smoke being visible over all its territory. Everyone would have known that Pteria was destroyed in a deliberate act of terror. Everywhere we have dug there is evidence for looting and the smashing of sculptures before buildings were set alight. At the Cappadocia Gate, two people attempting to flee through the heat and smoke were killed as timbers in the wall faces burnt, causing the masonry to collapse. We will never know whether these two unfortunates were alone or the last stragglers of a larger throng, but it is likely that one of them threw down the exquisite gold ornament that featured on the cover of the 2011 edition of *Heritage Turkey*. This and another unique ornament, a sumptuous ivory furniture plaque embellished with amber, gold leaf and inlay, discovered in 1996 are perhaps Ionian or, more probably, Lydian pieces. Whether it was the pieces themselves that were imported or the craftsmen who made them, they signal an élite taste for the finest artistic products of the greater Mediterranean world. Less valuable, but certainly more curious, is part of the jaw of a crocodile from the Nile recovered amongst rubbish associated with the Audience Hall.

Who, then, were the founders and inhabitants of Pteria? The language, on a monumental stone inscription from the Palatial Complex and graffiti on pottery, is Old Phrygian. In fact, every aspect of Kerkenes turns out to be Phrygian: the stone defences and plan of the Cappadocia Gate have clear parallels at Gordion; the tradition of freestanding buildings comprising a hall and anteroom provided with a double pitched roof of thatch echoes buildings on the citadel at the Phrygian capital and rock-cut architectural façades in the Highlands; semi-iconic idols, typical manifestations of Phrygian cult, were set up at gates and entrances as well as represented by graffiti. Life-sized sculpture in the round from the Monumental Entrance to the Palatial Complex has its closest parallels in much smaller Phrygian ivory carving. Remarkably, a fragment from the statue of a goddess, presumably Kybele, set up on a base embellished with a pair of sphinxes in deep relief, sports not one but three brooches of Phrygian type.

One seemingly inescapable conclusion, therefore, is that the foundation of this exceptional capital represents the movement of a very large group of people from somewhere in central or western Phrygia across the Kızılırmak (the Halys river) to create a new kingdom to the east of Phrygia. Little more than 100 years later, perhaps less, this city of Pteria was destroyed and abandoned.

All of this was completely unexpected when we arrived at Kerkenes with a blimp, two cylinders of helium and two young daughters, 20 years ago. The vehicle was our own second-hand Ford Escort estate, with only two doors and the steering wheel on the right. We were immediately welcomed at Şahmuratlı village where, over the years, the disused village

hall has been transformed into the core of an excavation house, above which the Eco-Center has grown and the splendid Erdoğan Akdağ Center for Research and Education acts as a base for hosting students and visitors as well as providing facilities for the excavation. This year, 2012, the 1974 blue Ford Escort estate was laid to rest at the Turkish Customs.



Kerkenes House and blue Ford Escort in 1993

The list of team members, colleagues, friends, local and national officials as well as individuals, institutions and corporations that have provided building materials, funds and support would fill several pages. It would be invidious to mention some and not others and here we can only express our sincere gratitude to all the participants and to those who have supported the Kerkenes Project since 1993. Here too, we should mention the Eco-Center that was inaugurated as a way of making the archaeology communal and of providing benefit to the village that hosted the expedition. Some of its successes have been influential internationally while others have brought long-term improvements to the village. Its future, however, is at this point uncertain...



The Erdoğan Akdağ Center hosting visitors at the Kerkenes Eco-Center