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Traces of Earlier Cultures in Anatolia and their Perception in Modern Turkey

The following paper will try to take a small step beyond the borders of classical archaeology and try to examine the phenomenon of cultural continuity from the antiquity into the modern times and its perception by the local population of Anatolia today. At this point it needs to be pointed out that this is not a part of a bigger project but a first attempt in order to gain an idea about the dimensions of cultural continuity and cultural similarity in the region as well as the self-identification of modern Anatolian population and their relationship with the pre-Turkish cultures of their homelands.

First a set of examples attesting the influence of pre-Turkish societies on the current Anatolian culture will be introduced secondly the results of short interviews carried out with the public in four ancient sites will be presented and finally the paper will be concluded with a discussion of the current situation as well as an humble suggestion in order to improve the cultural consciousness in Turkey.

Evidences of continuity

The examples that will be presented will be a random collection of relatively well-known cases which have been selected a) because of their representative character and b) because they provide a common background for the planned public interviews. Yet they can be grouped in three categories as architectural tradition locations of sacred areas and festivals & games.

Architectural tradition

The use of sun-dried mudbricks is probably the most common example of continuity in the architectural tradition of Asia Minor¹. This material widely available and relatively easy to process was used as early as in the Neolithic period and is still the most popular building element in the villages of Central and Eastern Anatolia.

The houses in Aktopraklık Höyük a neolithic site in northwest Anatolia excavated by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Necmi Karul of Istanbul University have the nearest comparisons in the nearby village of Eskikızılelma². Although not identical the size of the rooms the use of wood as construction material and especially the use

¹ NAUMANN 1998, 45–52; SEEHER 2008, 29–32, 95–99.

² KARUL 2006, 131–132.

of chalk as wall coating of these two-storey houses show great similarities with those excavated in the neolithic mound.

In Lykia the local architectural tradition of the classical period is still preserved in the high plateaus of the region. The wooden granaries from Bezirgan Plateau do not only resemble but are almost exact reconstructions of the elevated house-type rock tombs which are accepted to be adaptations of the wooden house architecture in stone in the first place³.

Settlement of the Arabic and later Turkish speaking communities in Anatolia initiated a new era of cultural interaction. Structural and sometimes the decorative features of the buildings of this period were defined by the local traditions and the existing repertoire of the local craftsmen⁴. The Diyarbakır Ulu Camii with its monumental façade and the Birgi Ulu Camii (in Aydın) with its three-naved basilica plan are two representative examples for the adaptation of local forms in the early Islamic architecture of Anatolia⁵.

Another well-known example will be the Turkish “hamam” where the function & arrangement of the halls as well as some of the technical details derive from the Roman and Early Byzantine “thermae”⁶. The total lack of ruins from the earlier baths in Bursa / Prusa known as the most important thermal center of the Byzantine Period suggests continual use or rebuilding upon the site of earlier bath complexes in the Ottoman period⁷.

Locations of sacred areas

The Temple of Augustus and Roma the Monumentum Ancyranum in Ankara is probably the best known example for the continuity of sacred areas⁸. The sacred character of this spot on the acropolis of the ancient city reaches back to the Phrygian period. The surviving Roman temple was built in the 1st century B.C. and was later converted into a church. In the 15th century a humanist Islamic philosopher Hacı Bayram Veli chose to be buried on the very same spot which initiated the act of building a mosque directly adjacent to the temple.

The ancient city of Doliche (in Gaziantep) in southeastern Turkey was the home to an interregional cult centre for Iuppiter Dolichenus in the Roman period⁹. The origin of this cult probably reaches back to the Hittites. And the existence among the local public indicates once again the adaptation of earlier cult places as sacred areas.

Festivals and games

As for festivals and games the most representative example is Hıdırellez a folks festival widely celebrated in the western Turkish world and generally held on 6th May to celebrate the beginning of the summer. In Islamic tradition this day is explained as the meeting of two prophets Hızır and İlyas once a year but the general characteristics and the celebratory elements of the festivals obviously reflected such strong of a “yatır” grave of the Islamic saint “Dülük Baba” on the very same hill still popular influences of pagan cultures -celebrating the rebirth of Tammuz Attis and Adonis and in Sumerian Phoenician and Phrygian cultures respectively- that some of the rituals are even known to have been prohibited in the Ottoman period¹⁰.

³ SCHWEYER 2002, 14–15, fig. 6-7, 10; BORCHHARDT 1975, 99–102.

⁴ KUBAN 1965, 92.

⁵ On Diyarbakır Ulu Camii: KUBAN 1965, 108–111; SÖZEN 1987, 34–36; On Birgi Ulu Camii: ÖNEY, ÜNAL 1999, 14, 71–72.

⁶ ÖNEY, ÜNAL 1999, 124; KUBAN 2007, 160–161.

⁷ YENAL 1996, 14; KUBAN 2007, 165.

⁸ KRENCKER, SCHEDE, 1936, 1–8, 60–61, Pl. 2-12.

⁹ ERGEÇ, WAGNER 2000, 85–91.

¹⁰ On Hıdırellez and its origins: ERGINER 2005, 32–39. On prohibition of certain rituals: OCAK 1998, 314.

Although not particular to Anatolia some of the ancient board games still exist in the Anatolian countryside. The strategy games “mancala” merels and 9-man morris all of which have numerous examples engraved on the pavements of the Greek and Roman cities around Anatolia were obviously popular in the Ottoman Period as well and are still known among the elder generations in rural Anatolia¹¹.

The examples can be multiplied. What is certain is the existence of a cultural continuity in Anatolia and that the modern Anatolian culture the *Turkish* culture does not *only* consist of Turkish-Ottoman and Islamic elements but that it also bears traces and influences of *all* other cultures which have immigrated to and settled in Anatolia from the Neolithic period up to the 20th century¹². These influences are either unintentional results of long lasting traditions caused by similar situations (such as similar needs natural & geographic conditions and the available material) or intentional adaptations of certain aspects of foreign cultures as a result of direct contact with them.

Biologic continuity

Besides this continuity or similarity in *culture* the increasing number of projects on genetic research proves also the existence of a biologic continuity in Anatolia. Dr. Ömer Gökçümen who has recently completed his PhD thesis on the “Genetic and Ethnographic Survey of Central Anatolian Villages” in University of Pennsylvania summarizes the situation as follows: “There definitely is biological continuity in Anatolia. Among the modern Anatolian population there are also genetic signs which reach back to the Neolithic Period but the general characteristics of the genetic structure of the region is of course not the same as in the Neolithic and has been influenced by continuous immigrations different political structures and the dense assimilation of the newcomers with the local people”¹³.

Public opinion

The reasons and the systems behind the phenomenon of cultural continuity in Anatolia exceed the limits of this paper but the *current situation* in Anatolia and the *relationship -or the non-existent relationship-* of the local people with the ancient ruins surrounding them brings the following questions to one’s mind: The locals the actual *subjects* of this cultural continuity what is *their* perception of the situation? Are they aware of the existence of such a similarity at all? How do they regard the earlier cultures and populations of Anatolia? Do they know anything about them? Do they know that they weren’t *that* different that they celebrated similar festivals regarded the same sites as sacred or used the same building techniques as today? Do they know how much of their current culture they may have taken over from their Anatolian “ancestors”? Do they regard them as their “ancestors” at all?

One could actually guess the general tendency of the answers. But the curiosity to know the individual opinions about the subject encouraged us to carry out a small set of interviews in four ancient sites in four different regions of modern Turkey: Bursa (ancient Prusa) in the northwest Ankara (ancient Ancyra) in central Anatolia Roman site of Perge (Antalya) on the south coast and the Roman site of Anastassiopolis (modern Dara in Mardin) in southeastern Turkey.

The interview formulars consisted of approximately 20 open-end questions concerning the self-identification of the interviewee their perception of ancient ruins in their vicinity and their opinions about the earlier populations of Anatolia as well as a set of thematic questions peculiar to each area. In Bursa it was

¹¹ SELVI BENER 2008, 199–201.

¹² This phenomenon has previously been addressed by several authors: KUBAN 1970, 19–29; MELLAART 1987, 223–227; KRANZ 1998, 3–15, 283–289, EYUBOĞLU 1999, 9; ŞAHİN 1999, 3–6; ERGENEKON 2003, 135–144; ÇEVİK 2005, 111–122; KUBAN 2007, 29–36, 163–165.

¹³ GÖKÇÜMEN, SCHURR 2008, 122–133.

the Roman origin of the “hamam” in Ankara the relationship between the Hacı Bayram Mosque and the Temple of Augustus in Dara the mud-brick houses and in Perge where we had the chance not only to interview with the local people but also with the Turkish tourists the similarity between the ancient and modern board games for the locals and again the influence the Roman baths in the Turkish “hamam” for the Turkish tourists.

A total of 42 people have been interviewed. Since the number of interviewees varied at each site the general tendencies will be summarized instead of a precise percentual distribution:

- In Bursa Ankara and Antalya the interviewee identified themselves all as Turkish or Turkish-Muslims whereas those in Mardin identified themselves as Kurdish.
- Most of the interviewee knew the origins of their ancestors up to three generations. Answers to the question about “the earliest origins” were -among those who identified themselves as Turkish- “probably Central Asia”.
- People living in small villages near ancient sites (Perge and Dara) are content to be living near such historical settlements because of both touristic reasons and due to the recognition these ancient sites bring to their villages. They know roughly who lived in those ancient cities but have almost no knowledge about the history or the prominence of the sites.
- In bigger cities (Bursa and Ankara) however the ratio of the locals who know about the existence of an ancient site on the same location is clearly less. In Bursa the Ottoman history of the city is so pregnant that the city is believed to be founded initially in the Ottoman Period. In Ankara the situation is a little promising the locals who knew about the existence of an earlier settlement could mention the names Hittites Phrygians Gordion and Midas.
- Hittites Summerians and Phrygians are regarded as probable ancestors¹⁴ whereas Greeks and Romans are consciously excluded from this definition and the word “Byzantine” is not even pronounced. These three cultures are identified with the modern Greek nation and neglected simply as “the others” or “the Christians”.
- Approximately 60% think it possible that the earlier inhabitants of Anatolia may have stayed in the region and that we -the Turks- may have mixed with them whereas around approximately 40% believe that they must have left Anatolia completely and that the current population of Anatolia all originate from Central Asia.
- Only around 20 % of the interviewed regard earlier Anatolian populations as their “ancestors” or “co-ancestors” together with their Central Asian ancestors. At this point it is interesting to mention that almost all of the interviewed local people in Dara gave a positive answer to this question. This can be interpreted as a result of the local policies imposing the “Kurdish ethnicity” and basing the local identity on their kinship to the earlier cultures and inhabitants of the region.
- But as for the question “Do you see yourself as the heir of earlier Anatolian cultures?” the answers were quite positive. Yet the attitude seems to be “well we happened to come and settle here we are the ones living on this soil now therefore we are their heirs who else?”.
- All of the interviewees believe that the ancient sites should be protected. Their main motive is tourism but they also regard them as cultural richness national heritage and values to be transferred to the following generations.

As for the opinions concerning the specific examples of cultural continuity.

- In Dara the locals explain their use of mudbrick houses as “tradition easy to build inexpensive healthy and comfortable (*less humidity cool in summer warm in winter*). They think it is possible that they may have learned this tradition from the earlier inhabitants of the region.
- In Perge the local people find the similarity between the ancient and modern board games interesting but prefer to find another explanation for *from whom* they may have learned them.

¹⁴ This preoccupation seems to be a result of the “Turkish History Thesis” putting forward the idea that these are “proto-Turkish” communities. SHAW 2004, 131–153; ESIN 1999, 277–288; AKURGAL 1956, 571–584; COPEAUX 1998a, 32–53.

- In Ankara the majority of the visitors of the Hacı Bayram Camii (many of them *regular* visitors and *all* inhabitants of Ankara) were not aware of the existence of the Temple of Augustus until our interview. Those who did believe that it could be a castle a church or a Roman bath. The shop owners in the area (*providing islamic religious goods*) on the other hand knew more about both the history of the city and the true name and function of the monument.

- As for the general opinion about the *location* of Hacı Bayram Mosque and the proximity of the two buildings the answers varied between “coincidence” and “God’s wish” to “respect of different religions to each other” and “well they all believed in god somehow”. About half of the interviewed pointed out the “tolerance of islam towards other religions because the Turks had not destroyed the building but built their mosque *beside* it”.

- And in Bursa the traditional center of the Turkish “hamam” people felt almost insulted for being asked about a possible Roman origin of the Ottoman baths. Although the questions were carefully formulated none of them considered such a relationship possible. The reactions varied from frowning pursing their eyebrows and having a sour expression to responses like “if there *is* a similarity they must have taken it over from *us*” or “bathing they have learned from *us*” they being “the christian Europeans”.

Conclusion

The results of this small set of interviews show that despite its strong cultural -and maybe even biological- ties with the earlier cultures of Anatolia modern inhabitants of Turkey are not really conscious of this fact and regard the pre-Turkish history of Anatolia not only as a “foreign country” but almost as the “disagreeable neighbour” and know close to nothing about them¹⁵. Especially in areas where Turkish identity is relatively strong even though the existence of a mixed population can not be totally denied people *do not* regard the earlier inhabitants of Anatolia as their probable ancestors and the *possibility* of owing some aspects of the “Turkish” culture to the ancient cultures of Anatolia is unacceptable. This problematic situation this “alienating” attitude has various historical ideological political and sociological reasons. First of all the ideology of the modern Turkish state does not base the identity of the Turkish nation on the ancient heritage of Anatolia unlike in Israel or in Greece. But probably the most important and the most influential reasons are the role of religion & language the government policies stressing the central Asian origin of the Turks the selective approach of some of the Turkish history writers and the social drama & mutual dislike between the Turkish (*or more correct “the Ottoman muslim”*) and the Greek populations caused by the wars of the past two centuries.

Can this situation be changed? Can the current inhabitants of Anatolia be re-acquainted with the history and culture of their homelands? Can they learn to embrace *all* earlier cultures of Anatolia *evenly* and regard & respect *all* earlier people of this land as their ancestors? Can a *sincere* tie be created between the ancient sites and their current inhabitants besides financial concerns? But maybe more important is there a political *will* to create such a cultural consciousness at all?

As we are amongs archaeologists I will have to direct my criticism and suggestions towards *us*. So what can be done? and how can *we* as archeologists contribute to this?

To increase the involvement of the local people with the ancient sites through archaeological projects could be a first step. Of course there *are* already projects which include such ethnoarchaeological activities within the scope of their work Çatalhöyük being *the* example. But perhaps the number can be

¹⁵ This phenomenon has previously been addressed by various scholars: MELLAART 1987, 223–227; KUBAN 2004, 1–4; ASGARI 1991, 8–10; ESIN 1991, 14–17; BERKTAY 1993, 240–259; ÖZDOĞAN 1993, 192–200; ÖZDOĞAN 2002, 42–45; ÖZBARAN 1998, 61–69; COPEAUX 1998b, 70–84; STATHIS 1998, 125–133; COPEAUX 1998a, 32–53, 93–115, 243–313; ARSEBÜK *ET ALII* 2001, 119–120; PULHAN 2001, 140–141; MANGO 1998, 7–10; İŞİN 1998, 94–113; ÖZDEMİR 2003, 7–26; KOÇEL ERDEM 2003, 81–85; PULHAN 2003, 139–147.

increased and the local population can be encouraged to really become the “owners” of the ancient sites which are in the current bureaucratic system being *protected* against them.

Of course this is not the main interest of an archaeologist on the other hand under the circumstances described above one can not help asking himself “*What are our scientific results good for if we`re not going to convey them to the public?*”. And with “public” I do not mean only those who will eventually finance our projects but also the “local people” which -in this case- have become strangers with their own past.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the director of DAI Istanbul, PD Dr. Felix Pirson and the session organiser Ms. Ute Kelp (M.A.) for making her participation at the colloquium possible. She would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Haluk Abbasoğlu, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yılmaz Selim Erdal, Dr. Dilek Erdal, Dr. Ayşe Seeher, Dr. Jürgen Seeher, Ali Akkaya and Özge Yıldız (M.A.) for their sincere interest and comments on the subject, Assoc. Prof. Necmi Karul for kindly sharing information and visual material regarding the neolithic site of Aktopraklık, Dr. Ömer Gökçümen for his contribution on the biologic continuity in Anatolia, Ms. Şehrişül Yeşil Erdek for carrying out the interviews in Anastassiopolis / Dara, Salkım Selvi Bener (M.A.) for her contribution on ancient games and Kenan Eren (M.A.) for the enriching discussions and proof-reading the manuscript.

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