

Engaging the material and academic legacies of the first BIAA-led surveys in the Konya plain

Christoph Bachhuber & Michele Massa |
University of Oxford & Bilecik University
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The Konya plain has been a major focus of research for the British Institute at Ankara since its founding in 1948, including survey projects led by James Mellaart, David French, Ian Todd and Douglas Baird, and excavations at Canhasan, Pınarbaşı, Boncuklu and Çatalhöyük. It is from this legacy that our own project, entitled the ‘Konya Regional Archaeological Survey Project’ (KRASP), was initiated in 2016.

Two outcomes of this earlier research are foregrounded in KRASP. On the one hand, there has been no attempt to integrate all this BIAA legacy data into a regional analysis of the Konya plain and, on the other, the surveys have resulted in the excavation of Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlements to the general exclusion of all later periods. These interests reflect a broader trend in the archaeology of the Konya plain.

Archaeologists have a far better understanding of the origins of sedentism and agriculture in this region than of later historical developments. For example, although Bronze Age settlements were a priority in the first BIAA-led surveys (see below), it is surprising that this period has subsequently attracted so little interest not only from BIAA-based scholars but from the archaeological community as a whole. This is even more surprising considering the Konya plain’s close proximity to the core area of the Hittite state and the general popularity of the Hittites in both academic and popular imaginations alike. Here we would like to pick up where Mellaart, in particular, left off in his surveys of the Konya plain.

These first surveys are a study in contrasting academic temperaments. Mellaart believed that his survey-based research could address one of the most puzzling questions for Old World archaeologists in the 20th century: the origins and spread of Indo-European speakers. French was more cautious, growing increasingly sceptical of the analytical potential of prehistoric archaeology. He eventually abandoned prehistoric surveys in favour of his ‘Roman Roads’ survey project. For French, the certainties of Latin epigraphy inscribed on mile markers were preferable to the vagaries of prehistoric settlement patterns. Thus the dominant legacy of these earliest BIAA-led prehistoric surveys would become Mellaart’s, who continued to publish his ideas on Indo-Europeans (specifically ‘the Luwians’) well into the 1980s. KRASP has inherited the data of these first surveys but also, more problematically, Mellaart’s interpretations. The material legacy includes about 6,000 sherds and 400 lithics collected from over 100 Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age settlement mound sites, all stored at the Institute in Ankara.

Mellaart developed a working hypothesis in his survey of the Konya plain during a period when most survey projects were undertaken for the sole purpose of compiling site



Archaeological survey pioneers in Turkey:
James Mellaart (left) and David French (right)

gazetteers. As with so many other aspects of his career, Mellaart’s analytical abilities and archaeological imagination were more expansive than those of his peers. His hypothesis of an Indo-European invasion was spatially oriented and interested in changes in material culture through time. His most compelling observations (see below) do not relate to the second millennium when Indo-European speakers are textually attested (for example the Hittites), but to the third millennium (Early Bronze Age, hereafter EBA) when there is no epigraphic evidence for an Indo-European language. So why did Mellaart focus on the EBA? Since text-based research was better placed to write histories of Indo-Europeans in Anatolia, then Mellaart clearly believed that the prehistoric origins of Indo-Europeans should be his domain.

Mellaart’s understanding of the EBA in the Konya plain was rooted in a cultural historical paradigm that was already reaching its twilight when he published these ideas in the 1960s. In this vision, the Konya plain was indeed a two-dimensional cartographic plain across which a monolithic cultural entity – the Luwians – invaded. For Mellaart, the first Indo-European speakers entered Anatolia from the eastern Balkans during the EBA. Mellaart observed this invasion in a number of phenomena across the western and southern regions in particular. For example, Mellaart believed that the Luwians used a technologically innovative type of wheelmade, red-slipped pottery, most well-known from Troy but observable across much of Anatolia in the mid to late third millennium BC. The majority of the sites in the Konya plain appear to have been abandoned and/or destroyed at the same time that this pottery was introduced, signalling a profound socio-political disruption caused by the invasion. Notably, he highlighted a dramatic drop of settlement frequency in the Konya plain from 100+ EBA sites to eight in the Middle Bronze Age. Mellaart followed these two trends across the whole western and southern length of Anatolia, from Troy, through the Konya plain and as far east as Cilicia.

There are several reasons to doubt this historical scenario on empirical and theoretical grounds. For example, stratigraphic, chronological and typological studies of the red-slipped pottery in excavations near Eskişehir have since

demonstrated a probable origin in this region. The red-slipped repertoire was gradually adopted towards the west (Troy) and towards the south and east (Konya plain to Cilicia). Our regional analysis will provide more chronological, spatial and technological resolution to the problem of the appearance of this pottery in the Konya plain, but our research will likely reveal the adoption of this pottery rather than evidence for a migration. Also, preliminary results of our analysis of second-millennium pottery (Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age) has shed light on a significantly higher number of Middle Bronze Age sites than Mellaart himself identified. The dramatic drop in site frequency appears to be a bias in his ability to distinguish diagnostic pottery, rather than a real demographic trend.

There were other biases in these first surveys also. Mellaart and French surveyed the landscape from a car, limiting their site identification to highly visible settlement mounds. They covered vast survey tracts at the expense of missing dozens if not hundreds of less visible sites. One of the primary aims of KRASP is to fill in these blanks in settlement patterns through our own planned pedestrian surveys, through remote-sensing methodologies using aerial and satellite imagery, and through the collation of all previous survey and settlement-based research in the Konya plain. In this we will be building on the methodologies and data of Baird's more recent surveys in the Konya plain, including the detection of 'flat sites' through intensive investigations of canal cuts.

If there are obvious limits to the settlement data of Mellaart and French, then the BIAA corpus is ideal for addressing other regionally extensive phenomena. Mellaart and French were pioneers in using ceramics collected from regional surveys to reconstruct networks of communication and technology transfer. In March 2017 we will begin a geo-chemical and petrographic study of the BIAA ceramics to address related concerns, although with technologies and methodologies that were not available to Mellaart and French. This research should provide a higher resolution to problems related to the production and exchange of pottery in the Konya plain in different historical contexts, for example during the EBA when the wheelmade red-slipped repertoire was adopted.

Many of the questions we are asking of the BIAA legacy material were not asked by Mellaart or French. Archaeological preservation and heritage in the Konya plain are major concerns of KRASP. Part of our literature review of survey and settlement data includes reports on the state of preservation of archaeological sites. We have calculated that roughly 70% of the sites that Mellaart and French identified in the Konya plain have since been impacted by a range of modern activities. These include (in order of frequency): levelling a settlement mound to create an agricultural field, building on and inhabiting settlement mounds, looting, constructing roads and irrigation channels, quarrying settlement mounds for fertile soil (*kerpic*) and the submersion of settlement mounds in dam reservoirs.



Google Earth imagery of Üçhöyük III Mezarlık (cemetery) in the Konya plain; this was identified in Mellaart and French's surveys and has since been impacted by ploughing activities (shaded areas indicate the probable extent of damage or loss)

In addition to these published accounts, KRASP has initiated a remote-sensing (satellite-based) survey which includes among its other aims the visualisation and spatial analysis of destruction to archaeological sites. This trend can be traced on a nearly decadal basis through legacy and serial satellite imagery. Likewise, data generated by the BIAA surveys in the 1950s and 1960s will provide higher resolution to those archaeological landscapes that have since been affected or otherwise destroyed by development and looting.

Modern impacts on the archaeological landscape raise an ethically and analytically complex challenge for our project. Ultimately, these research questions will require ethnographic methodologies as we strive to understand the relationships between the archaeological landscape of the Konya plain and the various stakeholders in these landscapes today, including local communities, Turkish and non-Turkish archaeologists, and other Turkish national interests.

Since Mellaart, there has been no compelling Bronze Age narrative of the Konya plain to match, for example, the overwhelming interest in the Neolithic of this region (inspired initially by Mellaart). A Bronze Age narrative is needed, not least, to attract more research attention to and heritage interest in the relevant archaeology of the Konya plain. Mellaart had a gift for spinning archaeological stories that captivated generations of would-be archaeologists and the colleagues and students who worked with him. Archaeologists need similar (if more disciplined) skills today as the boundaries between archaeological research, heritage and outreach become increasingly blurred. These new research agendas are partly a response to the accelerating trends of development and looting that continue to threaten archaeological landscapes across the greater region. If the Bronze Age archaeology of the Konya plain is to be salvaged from oblivion then it needs to be made significant, in the imaginations of academics and the public alike.