

## ANNUAL REPORT: BONCUKLU PROJECT 2015 FIELD SCHOOL

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*Bear figurine and obsidian tool deposited in house posthole*

### Introduction

The Boncuklu project gives us a chance to understand what the uptake of farming meant for early Holocene foragers, in terms of their household organisation and practices, landscape engagements, ritual and symbolism, as well as understanding the spread of farming from the Fertile Crescent and to points to the west, ultimately into Europe. The ritual and symbolic practices at Boncuklu are especially intriguing, given that Boncuklu seems to be a direct predecessor of Çatalhöyük and located only 9.5 kms to its north.

### Household archaeology

We excavated four buildings this season that seem to represent variants of the standard domestic residence, Buildings 20 and 21 in Area P, Building 24 in Area M and Building 25 in a new Area J.

Building 21 seems to have been a long-lived building with many floors, of which we have excavated only the final few. Building 21 well illustrates some of the dynamic features of these households, seeing significant remodelling. The western wall seems to have seen major remodelling for the final floor of the building, with the insertion of a row of bricks on edge against the earlier interior face of the wall, possibly to correct for slumping and major remodelling of the wall around a post. The north-western hearth was moved from an earlier position in the central part of the north-western space, to one immediately against the north-western wall in the last phase in the life of the building. A temporary final smaller hearth was also cut into the final floor. So at the end of its life this building had two hearths, perhaps allowing extra cooking or heating capacity. It is possible that these structural modifications were

necessary to extend the life of the house or to accommodate changing household in size or composition.

There are a number of elements of evidence that suggest the end of the life of a house was a matter of some importance to the household concerned and that ritualised dismantling may have occurred as seen later at Çatalhöyük. Perhaps the physical house was symbolically closely associated with the living household and required its own distinctive mortuary rituals. These could include the retrieval of the dead as evidenced in Buildings 21. A circular cut was located in the final floor of the building and had not been plastered over. This had the appearance of a burial cut as seen in other buildings, but there was no articulated body within it, rather a few human remains were found scattered in the upper fill. It may well have been a grave reopened, with most of the body removed. The floors seem to have been chiselled away around the cut as if people were searching for the cut. It was partially open when the building collapsed or was dismantled as bricks from the fill had fallen into the top of the cut. There was an additional small cut at the base of the pit, into which had been placed a canid jaw, in what appeared to be a deliberate depositional act of symbolic significance. In addition there were several small postholes around the edge of the walls of the building, in two cases when posts were removed special deposits of obsidian, a bone tool and a figurine, which we think represented a bear, were placed in these postholes. The occurrence of a bear within such a context is interesting given the bear reliefs at later Çatalhöyük, so the symbolic significance of particular animals, also important later is clear here. These 'magical' practices involve interesting symbolic exchanges, figurines, bone tools and obsidian for posts, canid jaw for human body potentially designed to satisfy various cosmological forces.

The pattern of decorating only specific parts of floors with red paint seems well established in Building 21, a burial slump had an area of thick red ochre on the floor and other floors had more extensive patches of paint. In Building 20 areas around post slumps were painted. We also saw the same phenomenon in Building 24 in Area M, where even silty floors in the western, apparently dirty, area of the house seem to have been coloured red on occasion, by including ochre into the floor makeup, and similar phenomena mark some floors in Building 25. The decorative function of these paint areas is unclear, they often seem irregular and limited. It seems likely that these might mark specific moments in the life of the household connected with different parts of the buildings, perhaps appropriate to the people involved in the events thus marked.

### **Non-standard buildings**

Some buildings do not have the characteristics of the relatively standard apparently domestic residences. We continued excavation of one of these in Area M this year, Building 23, which seems to have preceded two similar buildings. Like the domestic residences these buildings evidence long-term continuity. Building 23 was characterised by silty floors, which do not seem to have the robusticity or marl plaster content of the domestic residences. These characterised the northern parts of the building, where there seems to have been a raised platform hearth. In the western part of this structure were a series of posts that changed position very regularly, as if the superstructure may have seen frequent modification. At least two temporary pit hearths and several small shallow pits that sometimes had phytoliths, probably from reed, lining them. These shallow features seem like settings for objects such as baskets. Some of these floors in the south were covered by dense reed phytoliths representing spreads of reeds on the surfaces. These floors seem crowded with features. These buildings seem much more dynamic in terms of moving of fixtures and fittings and busier in the number of features in given floors. These seem

to be structures where activities involving fire and storage may have been important, possibly kitchen structures or task specific buildings. This raises interesting questions of who used these buildings and whether they were linked to a specific household or sets of households.

### **Ritual and other activity in open areas**

We continued working in Area M to examine a sequence of external areas. In 2014 we found a series of burials in these areas and this year we strengthened the evidence for an area of regular mortuary practice in the open spaces in this part of the site. We found two adult inhumations in close proximity to those previously excavated. One of these had over 50 marine shell beads around its neck, many coated with red ochre. We also found further evidence of skull detachment, circulation and burial with the deposition of skulls in pits near these burials, with, in at least one case, evidence of a painted skull. We completed excavation of Grave 43 (started last year) confirming that a detached skull had been placed over a large polishing stone and mass of yellow ochre, in turn placed over poorly preserved human bone around which were scattered further marine shell beads. Further work by Dr Jessica Pearson, on a skull excavated last year confirmed that the head area was covered with red ochre beads and a surprise two red ochre pendants/large beads. It is clear that in terms of grave goods these open-air burials could be as richly adorned as examples in houses, indeed possibly more richly adorned, providing further evidence for our considerations of who these individuals might be.

We excavated a 7x5 m area, Area J, to the north of Area M to see how much buildings may have encroached on this central area. The eastern part of this trench represented a new building, Building 25 with many characteristics of the standard domestic residences. It seems that buildings did occur in these central open spaces, so probably there was little demarcation of open space, in that domestic structures seem to have been found over the whole site and could encroach on previously open spaces, as suggested by Building 24 in Area M as well. Whilst the use of external areas seems structured, little sign of patterning in the location of structures is suggested by the current evidence.

### **Geophysical Survey**

Dr Kelsey Lowe and Aaron Fogel conducted Magnetometry and Ground Penetrating Radar surveys of the site. The initial Magnetometry results seem very promising with probable hearths and pits showing and anomalies that have a very similar sub-oval shape and orientation to our buildings, with possible hearths in the north-western areas of the putative buildings. Very excitingly there is variation in size in these structures with the possibility of the presence of significantly larger buildings than those excavated to date. We plan to follow up the survey work with ground-truthing next season to test the survey findings.

### **Electronic recording**

Our testing of the field recording tablet application developed by the Federated Archaeological Information Management System (FAIMS) continued with redesigned app. As in 2015 the app allowed structured recording of all of our field data reducing by c. 90% the time required for data input and verification. The system worked well for much of the season but with up to 10 tablets simultaneously synching with the server it is clear that Boncuklu has exceeded the current server capacity. 2016 will see significantly upgraded server and tablet hardware.

### **Experimental archaeology and outreach activities**

Experimental work aimed at helping us understand the buildings and open spaces at Boncuklu continued this year. The buildings had stood up well to the year's rain, strong winds and snow

needing only limited repair around the base of the wall exteriors. Water seemed to have percolated along some of the roof beams where they protruded from the roof eaves and created drips on the floors, replicating some of the 'rosette' features we have observed on the Neolithic house floors. Dripping around the hearth through the smoke-hole, which remained open through the winter was much less than expected, but did also create some of our putative 'rosette' features.

We created a screen wall around one of the hearths, replastered the floors of the two houses, painted red bands using ochre along the clean/dirty floor division, created a bucranium in one house at the base of one of the walls and created a burial in each of the houses. Readers will be pleased to hear that these burials were not of enthusiastic experimental team participants but rather two lambs that had died of natural causes, provided by local shepherds. The back filled cut did not evidence any smell of decay initially, but after several days cracks appeared in the soil of the backfill and the smell of decay was noticeable but not strong. When the cuts were then plastered over as part of the floor replastering there was no smell. We also tried various fire experiments in the houses, reeds which do seem to have been a common element of fuel loads, as suspected, created very smoky fires, which made staying in the house unbearable, but slow burning embers were much less problematic. Perhaps the reeds were used to start fires in the house hearths but not used constantly. In the external areas we created light structures and fire pits like those seen in the open spaces, and tried a number of cooking experiments to the considerable satisfaction of those members of the team with a penchant for barbecued animal head and marrow.

The Boncuklu visitor centre continued to welcome a steady stream of visitors. Among the visitors were more than 25 children at the Hayrođlu village summer school, who were taken on a tour of the site and took part in art activities with the dig team. As the result of a successful AHRC grant, Dr Jessica Pearson is developing a new interpretation project to extend the existing education materials and displays in the visitor centre focusing on the people of Boncuklu, including their diet and physical wellbeing. That project will also help to link Boncuklu to the story at Catalhoyuk.

IFR students were fully involved in all these activities including the experimental and outreach work, but with the exception of the geophysics. Papers will be presented in the Annual Symposium Turkey in May 2016, in Istanbul April 2016, Brisbane and Sydney November 2016, Vienna April 2016. Publications will result in British Institute at Ankara *Heritage Turkey* 2015, *Kaz Sonuclari Toplantasi* 2016, PNAS (submission end 2015), *Cambridge Archaeology Journal* submission 2016.