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The Use and Abuse of Archaeology and Anthropology in Formulating the Turkish Nationalist Narrative

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The ‘Turkish History Thesis’ was the project of constructing a history of origins and an ethnic identity for the Turks in early republican Turkey. In this respect, the project was similar to nation-building efforts elsewhere. Yet, archaeological activities, designed along the lines of the thesis, experienced a paradox between demonstrating the genealogical purity and autochthony of the Turks, on the one hand, and proving that they are part of, if not gave birth to, Western civilization on the other. Here archaeology served both as an instrument for grounding a national existence (autochthonism) and as a medium for participating in ‘contemporary civilization’. For this reason, the Turkish History project, in line with the nationalist vision of depicting the world both as an aggregation of nations and as their field of competition since Herder, is a way of assuring the equality (even superiority) of the Turkish nation with others and validating its right to exist on respective territories through demonstrating its continuous existence from time immemorial (autochthony). With these considerations in mind, ideologically motivated archaeological excavations of the 1930s were carried out under the auspices of President Kemal Atatürk, who personally visited the sites of excavation and showed his open support. Afet İnan (1943, p. 9), the foremost proponent of the thesis and the adopted daughter of Atatürk, explains the anthropological and archaeological concerns of the thesis:

No cultural period is alien [to Turks]. Ownership of this land by the Turkish race reaches back to time immemorial. Proto-Hittite and Hittite periods are the starting point of this ownership. The waves of migration that followed brought Turks’ brothers of the same race to the lands of Turkey. This country experienced the rule of different

political bodies and changes in its name throughout various epochs of its history. Yet in its racial quality, it has always preserved its Turkish essence. My remarks have two implications: first, the skeletons of our ancestors were preserved under this land for thousands of years; second, the Turkish nation, present dweller and rightful owner of this homeland, I mean, us ... This is quite easy to understand for us. But it is our duty to make this known in the international scientific community.

In order to prove the autochthony of the Turks and their role as 'founders of civilization', which constituted the backbone of the Turkish History Thesis, it was necessary to construct an archaeology and cultural historiography that dated back to pre-antiquity. The Faculty of Letters (DTCF) in Ankara University, with its Departments of Prehistory and Archaeology, as well as of 'Hittitology' and 'Sumerology', the latter two having no counterparts elsewhere, was established in 1935 to cater to the needs of the Turkish History Thesis. Following this logic, sites of excavations were selected in settlements from prehistoric and proto-historic ages. The archaeologists of the Republic, on the other hand, chose not to 'meddle with' settlements dating from classical antiquity. For the purposes of the thesis, there was no use or benefit in digging sites from Greek and Roman periods. Hamit Zübeyir Koşan (1943, pp. 21–32), who excavated Alacahöyük, reported the following:

The Chalcolithic culture of Alacahöyük appears to relate on the one hand to Kuban culture and pre-Scythian culture of southern Russia, and on the other hand to Sumerian culture compared with the artefacts recovered from king tombs in the ancient city of Ur ... One can trace this culture to Eurasian nomads (*reitervölker*); hence the place of origin of the earliest culture is indisputably, as research to date demonstrates, Central Asia. Furthermore, this culture had spread out from China to Scandinavia and had constituted a crucial stage of human evolution ... Chief representatives of this culture were Altaic and perhaps partly Uralic-Altaic people. According to Prof. Koppers, the ancestors of Indo-Germans had learnt this culture from Altaic people ... In every aspect, Alacahöyük's ancient culture is connected to Asian, thus by extension to Turkish, culture. It should be acknowledged that the Turkish race was no less active in prehistory than it was during historical periods, and it was instrumental in both creating and spreading human civilization. This is our fundamental contention. (1943, pp. 31–2)

The growing ascendancy of culture and ethnogenesis as overtones of Turkish archaeology has caused the imperial outlook of Osman Hamdi Bey, the founder of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, and his humanitarian approach to lose ground. Yet neither the thesis nor the attitude of the republican elites involved a wholesale rejection of the humanitarian tradition as the Republic made it its goal to catch up with 'contemporary civilization' and employed 'Westernization' as a practical instrument. As the founder of Turkish anthropology, Professor Şevket Aziz Kansu, put it:

As Macit Gökberk points out, 'Turkish society has been, at a steady or speedy pace, changing its circle of civilization since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, Turkish society departed from an *islamoïde* cultural circle to an *occidentoloïde* cultural circle. This reorientation is towards a rational-secular classical method of thought that constitutes the foundation of Western culture. (1981, p. 1)

However, the central claim of the Turkish History Thesis based itself on anthropological arguments in line with the dominant paradigm of the era. Thus, the thesis had two objectives. First, it strove to show that the Turks come from a European/'Alpine' race, and not from an inferior Asian one. Simultaneously, it sought to substantiate the Turks' claim to belong to civilization-founding peoples (Hittites, Sumerians, etc.) on the basis of evidence drawn from physical anthropology. For this aim, the ancient peoples of Asia Minor were lumped together under an umbrella term: 'Proto-Turks'. Through this, the thesis aimed to demonstrate that the Turks are the oldest inhabitants of this land. The founders of the Republic, for the reasons just mentioned, paid particular attention to anthropology. The establishment of the Institute of Anthropology right after the establishment of the Republic testifies to this (see Kansu, 1940). Leading figures of the Republic such as Şemsettin Günaltay and Köprülüzade Fuad were among the founding members of the Centre for Anthropological Studies of Turkey at Istanbul University (then the Darülfünun) in 1925. Honorary directors of the Centre included striking names: Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver (also served as a Minister of Education), Mustafa Necati (also served as a Minister of Education), Dr Refik Saydam (also served as a Minister of Health and as Prime Minister). These names show the importance attached to and the support given to the Centre by the state. It is obvious that the newly established state had a particular objective in mind when establishing this Centre. This objective, in the words of Atatürk, was to 'study Turks and Turkish society' (Kansu, 1983, pp. 3-4).

The founders of the Centre explained their goal in the inaugural issue of the Centre's publication, *Review of Turkish Anthropology*:¹

If a nation is worthy of research, this is precisely our nation now, in its hour of victory and progress. Does not this then require that the Turks have many good qualities? It is our right to demand our rightful place among the family of nations; it is also our duty to establish our position regarding the standing accruing to our race among peoples and within general humanity, as it is a task for us politically to claim our standing among nations.²

Kansu argued that this is the task for Turkish anthropology in its opening phase. As part and parcel of the Centre's enterprise, state-funded education and research abroad were provided for the following figures: Şevket Kansu in the Broca Laboratory of the Paris School of Anthropology in 1927, Seniha Tunakan at Berlin University in 1934, Muzaffer Şenyürek at Harvard University in 1935 and Afet İnan in Geneva between 1936 and 1938 to study under the supervision of the famous anthropologist of the time Eugène Pittard (Kansu, 1983, p. 6). Afet İnan (1974, p. 36), Atatürk's adopted daughter and a professor of history, explains this process:

According to Kansu, anthropology is one of the 'auxiliary sciences of history' and found its 'deserved place' with Atatürk's 'interest, guidance and guardianship' in the very Faculty of Letters established by him. Yet, as Kansu writes, Atatürk's interest in anthropology is far older. At the very least the date of the establishment of the Anthropology Institute testifies to this, since anthropology has an important place within the main body of the Turkish History Thesis formulated under the close interest of Atatürk. Atatürk in his note for Afet İnan's inaugural lecture stated that '... it is this very human intelligence ... which has found novel methods and sciences that satisfy the investigative minds of the day and illuminate history. Archaeology and anthropology come at the forefront of these sciences. History can be substantive only by grounding itself on the findings of these two sciences. Only those nations whose histories are grounded on these findings find and recognize their essence. And our history, Turkish history, is grounded on these findings. But only if the enlightened youth of the present recognizes and makes known these findings without an intermediary.'

Turks were the founders of civilization and, through them, civilization was diffused around the world.³ According to the thesis, Central Asia

was ‘a robust Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultural field’. The failure to find a hefty enough amount of Palaeolithic material was explained by the inadequacy of excavation and research, and the research in Iran was regarded as cursory. Thus, ‘to claim on the basis of the given amount of research that the Iranian plateau is older than Turkistan in terms of Palaeolithic culture is not something that scientists would do’ (Günaltay and Tankut, 1938, p. 9). For the thesis, Central Asia, in comparison to Iran and Anatolia, was ‘more senior in historical rank’ in terms of Neolithic and Chalcolithic culture. The thesis, basing itself on a theoretically weak diffusionism, constructed its narrative around the centrality of Central Asia, not only tracing archaeological findings back to this particular geography, but also allotting the botanical origins of cereals like barley and wheat there. The chronological order built upon this vision found the source of Anau in the ‘root culture’ Anau-Sumerian and Elam. The diffusionism in question did not consist merely in the spread of tools and techniques, but emphasized the agency of the migratory peoples of Central Asia who guided this process. This human agency made it all the way to Anatolia, and created Anatolian civilizations as well; with this sleight of hand, Turks were shown to be the indigenous inhabitants of Anatolia. This is of course killing two birds with one stone.⁴

This emphasis on agency – that civilization was carried by a defined group of people – rather than the cultural quality of the process of diffusion, adds the dimension of ‘race’ to the thesis. Günaltay and Tankut explain this as follows:

G. Elliot Smith pointed out that Turks belong to the ‘Alpine’ race and the homeland of ‘Alpine’ race is Central Asia. Therefore, attributing the origins of Sumerians to Central Asia and accepting that they created Al Ubaid and subsequent cultures of Mesopotamia corroborate our thesis which asserts that ornamental ceramic cultures were born in Central Asia. (1938, p. 14)

In the meantime, the idea that the homeland of ‘European races’ is Anatolia as a supplementary thesis was also brought to the fore. The founding father of Turkish anthropology and the leading representative of its ‘founding spirit’, Şevket Aziz Kansu, did not cease to refer, as late as the 1970s, to the German theories of the 1930s, arguing for a possible Anatolian origin for the white race:

A German anthropologist, Franz Weidenreich, in line with the polycentric evolution thesis, takes Asia Minor as the probable centre

of origin for European races in his study published in 1939. On the other hand, he traces the origins of Negroes to South and East Africa, of northern Mongols to northern China and of Australians and Melanesians to Sunda islands. Although this view is not founded on definitive evidence, it still amounts to an interesting hypothesis ... In the face of this hypothesis, it appears that Turkey's anthropological and human history becomes important and therefore requires thorough consideration. (Kansu, 1983, pp. 11–12)

The racial arguments of the thesis are: (1) the creators of 'Neolithic' civilization in Asia and Europe belong to white and brachycephalic stock; (2) the homeland of the brachycephalic race is Central Asia; (3) the Turks belong to the white, not the yellow, race,⁵ and their homeland is Central Asia not Mongolia; (4) the Sumerians are not the autochthonous inhabitants of Mesopotamia; they had migrated from Central Asia and they had linguistic and racial affinities with the Turks; (5) like Sumerians, the Hittites had their origins in Central Asia; (6) the people who brought civilization to Egypt originated in Central Asia.

It should be noted that the attempt to claim a place within European civilization on the one hand and an uncompromising reference to Turkish lineage on the other was the fundamental contradiction of the thesis. Thus, the casting off of this genealogical reference by the mid-1940s, and its gradual substitution with a civilizationist approach, as part and parcel of the broader discrediting of anthropology based on racial theories, was the direct outcome of this contradiction. The Turkish Republic's reforms which imposed a Western way of life, even at a superficial level, were a sign of the determination towards this end. The same paradox reveals itself again in the thesis' attempt to establish its connection to classical antiquity through a theory of diffusion. The thesis, by arguing that the Turks were deliberately kicked out of the mainstream of 'civilization' and denied their central role in it,⁶ claimed that the forebears of ancient Greek culture, Mycenaean and Minoan cultures had come from Anatolia. Since by this reasoning the essence of these cultures was claimed to be Hittite or proto-Hittite, the ancient Greek culture was automatically Turkified.⁷ Eurocentric theory, however, stated the opposite: Bronze Age European cultures were original and it was through the influence of these cultures that ancient Greek civilization was born. In this view, Homer's *Iliad* narrates a conflict between European and Asian cultures of the Bronze Age. As the ancient Greek and Roman cultures are crucial for the European civilizational heritage, the triumph of 'Europeans' in this Homeric conflict symbolizes

the superiority of contemporary European civilization. The Turkish History Thesis sought to refute this view. Although ethnogenetic and culturalist explanations are now discredited in the field of archaeology, one may still encounter a residual 'autochthonistic' explanation occasionally, based on some type of 'Anatolianist' view or one that draws on the cultural relationship between Central Asia and Anatolia.⁸

The early republican mission of reinforcing the official national identity imposed on archaeology had gradually withered away when the History Thesis lost its central place after the death of Atatürk. After this period when Turkish autochthony in Anatolia and its 'civilization-founding characteristics' were believed to be the fundamental elements of the Turkish History Thesis, the rule of İsmet İnönü (1939–50) was marked by an increasing emphasis on Westernization which propagated an archaeology and cultural vision influenced by humanism. A bureaucratic office, 'The Translation Bureau', established in 1938 at the personal initiative of the Minister of Education, Hasan Ali Yücel, started to generate its first books in 1940 (Öktem, 1981, p. 175). The prefaces written by President İnönü and Hasan Ali Yücel for the books published by the Bureau testify to the degree of importance attached to this enterprise. 'The translation of the Western literary classics along with that of Ancient Greece and Rome into Turkish provided the infrastructure for Westernization' (Akurgal, 1999, p. 99). Concurrently, during the ministerial tenure of Hasan Ali Yücel, specialized programmes providing instruction in Greek and Latin were established alongside science and letters programmes, starting in some elite high schools from 1940 onwards (Sinanoğlu, 1980, p. 83). This new phase also witnessed the first excavations of the Turkish classical age under the direction of Arif Müfit Mansel. Archaeology and its associated disciplines were thought to be contributing to the general Westernization of Turkey. Although one can observe the active support of the state in both phases, the first phase, during which the Turkish History Thesis was dominant, the archaeology of the Near East and prehistory were prevalent and essential to the thesis. In the second phase, the focus shifted to classical archaeology, thus the special attention previously given to Hittites, Sumerians and the philology of the same age gradually eroded.

On the other hand, classical philology and classical archaeology had a special significance for Kemalism, which set for itself the objective of achieving the level of 'contemporary civilization'. As the founder of classical philology in Turkey, Suat Sinanoğlu, put it, 'it was understood that the objective of reaching and transcending the level of contemporary civilization required a turn to antiquity'. Classical thought and culture

are the foundation of the modern system of thought. For this reason, 'The Atatürk Revolution desired to bring the humanist and rationalist Western thinking to our country' ... 'The Renaissance is rooted in classical thought; the Atatürk Revolution is the Renaissance of the Turks, thus it is rooted in classical thought' (Sinanoğlu, 1980, pp. 4–5). On this interpretation, the Atatürk Revolution is the movement for Turkey's wholesale Westernization. This is different from Gökalp's conception of civilization,⁹ which required simply importing Western science, technology and particular institutions. It implied going beyond 'blind imitation and vulgar application of abstract and concrete elements of a foreign civilization; instead, it required the internalization of the spiritual elements and the humanist consciousness underpinning the concrete features of Western civilization' (Sinanoğlu, 1980, pp. 89–90). The revival of humanism and classical culture found the source of modern civilization in the classical age of ancient Greece and Rome. The humanist movement developing in Turkey endorsed this view and further claimed that Kemalism represented a step towards that direction:

The Atatürk Revolution had pursued the objective of establishing a Western system in political, economic, social and cultural life. The Western system is based on a particular frame of mind, on a particular *Weltanschauung*. Individuals in the Western system have a mindset geared towards observation, scrutiny, realism and critical thinking. They have an unlimited confidence in human reason and human value. At the core of this rationalist-critical *Weltanschauung* lies freedom, especially freedom of thought ... The part of the world we call today the West in intellectual terms is a coherent body of civilization formed by these rational and humanistic values taking this set of principles as their basis. And this civilization has been sustained and nurtured by Greek and Roman civilizations and has risen on their shoulders. (Öktem, 1981, p. 170)

To sum up, when Turkey positioned itself within the Anglo-Saxon-centred Western camp (USA, UK, etc.) after the Second World War, it also abandoned its ontological grounding inspired by German nationalism. The strengthening of ties with the West also promoted an increasing international interest in Anatolia as an archaeological site and caused the nationalist paradigm, geared towards justifying Turkish autochthony in the region, to collapse. This international interest and cooperation, along with the general discrediting of the paradigms of the 1930s focused on origins, undermined the 'nation-building role' assigned to

archaeology with the History Thesis. Under these influences, archaeology in Turkey continued to flourish in entirely different areas. The fall of the nationalist paradigm marginalized anthropology previously conceived as the 'science of race' and archaeology which was preoccupied with prehistory and proto-history catering to 'national objectives'. Such a shift, in turn, promoted classical archaeology. Another factor that strengthened classical archaeology was the burgeoning tourism sector in Turkey in the 1950s. Every poster printed by the Turkish Ministry of Tourism had a photograph of an archaeological site on it that directly or indirectly contributed to the promotion of this particular field of research.

Nevertheless, research into the classical age had not started in this period. As mentioned before, this particular interest can be traced back to the nineteenth century, to the initiatives of the Ottoman bureaucracy. During the establishment of the Faculty of Letters at Ankara University, classical studies (classical archaeology and classical philology) were not forgotten. They were integrated into the constitutive organizational chart of the faculty, since the Republic regarded itself in the same circle of civilization as the West, which grounds its existence on the heritage of classical culture. Yet still, as Bedrettin Tuncel (1977, p. 1) points out: 'Classical philology was not initially instituted as a self-sufficient discipline ... the teaching of ancient languages was meant to provide support for research on Anatolian civilizations ... It was only later ... in 1940 that classical philology shook off its supporting role and turned into independent research'. Likewise, Suat Sinanoğlu (1980, p. 92) affirms the secondary nature of classical studies compared to the central interests and concerns of the History Thesis during the Atatürk era: 'the Faculty of Letters at Ankara University, established by Atatürk in 1935, promoted Greek and Latin language and literature chairs with the purpose of illuminating Anatolian history, but kept an independent interest for the classical world as well'.

The formula scholars of the Westernist/Kemalist persuasion, including figures such as Ekrem Akurgal and Bozkurt Güvenç, employed to explain Turkish culture and identity today is a synthesis that brings earlier cultures of Anatolia together with the cultural baggage carried from Central Asia. Within this synthesis, Central Asian origins, ancient Anatolian cultures and Mediterranean and Aegean cultures had a determining influence. Alongside these, Iranian and Arabian influences are also recognized. But, the 'synthesis view' argues, since these latter influences ceased to exist after the sixteenth century and were gradually replaced by Western influence, they can be neglected. All the more, as

Akurgal states, the 'Islamist approach' is regarded as 'detrimental to progress, hence malevolent'. What remains is pure ethnic Turkishness nurtured by ancient Anatolian and Aegean cultures and the propelling Western influence towards modernization. This 'idealized' synthesis which at the same time stresses 'originality' and 'specificity' is the basis of modern Turkish identity.¹⁰ In this respect, research on ancient Anatolian and Aegean cultures has a special significance for the strategy of Westernization. For this reason, we observe that various fields of archaeology, especially classical archaeology, were well protected and supported by the state. In this way, classical archaeology in Turkey has kept a healthy and symbiotic relationship with the state. Therefore archaeology developed within state universities and the ideological inner circles of the state, and excavations were carried out with government authorization and state funds. For its part, the Turkish establishment regarded the archaeological enterprise as an instrument for propaganda and for promoting tourism.

In sum, archaeology in Turkey, failing to institute a profound and proper relationship with the Enlightenment tradition, developed as both a component and a by-product of a pervasive but superficial Westernization drive. As a hybrid blend of Ranke's methodology of history inspired by vulgar positivism¹¹ and Croce's historicism, it lacked instruments to open itself up to broader sociological syntheses, hence ended up isolating itself from ideological and political currents that had a profound impact on social sciences and adjusting its strategies in accordance with its relations with the state. Although this hybrid methodology, developed in continental Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, lost its influence and validity, archaeology in Turkey continues to uphold it as 'scientific practice'. Based on vulgar positivism, this methodology relies on the concept of type, and on the typological method and studies of expression. A type 'is an ideal model which represents the main features of similar objects in a higher level of abstraction' (Brézillon, 1971, p. 16). Aggregation of 'random similarities of form' under categories, on the other hand, constitutes typologies (Yalçınkaya, 1989, p. 3). This method applied in prehistory found its way to the archaeology of Asia Minor and classical archaeology and was used to describe 'culture' through a typology of ceramic containers based on the way they were kneaded, baked and decorated, their motifs and the shape of their body, rim, bottom and handle.¹² It is of course no coincidence that this conceptualization of 'archaeological culture' sprang from nineteenth-century German Romantic philosophy which regarded culture as the 'manifestation of national spirit'. This view tended

to see 'archaeological cultures' as distinct ethnic groups with the help of typologies and the study of their forms of expression. This enables the construction of genealogical histories through which present national entities can be traced back to their roots; and nationalist, even racist, interpretations with an archaeological grounding become available.¹³ German Romantic philosophy, which promotes the organic uniqueness of these 'cultures', connects with vulgar positivism through Ranke's methodology. This way, historicism and positivism, two seemingly opposing philosophies, unite under the banner of archaeological method.

For this reason, the development of archaeology has been coeval with the development of nation-states. In the 'subconscious' of archaeology lies the quest for the roots of the *Staatsvolk* that constitutes the nation-state's essence and the signs of civilization which would prove the sacredness of the nation, and the attempt to show that this people is indeed the 'original inhabitants' of a given territory. The archaeology of antiquity in Turkey was inaugurated as an effort to prove that the ancient peoples of Anatolia were indeed Turks, which was then used as a pretext to claim the rightful place of Turks in the civilized world. This propagandizing enterprise, starting with the amateurish works of Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı, the 'fisherman of Halicarnassus', which drew a direct line of 'cultural continuity' between ancient Aegeans and their present counterparts, reached the point of claiming that even Ionian cultures in Anatolia were not 'Greek'. Therefore, even though it has departed from a civilizational basis, archaeology in Turkey has remained 'national' and failed to put on a 'universal' garb. Archaeologists operating on these terms tried to legitimize their work not on the basis of its scientific merits, but on the basis of its correspondence with the 'national interest'. Nation-states, for their part, have intensively exploited this field for their benefit and they continue to do so.¹⁴