

INVISIBLE ARCHAEOLOGY: BYZANTIUM AND THE RURAL REMAINS OF AN EMPIRE

One of the most exciting changes occurring within the field of Byzantine studies is the increased research in the field of Byzantine archaeology. Although there have long been important Byzantine excavations at various sites in Greece and the Near East, the majority of them have focused primarily on religious and elite sites. Thus there has been important work done in Constantinople and Madaba, Athens and Thessalonica, but what has generally been lacking is the archaeology of the secular and the everyday. Yet such sites have the potential to provide insight into the worlds of Byzantium not readily available in texts and more monumental archaeology. Since 2004, I have been involved with two projects in Turkey – one in central Anatolia at Çadir Höyük and one on the Black Sea at Cide – which are beginning to illustrate just how significant such sites are.

In 1990 Marcus Rautman published an important article titled “Archaeology and Byzantine Studies” [*ByzF* 15 (1990), pp. 137-54]. The deceptively simple title obscures the fact that the article essentially asked Byzantinists to move beyond the traditional research fields and views of Byzantium to include the rest of the Byzantine world and new methods of exploring them. Rautman’s article highlights the fact that archaeology is one of our only options for finding the ordinary citizens of the Byzantine world, because these populations generally do not appear in the written sources. Further, he argued, Byzantine archaeology needed to learn to incorporate the methodologies and theories used in other archaeological disciplines. In 2009, almost twenty years after Rautman’s paper, Mark Whittow published another extremely important article in the *Journal of Agrarian Change* titled “Early Medieval Byzantium and the End of the Ancient World” [9, pp. 134-

153]. In this article he questions the traditional concept of Byzantine continuity with the urban Roman past stretching from the end of Late Antiquity through to the fall of Constantinople, seeing this period rather as one of radical shift towards the medieval and the rural. Like Rautman, he also calls on Byzantinists to consider the importance of the archaeology of the secular and the rural as ways of more clearly illuminating the period. He observes that all conclusions for the Byzantine period must remain provisional “as long as the archaeology of this period remains a low priority” [p. 134]

Happily, this is beginning to change. An increasingly vocal group of historians and archaeologists are reconsidering the history of this period through a new engagement with the physical evidence for Byzantium. The archaeological record of rural and secular Byzantium, long ignored by excavators of earlier periods or simply missing from Byzantine narratives, is being explored with new types of questions, including those involving gender and agency theory and landscape archaeology. This has been particularly evident, for example, in the survey work of Kostis Kourelis in the Peloponnese and of the Euchaita-Avkat Project in central Anatolia. Increased exploration of domestic, rural, and isolated structures is providing a view into a world not visible in the written sources, widening our understanding of the populations present in the Byzantine Empire. Here we can include the projects of Kilise Tepe in southern Turkey and the long running project of Amorium on the western edge of the Anatolian Plateau. These approaches have also allowed for a new consideration of the Byzantine use of space. Byzantine archaeology is characterized by small-scale reuse and rebuilding within local environments, helping to confirm Whittow’s thesis about the changing nature of the Byzantine world. Overall, these new approaches create a much needed, more nuanced view of the history of the Byzantine period, including a much stronger understanding of the differences between the Early and Middle Byzantine periods.

Çadır Höyük

My first encounter with the importance of re-approaching our understanding of the rural and secular Byzantine world came out of my involvement with the ongoing excavations at the site of Çadır Höyük, a site now jointly run by the University of Chicago, University of New Hampshire, and SUNY

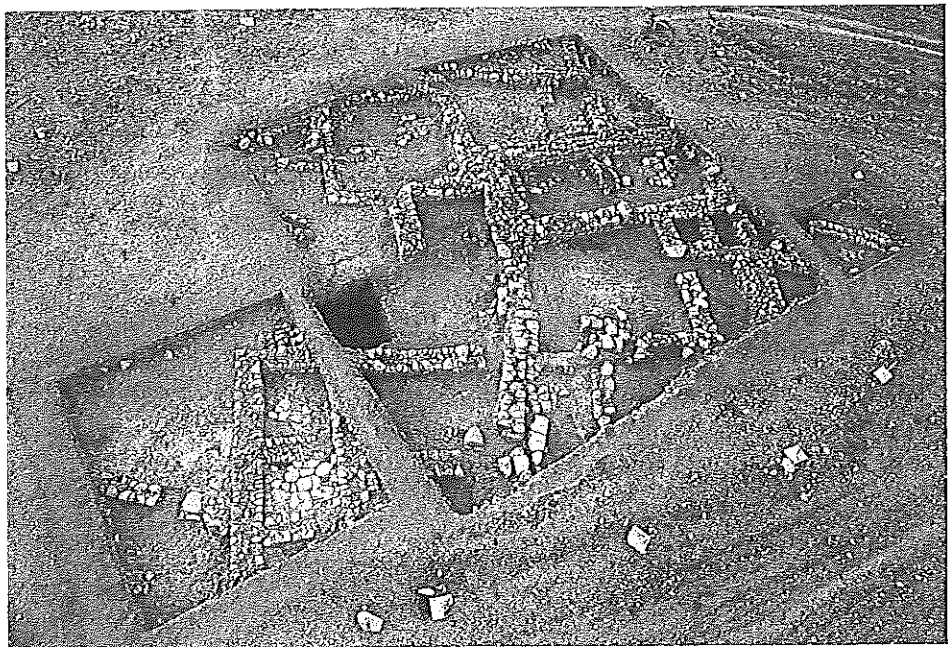


Çadır Höyük mound

Cortland. I have been involved with the site since about 2004, when I was asked to assess the material associated with the Byzantine periods. When I was first asked to analyze this data, our assumption was that it was an ephemeral layer on top of the extensive earlier settlements, since the site has multiple periods of occupation ranging from the prehistoric through to the Byzantine. We also believed that the site had been initially fortified and was probably a *kastron* or military outpost. What became increasingly clear, however, was that these standard assumptions were not enough to explain the site fully. Indeed, as excavation continued, it became clear that this was not a military or elite site, but rather, simply, a rural Anatolian village. Indeed, the more important fact of the site was what it represented: the continuous occupation of a rural Byzantine site extending from approximately the sixth century through to the eleventh century.

The initial excavations were opened on the top of the mound, which is indeed a small fortified tell. To date, we have excavated primarily the south-eastern section of the mound, which has produced some fortification walls, a large storage chamber, a stable, and a large courtyard area. Although the fortified *kastron* was indeed a common architectural type in the Byzantine world, as we excavated I was increasingly troubled by the fact that there were some notable artefact types missing. In the first place, there was nothing on the hill which spoke to a military population - no weapons; no evidence for a siege; no bodies. There was also nothing that spoke to an elite context: no fine ware and no luxury items. What I did find were storage jars, cooking pots, small religious amulets, glass bracelets, and a number of other small domestic artefacts. In other words, the artefacts of daily life.

Perplexed by this, we began to wonder about the life of the entire site, not simply the “fortified” structure on the mound. Since there was clear evidence for a settlement of some sort on the northern terrace, we turned to this area as a way of trying to isolate the nature of the settlement.



Çadır Höyük terrace excavations

The structure that has begun to emerge is incredibly complicated. The building is a large domestic complex, complete with courtyards and kitchens, storage rooms and stables. We found dishes and lamps, tools and toys, storage jars and farming implements. But again, we found no luxury items and almost no fine ware.

But the terrace gave us a new clue. The terrace was the first place where I saw laid out clearly the techniques of reuse and rebuilding alluded to by Rautman, by authors like Eyice and Ousterhout who write on domestic houses [S. Eyice, "Observations on Byzantine Period Dwellings in Turkey" in *Housing and Settlement in Anatolia: A Historical Perspective*. 206-220. Istanbul, 1996; R.G. Ousterhout, "Secular Architecture" in *The Glory of Byzantium*, eds. H.C. Evans and W.D. Wixom, 193-199. New York: 1997], and most recently by Whittow. The original structure had strong, well constructed walls, and in the earliest layers we found a few examples of Late Roman/early Byzantine fine ware and elite artefacts. In the early sixth or seventh century, then, this was probably a major structure. But as the Anatolian Plateau became increasingly isolated from the rest of the Byzantine world in the late seventh and eighth centuries, the population turned inwards. It is not clear that this was represented by a decline so much as a change, since the next phases of walls in the eighth and ninth centuries reflected strength and ability, if not money. Further, there were some poor local imitations of fine ware. Nevertheless, the house was divided to represent a rural village population with a communal kitchen and work area. However, by the end of the life of the site, true decay had set in, and by the last periods of occupation in the tenth and eleventh century, money had clearly become tight, and skill had been lost, as the repairs were done with less strength and ability. Yet people still lived here.

Armed with this knowledge, we returned to the top of the mound, again to be surprised with what we found. Careful excavation on the mound revealed that the same processes were in play. The initial construction on the mound had been done with some skill, and then reused as long as possible. What was interesting, though, was that the original occupation - the early Byzantine period - seems to be missing on the mound. The first occupation appears to date to the eighth and ninth centuries. In fact, this occupation sequence again seems to mirror the history of the Byzantine Empire. In the sixth century, this region was secure, and there probably was a fairly extensive land-owning aristocracy. But they would not necessarily need a fortified enclosure. However, by the eighth and ninth centuries, the Arab invasions onto the Anatolian Plateau did necessitate some sort of safe haven, which may explain why the mound was fortified in this period. The initial incursions, followed by the Seljuk invasions, provide the best reasons for understanding the need for fortification.

From the excavations themselves, we find further confirmation that the life of this site was representative of a small rural population defending itself in the face of a changing world. The mound provides a snapshot of the final days of the occupation of the site. On the mound itself, we found a lead seal belonging to Samuel Alusianos, a rather shadowy figure who served as a general around the time of the Battle of Manzikert. The seal indicates that whatever the population was, they received a message from Constantinople or the army in the area.



Samuel Alusianos seal

This communication may have involved some sort of indication that the Seljuks were coming. In roughly the same stratigraphical layers we also find evidence of a hurried departure. Jars are broken, others are left behind, but valuable objects seem to have been taken with the community and there is no evidence for human death. What remains, however, are the items that the community did not or could not take away with them. Most significantly, the stable was full. The excavation of the stable revealed a number of species of animals tied up and left to their fate, often with Christian amulets tied around their necks. The community either could not take these animals, or thought they would be back. The animals died where they stood. The remains of these animals, oxen, goats, sheep, and pigs, are the final legacy of a small undocumented rural community on the Anatolian Plateau.

Cide Project

Many of these patterns were confirmed for me on a wider scale through my involvement with an intensive survey project on the Black Sea in northern Turkey.

This project, run jointly out of the University of Glasgow, Leiden University, and Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Turkey, is an extensive survey project on the Black Sea. These areas have never had a full survey before, and so the project is extremely important for filling in a major gap in Turkish archaeology, and, more specifically for my purposes, the project is yielding an important amount of Roman and Byzantine material. The structures visible through survey once again represent the reuse and the rebuilding common in later Byzantine archaeology, and help to define the important transition from the Early to the Middle Byzantine period.

The changes are visible in two major types of architecture: churches and



Okular Spolia

fortresses. At least two churches have been identified over the last two years, as well as *spolia* such as column bases reused as wells that indicate other, now lost, churches in the region. The two extant churches are both in fairly poor shape, and both looked as if they had originally been Early Byzantine churches which were reused on a smaller scale in the Middle Byzantine period (although further exploration will be needed to prove this). This was a common practice in many places in Anatolia, where large Early Byzantine basilicas were cut down and reused as chapels in the Middle Byzantine period.

Similar development is evident when we look at “military” establishments or fortifications. These are perhaps the most commonly identified structures of the Late

Byzantine world in particular, and are indeed ubiquitous along the coastlines of the Byzantine Empire. These types of fortresses are found along the Black Sea coast, and there is no question that several of them served a primarily military function. Kazalli Kale, for example, is a structure that seems to have been in use from the Roman period. The structure was clearly designed as a military fortress, and this is visible in its architecture, its placement on a prominent outcrop extending into the sea, and the visibility from the tower itself. Interestingly, however, although it was almost certainly constructed in the Roman/Early Byzantine period, surface survey

shows little evidence of use in the Middle Byzantine period (although excavation might prove otherwise). Yet it clearly returns to usage in the Late Byzantine period, since Late Byzantine pottery is found at the site. This site has a very different lifespan from that of the *kale* at Okçular, however, which is almost certainly late Early Byzantine or Middle Byzantine. Located inland, it has a much smaller visible range of the sea and seems to serve as a small fortification for the rural populations living at its base.

Overall, the same patterns in architectural development and site use visible on the Anatolian Plateau at Çadir Höyük are also visible on the Black Sea. Although the original structures were constructed by a stable population in the Early Byzantine period, the nature of the settlements in the region changed at the end of this period and into the Middle Byzantine period. The settlements shrank, moving away from large, elite structures, to ones more related to local activities and security. This is visible in the shrinking of religious structures and the use of safe storage, and in the increase of coarse ware and implements associated with farming. This again speaks to changes in the economic and social stability of the Byzantine Empire as it faced increased incursions first from the Arabs and then from the Seljuks, resulting in a population increasingly dependent on its own local economy.

In large part, the field of Byzantine archaeology has been relatively underdeveloped until recently. Seen initially as the descendent of classical archaeology, its original function in Byzantine studies was conceived of as being illustrative of Byzantine historical literature. However, we are coming to understand that Byzantine archaeology is not only about the excavation of elite and large scale structures. Rather, through the use of new theory and methodology, archaeology can be used to illustrate the subtleties of Byzantine society and to find the “invisible” Byzantium of the secular and rural worlds.

Marica Cassis

[Figures courtesy of the Çadir Höyük project and the Cide Archaeological Project]

It is not only Marica’s types of everyday life that tend to be ignored: I have myself called for archaeologists of Byzantine sites to look for evidence of gardens rather than “automatically interpret(ing) disturbance of the soil in suburban and rural settings as evidence for farming, when around palaces and even homesteads it may often indicate horticulture”; but this is still not often being regularly done [Ed.].