

Growing up in the Anatolian Neolithic

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The site of Aşıklı Höyük, near Aksaray on the Anatolian plateau, represents the earliest settlement in central Turkey. At least 8,300 years ago, people began to come together to live, settling on the banks of the Melendiz river. Archaeological excavation by the Aşıklı Höyük Research Team from Istanbul University is slowly uncovering the fascinating history of these ancient inhabitants of Cappadocia using a wide variety of scientific and archaeological analytical techniques. Specialists in identifying the remains of animals and plants are working alongside experts in mud-brick building techniques to recreate – both in the laboratory and in the real world – the conditions of this early settlement in order to understand what life would have been like at Aşıklı Höyük: how and what people ate, where they lived and how they structured their small community. Many questions remain to be answered by archaeological investigation, and one of the new investigations which started this year, funded by a study grant awarded by the British Institute at Ankara, looks at understanding not just the way that people in general lived their lives, but at mapping out the life histories of individuals, as locked into the structure of their teeth.

Teeth are a unique source of information on how people in the past lived. Because teeth grow once, during childhood, and never remodel, they form a perfect record of a person's childhood experiences. They can include a record of different chemicals and chemical ratios which gives clues about what the individual ate and where they lived, as well as giving a week-by-week account of childhood growth. Because teeth grow in a regular, predictable fashion, we can tell when growth has faltered and, using these regular structures, we can work out the timing of events in a child's early life that caused growth to falter: such as episodes of fever, disease or malnutrition. Using microscopic analysis it is possible to reconstruct a weekly schedule of growth from tiny wave-like structures that line the surface of the teeth, perikymata.

In this new project, dental casts accurate to the micron level have been taken from the teeth of several burials from Aşıklı Höyük. These will be made into epoxy replicas that will be lightly coated in gold so that they can be viewed under the microscope. By counting the perikymata and noting when they have not grown normally, an unparalleled level of detail about childhood health and the growth of children who lived in Anatolia more than eight millennia ago will be revealed (see figure of replica tooth covered in gold: the gap in the lines is a hypoplastic defect of enamel, which is evidence of growth disruption). This project will in turn help archaeologists to understand the many different factors that went into the formation of this unique, early settlement at the dawn of civilisation.



Everyday architectural decoration in the late antique city

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This research deals with the architectural decoration of late antique modest structures in the region of the eastern Mediterranean and is part of a project entitled 'Visualizing the late antique city: everyday life AD 300–650'. Although the decoration of monumental structures of this period, especially ecclesiastical and imperial ones, is well synthesised, this is not true of street porticoes, shops, workshops, modest houses, small baths and churches, regardless of the fact that they were major elements of every urban built environment. In recent decades, academic debates have erupted over the changing topography of the fourth to sixth century city, yet few can picture quotidian urban life at this period and we have no image to offer the wider public. To provide realistic urban images it is essential to consider not only major public structures but also in-between spaces, and, above all, to concentrate not just on the great capital of Constantinople, but also on smaller provincial cities, which provide some of the best-preserved examples (especially those of Asia Minor, for example Ephesus, Pergamon, Sardis, Side, Selge, Sagalassos). Hitherto, the empirical data to permit this visualisation have not been collected.

In this framework, my research aims to bring together all the empirical data that exist for the architectural decoration of street porticoes, shops, modest houses, small baths and churches of the late antique city in the eastern Mediterranean so as to understand better the everyday visual and social experience of urban life. Along with the evidence of architectural decoration, a focal point will be the evidence for light fittings, shutters and textile hangings which might have modified the appearance of these structures. The research will consider how this decoration, which might not have attracted as great an investment as that of monumental buildings, aged, weathered and was repaired, helping to reconstruct more realistically how it once looked in its spatial setting. In this context, this study will also examine the views of ancient authors as to whether the weathering and ageing of the decoration added value or took it away from these late antique buildings.

Given the condition of the evidence, which is widely scattered rather than concentrated in one sub-region or site, the research will compile gazetteers of dated examples of decoration. These data will be analysed to support discussion concerning the regional and chronological distribution of different types of decoration and the social and functional significance they conveyed. The range of sites selected for this study will allow the evidence of architectural decoration to be interpreted and reconstructed at an empirical level by setting particular site observations into a broader context.

This research seeks to contribute to making the late antique city accessible, especially to the general public for whom the late antique city means little, if anything.