

Anthropology for archaeologists: student-led training at Ege University

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Biological anthropological research at Ege University has been a source of fascinating insight into the changing political and social world of the fourth millennium BC in the upper Tigris river region. In 2014, excavations led by Haluk Sağlamtimur at the site of Başur Höyük revealed an elaborate burial accompanied by both material wealth and retainers, and then a death pit containing the hastily interred remains of more than 50 individuals. This launched a programme of research that has the potential to enhance dramatically our ability to understand the radical death practices that accompanied the political and social changes associated with the development of the world's first 'state'-like societies. The contribution of biological anthropology to interpreting the site presented a new challenge, however, with the need to design and deliver a full programme of physical anthropological research. Human remains require specialist consideration in terms of excavation, finds processing, sample selection, preservation, recording, storage and interpretation. In order to carry out the ambitious programme of biomolecular analyses – looking at ancient DNA and stable isotopes to determine who the people buried at Başur were and how they lived – it was necessary to make sure that students and colleagues at Ege University had the correct tools at hand.

For this reason, the team devised a new programme to build anthropological skills. In summer 2019, archaeology graduate students participated in a first-of-its-kind training initiative sponsored by the British Institute at Ankara. First the students would learn more about physical anthropology and then they would share their new skills with department colleagues in a hands-on training workshop. The students spent three weeks in June 2019 learning how to preserve and store the human remains excavated at Başur Höyük without destroying any research potential. Excavation techniques and the preparation of material for analyses related to different anthropological research questions were also discussed. On 17 October 2019, peers and staff from across the department were invited to attend a workshop at which the students presented three different critical aspects of integrating physical anthropology into archaeological research.

Öznur Özmen Batihan discussed the complex spatial and three-dimensional recording and excavation techniques used on site and what each of them permits in terms of the research questions that can be asked. She also demonstrated the importance of using soft tools like bamboo sticks and brushes to avoid damaging bones, showing examples of different kinds of taphonomic damage that could be caused, and left the attendees with a solid understanding of excavation and recording best practice.

Pinar Dolmuş presented the process of research once the human remains are in the laboratory. She explained why, during finds processing of human remains, special care must be taken not to damage the delicate deposits of plaque on teeth, in case they need to be sampled for archaeobotany or phytolith studies to understand what people ate in the past. The attendees learned which parts of the body are best suited for different research samples, including, for instance, that aDNA samples are ideally taken from petrous parts of temporal bones. She also showed the microscopic finds that can come to light while cleaning in the lab.

Muhammed Dolmuş had the challenge of sharing the types of data a specialist can extract from human remains and how these can be utilised to address interpretations of the past – without being a specialist himself. He was able to share effectively with colleagues the basic shape and size differences of the human skeleton that allow physical anthropologists to identify sex and age. This was a presentation that everyone was able to participate in, and it opened up a series of interesting questions about the potential for physical anthropological research.

There was a great deal of interest in all aspects of the workshop, and we are very pleased that it was so successful – we have already begun arrangements to run a second workshop next year. Many students (and staff) stayed after the talks had finished to ask questions, and everyone reported that they had learned something new about the process of physical anthropology. The student workshop leaders clearly demonstrated in front of their supervisors and colleagues that non-specialists can integrate best practice into archaeological investigations of human remains, and we hope that this will lead to increasing opportunities for physical anthropological research in the future.



Muhammed Dolmuş speaking at the workshop.