

Aşıklı Höyük

By Sera Yelözer – Ph. D candidate, Istanbul University

The Volcanic Cappadocia Region has a distinctive historical, cultural and geological background with its valleys, rock-cut churches, underground cities and archaeological sites. The spectacular volcanic landscape of the region, the ecological micro-niches and the raw material resources most probably attracted the prehistoric communities to establish long-term, permanent settlements.

Within the modern village of Kızılkaya, located 25 km to the southeast of the city of Aksaray, lies the Aceramic Neolithic mound of Aşıklı Höyük, radiocarbon dated to the 9th and 8th mill BC (8400 -7300 BC). Aşıklı is the so-far known earliest sedentary community of the region.

The site was first discovered in 1963 by the hititologist E. Gordon, and investigated by I. Todd as part of a reconnaissance survey between 1964-65. Excavations at the site started in 1989 as salvage excavations under the directorate of Prof. Ufuk Esin from Istanbul University, Department of Prehistory. Since 2010, the research and excavation project is led by Prof. Mihriban Özbaşaran in collaboration with an international team from various universities and institutions.

The life of the Aşıklı community from the 9th to the 8th millennium BC

The settlement has an uninterrupted sequence, starting from mid-9th millennium cal BC until the mid-8th millennium. The first inhabitants constructed semi-subterranean, oval *kerpiç* buildings that were reconstructed and renewed periodically at the same spot. *Kerpiç* was the main construction element for hundreds of years. Although the volcanic landscape offers various kinds of stones that could be used as a durable construction material, the Aşıklı community strictly preferred *kerpiç*. This was due to the extensive knowledge of *kerpiç* production and probably their traditions. Characteristics of the 9th millennium buildings include hearths located at the center of the buildings, a small platform, grinding stones and burial pits. The life was organized outside the buildings, in open activity areas, where many of the daily tasks such as cooking, food processing and preparation, butchering and distribution of food from hunt and harvest, manufacturing of bone, obsidian tools, reed baskets and items such as bone beads were conducted collectively. The tools of the Aşıklı inhabitants were dominantly made from obsidian, obtained from the sources of Kayırlı-Göllüdağ and Nenezi, some 25-30 km in distance. The raw material was brought to the site as nodules and the production took place in the settlement.

During the earliest phases of the 9th millennium settlement, wattle and daub structures were also in use. The use-life of these structures ended with a burning event. The causes of fire, whether it was deliberate or accidental, are under investigation, however analyses indicated that they had different functions than the *kerpiç*-walled semi-subterranean dwellings.

Analyses of micromorphology and soil chemistry and the presence of primary-*in situ* dung layers attest to the fact that animals were kept within such enclosures. Archaeozoological data, as well as isotope analysis show that caprines, specifically sheep, were kept in the settlement from the earliest levels; management and domestication process continues all through the sequence.

The archaeozoological data attest to a broad spectrum hunting during the 9th millennium, including a variety of small prey, birds and fish, although the main focus was always on sheep/goat and aurochs. The community had the knowledge and the experience of growing plants and cultivating wild and domestic cereals, as revealed by the presence of domesticated einkorn and emmer wheat. Wild plants, legumes such as lentil, pea and bitter vetch, fruits such as hackberry, pistachio, almond, were among the gathered plants.

The burial customs consist of intramural, sub-floor inhumations. The deceased were buried in pits under the floors of the buildings in *hocker* position. Although this tradition was not subject to change for hundreds of years, some new practices occurred during the latest levels of the occupation at the site. The dead were not buried with any “personal items” during the 9th millennium BC, however changes came towards mid of the 8th millennium when they were buried with items such as ornaments, baskets and obsidian tools.

With the start of the 8th millennium BC some changes occurred in the architecture and in settlement pattern. The oval, semi-subterranean buildings of the 9th millennium were replaced by rectangular ones. These buildings were mostly single roomed, although few in number two or three roomed buildings were also evident. Buildings were densely packed. The latest phases buildings were grouped together in what we may call neighbourhoods. Narrow spaces separated the building clusters from each other and a few passages/paths separating these neighbourhoods led to the communal middens. The daily life began to be organized on the flat roofs of the buildings and the interior spaces. Hunting and gathering continued, though with less importance, and the subsistence was based mainly on sheep and goat. These animals were no longer kept within the settlement.

Mid of the 8th millennium showed a well-defined settlement organization where the residential area on north was separated from the special-purpose buildings area by a wide gravel street. To the southwest of the present mound lies a building complex, distinguished from the residential area in terms of plan, size, construction material, inner architectural features and floor and wall treatment. The distinct architectural features and the characteristics of the archaeological material (eg. the dominance of wild cattle) allowed us to interpret this section as a public area where communal consumption and certain ceremonies took place. The two large, domed ovens, located within this building complex, support the idea of collective activity in this area.

The overall results coming from a collaboration of various disciplines including geoarchaeology, anthropology, archaeozoology and archaeobotany allow us to understand the diachronic changes and transitions that the Aşıklı community underwent through hundreds of years of occupation. Besides the aforementioned changes, continuity of certain elements such as the location of the buildings and interior architectural features, constant renewal and maintenance of the floors and

walls of buildings, and the transferring of objects and knowledge characterized the social fabric of the community. It could be argued that the inhabitants have managed to live in cohesion throughout the occupation sequence, the collective way of life had been maintained with new solutions and the perpetuation of continuity and collectivity against changes and transformations was the main character of the newly established Neolithic way of life at Aşıklı Höyük.

On your way to the Gülağaç District from Aksaray, right after you cross the bridge into the Kızılkaya Village, you will find the settlement nearby the Melendiz River. At the entrance of the site, the experimental Aşıklı village will welcome you. Aiming to understand the architectural choices and solutions, tool-making processes, harvesting practices and other aspects of daily life, the project has adopted a versatile approach to experimental archaeology where the life of the community is reconstructed. Experimentation work combines the data coming both from the field work as well as from a variety of analyses on archaeobotany, archaeozoology, micromorphology, phytolith and soil chemistry.