



The Istanbul-Chicago Universities: Joint Prehistoric Project

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Many of this report's readers may have seen the results of a press release we made in early June. It concerned the 1984 season of the Joint Istanbul-Chicago Universities' field work at Çayönü in southeastern Turkey. Halet Çambel of the Prehistory Section in Istanbul University and Wulf Schirmer of the Institute for the History of Architecture at Karlsruhe University—our project's other senior colleagues—also floated press releases for the same date. No one of us had ever tried press releases before and the results—in our case, at least—were both gratifying and odd. From an excellent article in the *New York Times* to garbled versions of AP copy in a variety of regional newspapers throughout the country, we did indeed get publicity. We then began to receive a batch of odd responses, including one warning that we must quickly rebury the skull tops taken from our special building at Çayönü “. . .because all ancient religions put a curse on anyone who disturbed their dead or stole their effects. . .in such a curse those responsible die suddenly or their Museum burns to the ground. . .” We're holding our breaths!

The main focus of our press release was prompted by the so called “skull building.” We actually first encountered it in our previous (1981) field season. The background thinking for the press release went about as follows. We first began excavation at Çayönü in 1964 and had already finished eight campaigns when we returned in the late summer of 1984. We resumed the clearance of more house remains, in order to broaden our comprehension of the general plan of the original village. We also needed more of that “Sears Roebuck” inventory of all the articles in daily use that had managed to survive—the key to *all* culture-historical interpretation for prehistoric times.

By now we have cleared more than several dozen domestic house foundations. In many cases, these also involved rebuildings of earlier examples of similar size and plan. The later editions were usually built right over the earlier ones; just why, we don't know. In any case, it was the overall uniformity of our houseplan types and of the articles of daily use in the “Sear's” catalogue we recovered, that tended to fool us. Based on our assumption that this overall uniformity

of simple domestic finds (characteristic too of what we'd ourselves encountered at Jarmo in Iraq, Sarab in Iran, and as found elsewhere by colleagues in comparably early sites), we had come, we now realize, to have a naively simplistic view of what life must have been like in Çayönü. For the earliest food-producing villages of just after 10,000 years ago, we reasoned, life must have been a simple bucolic affair.

We should, indeed, have tempered this idea earlier but it took the final clearance of the "skull building" last October to really shake us up. Already in 1964, we had found the "flagstone floor building," the foundations for a rather large single roomed structure, open to the south, with interior pilasters paired with the bases of stone slabs—doubtless originally of columns which supported roof beams. We couldn't quite visualize these remains as those of a simple house but we didn't then consider the broader implications.



Fragmented skulls in situ.

In the 1970 season we encountered the remains of another building of much the same plan and orientation, a bit bigger, and with a fine smooth orange-colored terrazzo floor. Set into the terrazzo were two pairs of lines, made of white marble-like chips, running between interior pilasters. Ter-

razzo means both the burning of limestone to make cement and the implication of a staggering number of man-hours committed to the finishing of the smooth floor itself.

We were much impressed by the “terrazzo building:” but we still did not shift from our long held overall impression that Çayönü (and comparable early villages) had been a simple settlement, just over the threshold of effective food-production at about 7500 B.C. Indeed, while domesticated wheat, peas, lentils and the dog were present from the beginning, domesticated sheep and probably domesticated goats seem only to have come into the Çayönü inventory as time went by.

Finally, in 1981, came the first traces of the “skull building,” whose clearance we completed only in 1984. Again, the plan was open to the south but in this case, included three small rooms behind the large central room. On the floors of two of the small back rooms, some forty or more human calvaria—simply the tops of skulls—had been placed. These skull tops showed clear traces of having been burned and all were more or less badly broken. Furthermore, we encountered several fragmentary skeletons in holes below the floors of two of the small back rooms. The large front room was provided with a plastered floor and a large flat and well smoothed stone, now fragmentary. Just what all this burned skull top business in a building of very special nature can mean, we still do not know. Finally, however, what Çayönü had been hinting to us from the start began to soak through our thick heads! Here was no simple bucolic little farm village, notwithstanding that its people had only recently crossed the threshold of the new food-producing way of life. It seems sure that there already had been a marked upward swing in the curve of cultural acceleration. Instead of our assumed very smooth gradual pace of development—to arrive eventually about four thousand years later in the first appearance of literate urban civilization in Mesopotamia—Çayönü seems to be telling us that given year around settlement and a reasonably assured food supply, new things could begin to happen both earlier and faster than we had imagined.

Well, this was the message we tried to float in our respective press releases in June. They have certainly attracted a good deal of attention and hopefully will bring some new “friends” to the Prehistoric Project, thus adding to the group of loyal old “friends” who have so generously helped support the project over the years.

Halet says her own press release got excellent attention in Istanbul; we haven’t yet heard from Wulf in Karlsruhe in the matter. Some of the newspaper coverage here got pretty garbled. Reporters who came into our lab or phoned usually

wanted specific answers—what exactly did those burned smashed skull tops mean? That we certainly can't answer as yet, but they surely make us keen to try and find out.

As we write this, we will soon be returning to the 1985 field season. Mike Davis, highly valued field hand, is already enroute to Turkey for his eighth field campaign at Çayönü. Traveling together with us, for her second field season, will



From left to right: Linda Braidwood, Bruce Howe, Robert Braidwood and Halet Çambel.

be our extremely helpful Chicago field hand, Andrée Wood. With Halet's formal retirement from Istanbul University (but not from field work) the Turkish Government has, at our joint request, formally appointed Dr. Mehmet Özdoğan, an assistant professor in Prehistory at Istanbul, to be the expedition's next director. Mehmet—as a beginning student in 1964—had his very first field season with us and has been at Çayönü for at least part of every field season since then. We are enormously proud to have had a role in the development of this highly distinguished young Turkish colleague.