

Pathways of communication: roads and routes in Anatolia from prehistory to Seljuk times

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Over three days in March 2014, the conference ‘Pathways of communication: roads and routes in Anatolia from prehistory to Seljuk times’ took place in the historic Farabi Auditorium, the largest conference venue of the Faculty of Languages, History and Geography at Ankara University. This event was an element of the British Institute at Ankara’s Divisions, Connections and Movements: Rethinking Regionality research programme, which has been funded by the British Academy. It was co-organised by the BIAA and Ankara University, and ran extremely smoothly thanks to the organisational talents of Leonidas Karakatsanis, who, in turn, was able to count on excellent help from several archaeology students and assistants from Ankara University. Over the course of the event, more than 450 people attended and participated in the discussions.

The aim of the conference was to bring together philologists, ancient historians, epigraphers, ancient geography specialists and archaeologists to discuss the ancient routes and roads of Anatolia from different perspectives and to develop a diachronic perspective on their use and development from the earliest beginnings to the end of the Seljuk period. Thus, 14 speakers were invited to deliver keynote papers on overarching topics, and each of these papers was presented in combination with two or three others which highlighted specific aspects of the theme introduced by the keynote address. The positive response to the call for papers permitted the scientific committee, composed of Douglas Baird (University of Liverpool), Kutalmış Görkay (Ankara University), John Haldon (Princeton University), Michele Massa (UCL, Koç University’s Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations), Stephen Mitchell (University of Exeter, BIAA) and myself, to choose from many promising proposals for papers and to select those that would, together, generate the most coherent programme.

The conference started off with a panel on maps, digital mapping and related possibilities and difficulties in the digital era; this was followed by a panel on digital approaches to roads and networks. These two panels set a general framework for the other ten sections that were broadly arranged in a chronological order, apart from one panel that had a thematic subject and dealt with sea routes.

The chronological arrangement highlighted several gaps in our knowledge. Whereas the papers on earlier prehistory by necessity dealt with communication and long-distance trade routes without developed roads, other contributions made it clear that this situation may have changed already in the course of the third millennium BC, when the combined action of pack animals and wheeled vehicles may have helped shape better-defined roads. However, the pathways and extent of Bronze Age roads/routes can only be elicited by



Conference participants and organisers outside the event venue at Ankara University.

comparing the scant archaeological evidence with later road networks. This is despite the fact that written evidence clearly indicates the existence of a well-defined road system in Hittite times, as the panel devoted to that topic nicely demonstrated. Surprisingly, the information we have on routes and roads through Anatolia between the Hittite and the Hellenistic periods is thin and patchy for many regions of Turkey throughout the Iron Age. Even for the Hellenistic period a large question mark remains over the appearance, density and course of roads.

This is partly due to the expansion of the built-road system in the Roman imperial period. The contributions to the conference clearly showed the wealth of material from this period. Not only are paved stretches of roads preserved, so too are milestones, inscriptions related to routes and roads as well as literary evidence. What is more, papers dealing with newly-recovered material made it clear that much more is still waiting to be discovered. The careful plotting of remaining stretches of roads as well as other remains indicating the existence of a road in ancient times have led to the partial reconstruction of local road networks in certain areas. This work has also revealed how, in less densely inhabited areas, local tracks in some cases still follow those of the Roman period. Remarkably, the amount and variety of information on routes and roads for the post-Roman period is less rich and we are largely dependant on road-related structures for reconstruction.

The conference thus collected together, for the first time, material on the routes and roads of Anatolia across a wide span of time and considered it from a variety of angles. Among the important results is the recognition of the longevity of the main long-distance routes through the country and an understanding of the clear impact of landscape and geography on the course of these ‘highways’. The importance of natural features was a recurrent element in the papers dealing with long-distance routes as well as those considering local networks of roads. An edited volume based on the conference papers is currently in preparation.