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New Publication/Masthead
Editorial

The sky is falling, still. In his Introduction chapter of the 1998 book *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Jordan*, Don Henry noted that the number of publications in all venues pertaining to all periods of Jordanian prehistory had zoomed to an average of 14 per year between 1980-1986, noting that this was “a nearly four-fold increase … over the whole decade of the 1970’s” (Henry 1998: 1). Over the past couple of decades the pace of research and publication for the entire Levant has started to reach unmanageable proportions for authors attempting to make sense of newly available information, and this is becoming particularly difficult in the case of projects dealing with the 12th-4th millennia. Certainly we would all benefit from a constantly updated central repository of new publications, suitably tagged with keywords, but how such an institution could be developed and maintained is a daunting problem. Geneviève Dollfus of Paléorient has foreseen these needs; in recent years, she has laid the foundations for such a data base, and we should think about supporting its implementation.

Gary O. Rollefson and Hans Georg K. Gebel

Henry D.
Renewed Excavations at Monjukli Depe, Turkmenistan

Reinhard Bernbeck, Susan Pollock, and Birgül Öğüt

Monjukli Depe is a small site close to Altyı Depe in southern Turkmenistan a few kilometers north of the foot of the Kopet Dag. It dates to the Late Neolithic period through the early Aeneolithic (regional terminology for “Chalcolithic”). The site’s uppermost level was broadly exposed in the early 1960s under the direction of O.K. Berdiev (1972). Prior to this, A.A. Murshhenko had excavated a stratigraphic sounding in the center of the mound, which was unfortunately never published in detail. In 2010, we began renewed excavations at the site.

Our work seeks to clarify the chronological sequence at the site and technological-cultural developments in the transition from the Neolithic to the Aeneolithic periods. Since 2010, we have conducted three seasons of work at Monjukli Depe. Although much of the analysis remains to be completed, preliminary results already point to some important new insights. Here, we briefly mention aspects of chronology, architecture, pottery technology, and subsistence.

Dating and Sequence

We encountered Neolithic levels only in a few places. They occur some 3.5 to 4.0 m below the present mound surface and are located not far below the earliest Aeneolithic architecture. Although we have only reached the upper part of the Neolithic occupation, we know from the Soviet investigations that the Neolithic layers have a depth of some three meters. Several radiocarbon dates firmly anchor these levels in the late 7th to early 6th millennium BCE, contemporary with Early Jeitun at the type site of Jeitun (Harris et al. 2010: 120-123). This runs counter to Berdiev’s assumption of a Middle to Late Jeitun date for Neolithic Monjukli Depe (Berdiev 1972). It is too early to say whether and how these Neolithic materials differ from those from the site of Jeitun itself or from other Jeitun sites in the western ranges of the Kopet Dag foothills, such as Pessedjik, Bami or Novaja Nisa or sites in Iranian Khorassan (see Garazhian, this issue).

The Neolithic levels are separated by a hiatus of ca. 900 years from the Aeneolithic occupation. Our initial question about the nature of the transition from the Neolithic to the earliest Aeneolithic or “Anau IA” period has thus been answered simply: there was no transition. Absolute dates for the Aeneolithic occupation at Monjukli Depe also present us with a surprise: Berdiev already pointed out that the pottery from Aeneolithic Monjukli Depe bears motifs that are different from those of Anau North and the few other known Anau IA sites (e.g. Berdiev 1974: 35-36; Hiebert and Kurbansakhatov 2003: 75-77). He therefore claimed that Monjukli Depe’s Anau IA layers were chronologically later than those at the other sites, including nearby Çakmakly Depe. Our results, however, reverse this sequence. Anau IA layers at Anau North have been dated to the second half of the 5th millennium by several absolute dates (Hiebert and Kurbansakhatov 2003: 55-56), while nearly all determinations from Aeneolithic Monjukli Depe fall into the first half of the 5th millennium BCE (Pollock and Bernbeck et al. 2011: 183-184; Bernbeck et al. in press). Therefore, at least in the southeastern part of the Kopet Dag foothills, the current sequence of Early/Middle/Late Jeitun, followed after a lengthy hiatus by Anau IA has to be modified by inserting a chronological unit that we call the “Meana Horizon.” The geographic extent of this horizon is presently unclear. Pottery motifs similar to those discovered at Monjukli Depe, the main element for an assessment of chronological and other parallels, have yet to be found. South of the border in Iranian Khorassan, the chalcolithic materials from Shir-e Shian or the Shahroud survey seem also to date later than Aeneolithic Monjukli Depe (e.g. Roustaie 2012: fig. 16). In terms of absolute dates, we can compare the Meana Horizon with the early “Transitional Chalcolithic” of the Tehran plain (Fazeli Nashli et al. 2004).

Aeneolithic Architecture

Our excavations have revealed extremely well preserved architecture from the Meana Horizon, with some walls standing to a height of 1.5 m or more (Fig. 1). The buildings very often underwent substantial modifications, particularly through the addition of internal partition walls. Berdiev (1972) described Aeneolithic architecture at Monjukli Depe as consisting of three house types: multi-roomed buildings consisting of small cellular entities, houses with functional installations (hearth, benches, etc.), and houses with lengthy “vestibules.” From our work it is apparent that many of the complex, late-phase plans noted by Berdiev were originally one-room, squarish buildings divided in half by two opposing buttresses. Berdiev’s “vestibule” and “functional installations” seem to refer to the fact that one half of the buildings served as both entry and space for bins, hearths and other such features, while the other half, the floors of which are 12-15 cm higher than the other, consisted of living quarters. The fundamental layout of these houses is quite similar to the standard house types
found at Early Jeitun sites such as Jeitun itself, but also at Çağylly Depe not far from Monjukli Depe, a site that is thought to date to the Late Jeitun period (Berdiev 1966).

The buttresses encountered in many houses come in two types: simple protrusions from walls that are one or two bricks wide; and T-shaped buttresses that extend one brick length from a wall and are then enlarged at the end (Fig. 2). Buttresses were especially well plastered, often several times and in different colors. They apparently had the primary function of supporting the roofs of the spacious rooms but seem also to have had a more symbolic function, the details of which still elude us.

Well known from other sites of the Aeneolithic period is also the habit of painting walls. In Monjukli Depe, we found both white and ocher-colored examples, in one case also traces of black paint. At any one time, however, each wall was monochrome: there was apparently no wall painting of the sort found at Neolithic Pessejik Depe (Müller-Karpe 1982: 18-19).

The village plan of Monjukli Depe contains a thoroughfare, thought by Berdiev to be similar to the one at Çakmakly Depe that cut the village in half. Our excavations exposed Berdiev’s street but showed that some modifications of his ideas are necessary. At more or less the center of the mound, the straight street we call “Berdiev Street” (Fig. 1) that runs from the northwestern edge of the village is paved with a row of flat stones that lead up to a gate with door sockets and a large, incised limestone door jamb. It is clear that this gate could be closed. Behind it, we found an open area bordering a huge ash accumulation which we refer to as the “Eastern Midden.” Here we discovered many well preserved animal bones, particularly skulls of cattle.
and sheep. The exact derivation of the material in the Eastern Midden is unclear, but it seems to be related to communal feasting.

Shortly to the west of the gate, a smaller passage-way turned off to the south (“South Street”, Fig. 1), coming to an end between two houses. Taking together the insights from house architecture and village layout, we find more parallels to Jeitun-period Çagylly Depe than to Aeneolithic Çakmakly Depe, suggesting at least some elements of a continued tradition from Neolithic Çagylly to early Aeneolithic Monjukli Depe.

Pottery and Chronological Problems

The most surprising find in terms of pottery at Monjukli Depe is the abrupt drop in quantity from the Neolithic to the Aeneolithic period (Pollock and Bernbeck et al. 2011: Fig. 19). The range of Neolithic materials from Monjukli Depe is too small to investigate differences or commonalities with other sites of the Jeitun period and particularly with Jeitun itself. However, there is a notable difference between the bulk of the coarse chaff-tempered ware from the Neolithic levels and a small component of a fine chaff-tempered painted ware. Neolithic Coarse Chaff Ware has a thick flaky slip, as well as very thick, slightly S-shaped walls and simple rims. These characteristics, plus clear indications of sequential slab construction (Vandiver 1987), make this coarse ware a typical Late Neolithic product that can be connected to the technology of vessel production from the southwest Iranian lowlands to the Kopet Dag foothills.

Another, much finer chaff-tempered ware is “Fine Chaff Black-on-Red Ware.” It has a thick, carefully burnished slip on both outside and inside and is equally carefully painted with abstract motifs in thin black lines. It can likely be dated to the time just before the
900-year hiatus between the Jeitun occupation and the Meana Horizon. The sherds are all small and heavily worn, and none of them has been found in situ (see Pollock and Bernbeck et al. 2011: Fig. 16 and Fig. 20, Groups A and B).

Ceramic vessels from the Aeneolithic levels at Monjukli Depe cannot be considered objects of daily life. Their rare occurrence likely made them akin to luxury items. Their general make-up is similar to that described by Hiebert (2002: 33) for the Anau IA “high-fired” ware at Anau North, where this material constitutes only 15% of the full assemblage. Almost all Aeneolithic ceramic vessels from Monjukli Depe are thin-walled hemispherical bowls of various sizes with simple rims and dimpled bases with a very small diameter. Motifs consist of one band at the rim, often with a sloppily drawn cross-hatch motif or triangular patterns and four to six vertical lines that converge at the narrow base of the vessel (Pollock and Bernbeck et al. 2011: Figs. 17 and 18). Contrary to our macroscopic observations and the description of this ware in the literature as “high-fired” (e.g. Hiebert 2002), archeometric analysis shows that firing temperatures were no higher than those of the Neolithic chaff-tempered pottery (Daszkiewicz in press). It may be of chronological importance that Monjukli Depe’s Meana Horizon is almost completely devoid of chaff-tempered pottery and that the typical ware is essentially untempered. At least in the southeastern Kopet Dag piedmont, the chaff-tempered Neolithic pottery should not be linked to the equally coarse but much later Anau IB wares (see Berdiev 1974).

Subsistence Practices

Only a small portion of the faunal and floral remains recovered from Monjukli Depe has been analyzed. Nonetheless the initial results offer some pertinent information regarding subsistence at the site in comparison to other assemblages.

Miller (2011: 219-221) notes the presence of both glume and free-threshing wheat at the Aeneolithic levels at Monjukli, whereas in Anau IA levels at Anau itself only free-threshing wheat was present. The very few Neolithic samples from Monjukli Depe yielded only glume wheat, as did the type-site of Jeitun. Wheat seems to predominate over barley at Monjukli Depe, with six-row barley present in both Neolithic and Meana Horizon occupations. Both the macrobotanical and phytolith analyses indicate the use of irrigation, presumably a simple form using gravity-flow (Miller 2011: 220; Ryan 2011: 226; Miller and Ryan 2011: 227). Plant material from the Anau IA period at Anau North is also argued to imply irrigation (Miller 2003: 137-138), whereas at Neolithic Jeitun it remains uncertain whether irrigation was practiced or if farmers sought out places with high water table. Alternatively, a somewhat greater amount of precipitation may have enabled crops to be grown with rain-fed agriculture alone (Charles and Bogaard 2010).

Faunal remains at Monjukli Depe are heavily weighted toward domestic species, in particular sheep, goat and cattle. Gazelle and half-ass (Equus hemionus) are among the more commonly represented wild species (Benecke 2011). A rather different faunal spectrum is represented at Jeitun and Anau North. At Jeitun the only definitive domesticates are sheep and goat; wild game include gazelle but no equids or cattle (Dobney and Jaques 2010). At Anau North domesticates include sheep, cattle, and dog, with gazelle and onager the principal hunted animals (Moore et al. 2003).

Summary

Renewed excavations at Monjukli Depe have clarified some questions of chronological import in the relation between the Late Neolithic and the Early Aeneolithic of southern Turkmenistan. At the same time, they have raised many new questions. Some of them can be answered by continuing work at the site, others can be investigated by soundings at other sites, particularly Çagylly Depe, where Neolithic levels are easily accessible. However, only a much denser network of survey and excavation along the northern Kopet Dag foothills will enable us to clarify whether we are indeed in the presence of prehistoric cultures that are fairly homogeneous in a region that stretches across hundreds of kilometers, or whether we need to deconstruct “Jeitun”, “Anau IA” and other such categories into smaller, more local traditions.

Endnote

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Wadi Hammeh 27, an Early Natufian Settlement at Pella in Jordan is a detailed report on one of the most important Natufian sites to have emerged in the past thirty years and an integrated analysis and interpretation of subsistence strategies, settlement patterns and ritual life in one of the world’s earliest village communities. The 14,000-year-old settlement of Wadi Hammeh 27 is one of the most spectacular sites of its kind, featuring one of the largest, most complex pre-Neolithic buildings yet discovered in the Middle East, an unparalleled series of artefact caches and activity areas, and a rich corpus of late Ice Age art pieces.

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