

THE ŞANLIURFA STONE MOUNDS (TENTH–SEVENTH MILLENNIUM BC) REVIEW OF THE 2024 WORLD NEOLITHIC CONGRESS IN TÜRKIYE

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An event long anticipated in the field of prehistoric archaeology has finally taken place. The World Neolithic Congress was held 3–8 November 2024, in Şanlıurfa, south-eastern Türkiye. The Congress had been postponed for over a year due to the devastating earthquake of 6 February 2023, which severely affected southern and central Türkiye and northern and western Syria. Despite the tragic loss of life, extensive damage, and economic repercussions caused by the earthquake, much of the destruction in the city has been remedied. Numerous new constructions have emerged, and while remnants of collapsed buildings are still visible in some areas, the local authorities and community invested tremendous effort in preparing for and hosting this pivotal forum for the Neolithic archaeology. This underlines the resilience of the region and its commitment to advancing archaeological research despite significant challenges.

The 2024 World Neolithic Congress explored the diverse cultural and socio-economic pathways of Neolithic societies worldwide. It addressed key themes, including the transition to sedentary life, environmental interactions, technological innovations, and social hierarchies, while integrating the latest scientific and archaeological methods. The Congress, first of its kind globally, aimed to challenge established theories and foster fresh perspectives on the global and local significance of the Neolithic. This event emphasized the significance of prehistoric sites like Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe, contributing to discussions on early human civilization.

Since I believe that no other conference on the Neolithic in the near future will surpass the recently held Congress, I took the liberty of writing out an extensive review in order to present my impressions in sufficient detail and with adequate justification.

Hosts, organization and venue

The Congress was organized in collaboration with Istanbul University and Harran University, and was supported by Türkiye's Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Over 70 individuals contributed as members of the Organizing and Scientific Committees and the Advisory Board, with a strong international presence. The role of the nine-member Organizing Committee should be emphasized, primarily composed of members from Harran and Istanbul Universities. The head of the Organizing Committee was Prof. Dr. Necmi Karul (Head of the Department of Prehistory at the Istanbul University), who is responsible for the Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project (Taş Tepeler) and directs the excavations at Karahantepe (fig. 1). The project to be discussed shortly appears to have been the driving force behind the idea of organizing the Congress.

This academic forum brought together more than 900 participants (over 1000 registered) from 63 nations, representing 486 institutions worldwide, and featured the remarkable number of 687 presentations (fig. 2). It was truly an intergenerational gathering of archaeologists, historians, anthropologists and other specialists dedicated to exploring various aspects of the Neolithic. Respected, internationally recognized scholars, some

PROF. DR. NECMİ KARUL

ORGANİZASYON KOMİTESİ BAŞKANI
HEAD OF ORGANISING COMMITTEE



Figure 1. Necmi Karul
at the opening ceremony.
*Image Credit: Oasis Travel
Enterprizes Co.*



Figure 2. *Some of the participants in the Congress. Image Credit: Oasis Travel Enterprizes Co.*

of them retired, engaged in discussions alongside established and early-career researchers, PhD candidates, and even master's students. While listing individual names would be unnecessary and inevitably incomplete, one figure stood out prominently: Mehmet Özdoğan, the doyenne of Anatolian prehistory and now Emeritus Professor at the Istanbul University.

Prof. Özdoğan's extensive contributions to archaeological research across Türkiye and his robust international collaborations seemed to form the central pillar around which the event's discourse revolved. Following the opening address by the Mayor of Şanlıurfa and the Rector of the Harran University during the opening ceremony of the academic program, Mehmet Özdoğan delivered a welcome speech about the inspiration for the meeting and the major ideas that are to be discussed. His address was followed by the honorary presentation of the latest volume in the *Neolithic in Turkey* series, dedicated to his legacy and introduced by the Editors Necmi Karul, Eylem Özdoğan, and Nezih Başgelen, together with Hans Georg Gebel (fig. 3).

Turning our attention back to the organization of the forum, it is important to highlight the official travel agency of the Congress, Oasis Travel Enterprizes Co., which man-



Figure 3. *Opening ceremony of the Congress. From left to right: Nezi̇h Bařgelen, Mehmet  zdoĝan, Eylem  zdoĝan, Hans Georg Gebel, and Necmi Karul. Image Credit: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları (https://www.instagram.com/p/DCY_AkuuWfi/?locale=zh-hans).*

aged registrations, booking accommodations, coordinating tours and airport-hotel-airport transfers for the participants. Their work was exemplary and highly professional. The hotels they suggested were preferred by most attendees, providing great convenience, as the Congress itself took place at the Osmanbey Campus of the Harran University located approximately 20 km east of řanlıurfa. Every morning, buses were organized at several locations in the city, primarily in front of hotels, to transport participants to the campus, and in the evenings, these buses also facilitated returns or transfers to the venues hosting social events.

The Harran University was founded in 1992. Its structure comprises three institutes, 14 faculties, four colleges, one state conservatory, 14 vocational schools and 14 research and application centers. Approximately 1200 faculty members are involved in teaching and research across a diverse range of departments and programs, supporting a student population of more than 26,000 (<https://www.harran.edu.tr/>). The Osmanbey Campus, one of the university's several campuses, spans approximately 210 hectares and resembles a small, well-organized village where it is still easy to lose one's way. The central part of the campus features a green space with a large lake, a park, and gazebos. Surrounding this area, primarily to the south and east as the campus continues to grow and be developed, are the buildings of the faculties and administrative offices (fig. 4). There is also an area with caf s, fast food options, and a market, which proved to be frequently visited, providing the sought-after espresso that many of us yearned for. It became apparent that in řanlıurfa, most hotels and establishments predominantly offer instant coffee, alongside T rkiye's traditional aromatic tea.



Figure 4. *The Osmanbey Campus of the Harran University.* Image Credit: <https://www.harran.edu.tr/galeri.aspx>

The Congress was hosted across 13 rooms in the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences. The convenience of having all the sessions in a single building was greatly appreciated by the participants. The rooms were situated side by side on two floors within the building. Also located in the building was the lecture hall, where the opening ceremony and various keynote lectures and speeches were held. Although this hall was spacious, the congregation of standing colleagues at the back was inevitable, particularly on the first day of the event.

The working language of the Congress was English, as is customary at most large-scale international conferences. Some of the volunteers, whose tireless and dedicated assistance deserves recognition, faced challenges in communicating in English. However, as the organizers had kindly warned, ‘Şanlıurfa is rather a moderate town where foreign languages are very rarely spoken.’ Ultimately, mutual understanding was achieved during the sessions and with the local population in the city.

The hosts provided complimentary lunch at the University’s cafeteria during the one-hour lunch break, which was a welcome exception not often seen at major conferences. The menu was well-balanced, featuring typical local cuisine, with vegetarian options available. Water, instant coffee, and tea were abundantly provided during the breaks between sessions.

The registration desk opened as early as 3 November, although most participants arrived in the evening, resulting in a long registration line the following day and a minor delay in the Congress schedule. Upon registration, we received a conference bag containing materials, gifts and a name badge. However, the package did not include a printed program booklet, which would have been quite convenient. On the other hand, the

availability of a dedicated Wi-Fi network in the building allowed access to the Congress's well-designed app, where the schedule was organized in multiple formats (<https://www.worldneolithiccongress.org/program.aspx>). We were also sent a link with the program, sorted by days and sessions, in a section of the 'Stone Mounds' app (<https://stonemounds.app/tr/wnc>). This option turned out to be exceptionally easy and practical to use. In the Faculty's lobby, just outside the lecture hall, several stalls were set up selling souvenirs and jewelry, alongside various exhibitors. The greatest attention, of course, was drawn to the tables overladen with books, conference proceedings, and journals from several publishing houses (e.g., Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları and Bilgin Kültür Sanat Publications).

Scientific program

The Congress sessions explored 45 key topics, covering aspects from early settlement patterns to the symbolic and ritual elements of Neolithic societies. The sessions were divided into two main sections: *Global Perspectives on the Neolithic* (22) and *Regional Neolithic* (23). Additionally, there was a poster session, *Recent Finds, Recent Recoveries*, in which 62 posters were available for viewing in the building's lobby.

The sessions in *Global Perspectives on the Neolithic* addressed diverse major themes, starting with theoretical and terminological issues, such as the understanding of 'Long Neolithics' or the regional and global problems with the terms Neolithic/neolithization. Several sessions were grouped under the theme of Neolithic diets and food technology, addressing various aspects such as plant and animal domestication trajectories, food production and circulation pathways, and dietary strategies. Key topics included long-term changes in plant consumption patterns (e.g., storage, grinding, and cooking), settlement trends, human population dynamics, and the spread of farming and herding, analyzed through interdisciplinary approaches like genetics, linguistics, and archaeology. A couple of sessions dealt with the future potential of biomolecular and isotopic proxies in Neolithic studies, highlighting advances in bioarchaeology. Topics included ancient DNA from humans, animals, and plants, stable and dietary isotopes, microbiomes, proteomics, and residue analysis, emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach to uncovering new insights. Some sessions addressed specific issues, such as the connections between climate change and the rise and expansion of early farming societies, the impact of Neolithic architecture on social behavior and building technology, and the diversity of mortuary practices across different regions and time periods. Additionally, discussions explored how tectonic and geomorphological processes from the Last Glacial Maximum to the Holocene influenced landscape changes and resource distribution, highlighting Neolithic communities' resilience and adaptability. A number of sessions explored topics such as lithic and stone-polished tool technologies, the use of clay tokens and counting objects, and the role of animals in rituals and symbolism, emphasizing their connection to supernatural beliefs. Additionally, discussions focused on symbolic systems, including signs, images, built spaces, and burial practices, as well as the material culture and iconography of the

early Neolithic communities, analyzing the interplay between art and the socio-economic context of these societies.

The sessions in *Regional Neolithic* were organized from Eurasia, Central and East Asia (5), through Southwest Asia and Anatolia (12), and Caucasia (1), to Southeast Europe/Europe and Eastern Europe (4). They addressed various aspects of the neolithization and the Neolithic, with a focus on themes related to the Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic communities, the transition to the Neolithic, and the interactions between early agricultural communities in different regions.

In addition to the regular sessions, several special talks were held. On 4 November, Peter Bellwood delivered a keynote lecture on the impact of food production on global human population history over the past 12,000 years. On 5 and 8 November, two plenary lectures took place – one by Hsiao-chun Hung on the emergence of Neolithic life in East and Southeast Asia, and another by Melinda Zeder titled ‘Unpacking the Neolithic.’ On 7 November, three commemorative speeches were given, tracing and honoring the work of the early researchers of the Pre-Pottery and Early Pottery Neolithic in Anatolia and especially in Urfa. Mehmet Özdoğan acknowledged the pioneers of Neolithic research in southeast Anatolia, including Bruce Howe, Halet Çambel, and Robert J. Braidwood. Barbara Helwing delivered an emotional speech on the legacy of Harald Hauptmann, while Joris Peters paid tribute to Klaus Schmidt and especially his work at Göbeklitepe. These commemorative speeches provided an essential link between generations of Neolithic researchers, not only in Anatolia but around the world. It is worth emphasizing once again that the Congress created a true impression of an intergenerational gathering of archaeologists.

A common drawback of large scientific forums, where many sessions are held simultaneously, is that it’s impossible to attend everything one would like, necessitating tough choices about what to participate in and what to skip. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I chose to focus on the sessions I attended as well as on the participation of Bulgarian archaeologists in the Congress.

The participation of a significant number of Bulgarian scholars from various institutions made a positive impression. A total of 12 Bulgarians attended the event, delivering ten presentations in total. The representatives of the National Institute of Archaeology & Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, were the most numerous; in fact, almost the entire Department of Prehistory participated. However, some co-authors of the papers could not join in person for various reasons. Those present included Krum Bacvarov (Head of the Department), Vasil Nikolov, Maria Gurova, Desislava Takorova, Galina Samichkova, and this author, Nikolina Nikolova.

The other Bulgarian participants were Tanya Dzhanezova of the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, Malgorzata Grebska-Kulow, formerly of the Blagoevgrad Regional Museum of History, Ivan Gatsov of the National Museum of History, Petranka Nedelcheva of the New Bulgarian University/National Museum of History, Sevdalina Tsaneva of the Provadia Museum of History, and Petar Zidarov (independen-

dent researcher). Tanya Dzhanfezova co-organized a session, while Petranka Nedelcheva was a member of the Advisory Board of the Congress.

The Bulgarian participation was concentrated in the *Regional Neolithic* section, specifically in the four sessions of the Southeast Europe/Europe and Eastern Europe region (R14–17), as well as in one session from the *Global Perspectives on the Neolithic* section, which was generally dedicated to the Neolithic burial practices (G24).

Regrettably, I was only able to attend couple of sessions in their entirety. The first one, *Anatolia and the Balkans During the Neolithization Process: Connections, Similarities and Differences* (R16), was organized by Barbara Horejs, Sofija Stefanović, and Tanya Dzhanfezova. This session highlighted the key role of Anatolia and the Balkans in the neolithization process, focusing on their mutual connections. It provided a platform for presenting new evidence and theories on the formation of the Neolithic, addressing social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects, such as built environments, diet, burial customs, production, technologies, and innovations. By examining regional and supra-regional perspectives, the session aimed to shed light on the complexity of neolithization and the interconnections between these regions during the early to middle Holocene, contributing to a broader understanding within the global Neolithic context.

The session featured 17 papers, three of which were presented by Bulgarian participants. The presentation by Nikolina Nikolova, Atanas Tsirev, and Krum Bacvarov summarized the results of extensive archaeological research in the Middle Maritsa Valley in Upper Thrace over the last two decades, shedding light on various aspects of Early Neolithic material culture and social practices. The authors argued in favor of the Middle Maritsa Valley as a dynamic thoroughfare for interaction and exchange throughout the Neolithic expansion in Upper Thrace and beyond. Immediately following, Małgorzata Grębska-Kulow gave a similar and detailed overview of the Early Neolithic in southwest Bulgaria. She focused on how prehistoric communities in Anatolia influenced the shaping of the Early Neolithic along the rivers Struma and Mesta, and how these processes impacted the development of Neolithic cultures in the region. Tanya Dzhanfezova's paper examined the pottery attested at some of the earliest Neolithic sites in Bulgaria through a range of macro- and microscopic analyses, aiming to investigate the adaptation mechanisms of Neolithic communities by exploring the earliest ceramic technology.

The session was particularly interesting as it presented several new studies from well-known sites, exploring various aspects of Neolithic cultures, including settlement patterns, architecture, burial practices, flint production, and ceramic technology. Especially valuable was the presentation of new series of radiocarbon dates from numerous sites, mainly in the Balkans.

As with most sessions, due to the large number of participants and the tight schedule, no dedicated discussion slots were included. After most presentations, there was an opportunity for one or a few questions, but in some cases, time did not allow for any. Final discussions were scheduled at the end of the sessions. This is, of course, not a criticism of

the Congress itself, but applies to most, if not all, large-scale conferences (e.g., the EAA annual meetings).

The next session I attended – *The Neolithic of the Aegean and Beyond: Supra-Regional Networks and Local Communities* (R15) – was organized by Agathe Reingruber, Zafer Derin, and Eylem Özdoğan. The session focused on the beginnings of the Neolithic way of life in the context of the Mesolithic precursor and the subsequent transformations up to the early sixth millennium BC. It explored the internal dynamics within the Circum-Aegean world and exchanges with surrounding areas, with special attention given to the differences between its eastern and western parts. Topics included material culture, chronology, regional cultures, and interregional networks, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches such as environmental studies, archaeometry, and bioarchaeology, aiming to highlight the uniqueness of Aegean Neolithic societies.

A total of 28 papers were presented at the session, two of which by Bulgarian participants. Ivan Gatsov and Petranka Nedelcheva summarized their study over the past two decades on lithic technologies and raw material supply in the Marmara Sea area and its neighboring regions during the Early Neolithic. Vassil Nikolov and colleagues presented findings from two Late Neolithic pit sites in the Maritsa River Valley in Upper Thrace: Svilengrad (Lyubimets–DB 2) and Kapitan Andreevo. An interesting focus was placed on more than 700 sherds from face pots found in the pits at Kapitan Andreevo, which were likely made for ritual purposes and intended for multiple use. An additional contribution to the Bulgarian presentations was made by Jean-Paul Demoule, who summarized the results of the excavations at Kovachevo, one of the earliest settlements in the Balkans. The remaining contributions were dedicated to specific microregions and/or particular sites, as well as various find types, both from the western and the eastern Aegean coasts, as well as from the Balkans.

The third session from the European region section I attended, *Early Monumentality and Social Differentiation: Transformations in Europe* (R17), was organized by Johannes Müller and Wiebke Kirleis. The session explored the role of megalithic monuments in shaping the European landscape, linking their rise to social, economic, and environmental changes. It focused on how these monuments reflect broader cultural transformations, including the expansion of external relations and the diversification of material culture. By integrating case studies on early monumental architecture, social changes, and environmental shifts, the session aimed to provide insights into the creation of Europe's earliest cultural landscapes during the Neolithic.

The session featured 20 talks, with a significant representation of participants from Central, Western, and, to a lesser extent, Northern Europe, including a notable number of scholars from the Kiel University. This predominance reflects the historical development of research on megaliths and monumentality, which has been primarily advanced by West European scholars – particularly from the UK, Germany, and France – dating back over a century.

Most presentations focused on case studies, mainly examining various types of megalithic tombs of the Funnel Beaker culture, Corded Ware culture, Yamnaya culture, Wartberg archaeological group, etc. Additional contributions explored megaliths, burial structures, and standing stones from France and the Alps, as well as tumuli and stone circles from Iberia. Several papers presented findings on Trypillia mega-structures, specifically the assembly houses identified at these sites.

Three presentations addressed the monumental nature of prehistoric ditch enclosures in different parts of Europe, providing valuable insights into the methodological and analytical approaches employed in studying such sites. The study focusing on the ‘westernmost’ region analyzed depositional practices at a selection of North European causewayed enclosures in southern Britain and Scandinavia. The ‘central’ study examined rondels as Neolithic monuments and their visibility in the local landscape of Central Europe. The ‘southeastern’ study, presented by the author, aimed to explore the Early Neolithic ditch enclosures in the Eastern Balkans as monumental features – large-scale projects, but also memorial in their significance. The argument was made that the repeated activities of digging, refilling, and recutting, along with deposition practices performed in and around the ditches, highlight the importance of these enclosures in the collective memory of the Early Neolithic societies in the region.

Several presentations explored more abstract aspects of monumentality, such as investigating gender inequalities in the Neolithic through ancient human genomes and using eye-tracking techniques to understand how monuments shape our perception of the world. A particularly engaging discussion focused on the emergence of waste monumentality in Europe.

The fourth regional session with Bulgarian participation was *Regional and Inter-Regional Palimpsests of Neolithization Processes: South-Eastern Europe* (R14), organized by Mihael Budja, Dušan Borić, Zuzana Hofmanová, and Maxime Bami. The session explored a broad spectrum of topics related to regional palimpsests, encompassing archaeological, archaeogenetic, biomolecular, demographic, climatic, and paleoeconomic perspectives. It addressed themes such as the transition to farming, artifact assemblages, chronological developments, symbolism, and social practices. Key theoretical frameworks were also examined, including the Neolithic package, demic diffusion, migration, gene-culture coevolution, and the Neolithic demographic transition.

Of the 13 presentations, two were delivered by Bulgarian scholars. Petar Zidarov discussed a case study from the Early Neolithic site of Sinagovtsi in northwestern Bulgaria, which featured a single large pit and three skeletons – an adult male, a female, and a child – each buried in a distinct manner. Zidarov highlighted the importance of this Early Neolithic feature and its broader implications for understanding connections along the Middle and Lower Danube regions. Maria Gurova, in collaboration with Clive Bonsall, discussed the use of Balkan flint by Early Neolithic communities in the Balkans during the early sixth millennium BC. Understanding the supply and distribution of this raw ma-

terial is key to tracing the trajectory and regional dynamics of the neolithization process. The concentration of Balkan flint in northern Bulgaria positioned the region as pivotal in spreading the Neolithic lifestyle, though the origins of the flint distribution network remain unclear.

The final session I will discuss, although, unfortunately, I was unable to attend, is *Treating Dead Bodies in the Neolithic: Exploring the Increasing Social Complexity* (G24), organized by Yılmaz Selim Erdal, Françoise Le Mort, and Stéphane Rottier. This was the largest session of the Congress, spanning three days. A total of 38 presentations were delivered, two of which were given by Bulgarian teams. This session examined Neolithic mortuary practices as a lens for understanding societal transitions and the evolving relationship between the living and spaces of the deceased. The diversity of burial practices was explored – including variations in location, architecture, grave goods, and body treatments – alongside phenomena such as skull plastering and cannibalism. Scholars presented regional and interregional analyses, diachronic studies, and integrative interpretations to trace the evolution of attitudes toward death over time.

Desislava Takorova, together with Vassil Nikolov, Kathleen McSweeney, Nadezhda Atanassova, and Todor Dyakov, presented the latest discoveries at the Early Neolithic site of Slatina–Sofia. In the ritual complex near the settlement, numerous human remains were found, including articulated skeletons as well as skulls. Unlike the settlement, where burials found between houses showed no post-mortem manipulation, the remains at the ritual complex exhibited evidence of dismemberment, cutting, and soft tissue removal, suggesting these actions occurred near the time of death. Krum Bacvarov, together with Nikolina Nikolova, Georgi Katsarov, Atanas Tsurev, and Kathleen McSweeney, presented Early Neolithic burial evidence from Nova Nadezhda in Upper Thrace. Eighteen burial contexts, containing the remains of 24 individuals, were found either in the fill of an enclosure ditch, along its inner edge, or associated with its intentional filling. This is the largest burial sample from an early sixth millennium BC site in an area lacking formal burial grounds, offering valuable insights into the social practices of early farming communities.

Due to the high level of interest in this session and the numerous opportunities for analysis and interpretation offered by the topic of ‘treating dead bodies’, the presentations were divided into several subsections. The main themes covered included: treating the skull, recognizing and interpreting intentional modifications of human remains, the diversity and complexity of multi-stage mortuary practices, shedding light on social complexity through genetic analysis of dead bodies, age, gender, and status in death, and exploring regional identities through mortuary practices.

Social events

The beauty of such large academic forums, as well as smaller-scale conferences, lies in the virtually constant opportunities they offer for socializing with colleagues from around the world – during sessions, coffee breaks, and even after the official program

concludes. The organizers ensured that we were never bored or left to plan most of our time on our own. They prepared a rich and exciting schedule of social events for us. I must emphasize that all the events were entirely free of charge. Moreover, the registration fee for participation was completely reasonable and, in my opinion, even insufficient given the level of organization. For the group of countries that includes Bulgaria, and within the early bird payment period, the fee was only €90. It is worth noting that the Congress was supported by a large number of partners and sponsors whom we should gratefully acknowledge.

The events primarily consisted of receptions but also included concerts, exhibitions, and the highly anticipated visit to archaeological sites, which I believe is one of the reasons for the high attendance at the Congress. On the very first day, although only a relatively small number of attendees had arrived by then – most members of the Bulgarian group, for instance, arrived late in the evening – there was a classical music concert performed by Cihat Aşkın – *Türk Valsleri* immediately after the official opening ceremony of the forum. The evening continued with a welcome reception at the Hilton DoubleTree Hotel.

The following day, now with around 900 scholars in presence, we attended a reception held in the courtyard of the Şanlıurfa Archaeological Museum. Our hosts had arranged a concert featuring traditional Turkish music as well as a tasting of various local dishes. Naturally, the tables laden with delicacies drew a crowd. This was followed by the official opening of *Beyond the Past* art exhibition, which presented a modern interpretation of prehistoric art in the region.

The Şanlıurfa Archaeological Museum is among the most impressive museums I have visited, particularly for its Neolithic collection. The Museum opened relatively recently, in 2015. Its modern building is square-shaped, covering an area of 6000 square meters (fig. 5). It's the largest museum in Türkiye, with 14 main exhibition halls and 33 animation areas. Around 10,000 artifacts from various periods are displayed. The exhibition is organized chronologically, starting from the Paleolithic and extending to the Islamic period (Karul et al. 2024, 4ff). From the author's perspective, the most impressive part is the Neolithic exhibition, where one can see one of the oldest statues in the world, found at Yenimahalle, a replica of the Göbeklitepe D Temple, the original Nevali Çori Temple, and many more. This year, the Museum also opened a new exhibition hall, Taş Tepeler, dedicated to the discoveries of a large-scale archaeological and socialization project in the region, which I will describe shortly. A wonderful surprise was the Neolithic Catalogue (Karul et al. 2024), published in connection with the opening of the new hall, which was given to us on the registration day. A notable aspect was that the organizers had provided free access with the Congress badges, not only to the Archaeological Museum but also to the Şanlıurfa Haleplibahçe Mosaic Museum and the Kızılkoyun Necropolis of rock tombs, which a significant number of participants took the opportunity to visit.



Figure 5. *The Şanlıurfa Archaeological Museum.* Image Credit: <https://www.turkishmuseums.com/museum/detail/2227-sanliurfa-museum/2227/4>

On 7 November, we attended a cocktail reception, once again held at the Hilton Double Tree Hotel, which served as the closing event. A speech was delivered by Gökhan Yazgı, the Deputy Minister of Türkiye’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, who spoke about the cultural heritage of Şanlıurfa, the Taş Tepeler Project, and the success of the Congress. This was followed by hours of conversations with colleagues, accompanied by music, delicious catering, and glasses of wine (figs. 6 and 7).

The Taş Tepeler Project

Undoubtedly, the highlight of the program was our visit to Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites at the Şanlıurfa Plateau. Some of the sites are newly discovered, while others have been known for a shorter or longer time. Their extensive investigation in recent years, however, is the result of a major project that has been carried out. The Şanlıurfa Neolithic Research Project – Taş Tepeler (Stone Mounds in English) – launched in 2021 by Türkiye’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, is a large-scale archaeological initiative focused on studying Neolithic sites in the Şanlıurfa region. The project aims to uncover the origins of sedentary life across a plateau encircling the Harran Plain, extending over 200 kilometers from the foothills of the Eastern Taurus Mountains (<https://tastepeler.org/en>).

Involving 33 academic institutions, including 19 international partners, and directed by Necmi Karul, the project investigates the transition from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles. Discoveries at sites such as Göbeklitepe and Karahantepe challenge earlier assumptions that agriculture was the primary driver of sedentary living. Instead, the evidence



Figure 6. Reception at the Hilton Double Tree Hotel, Şanlıurfa. From left to right: Vassil Nikolov, Mehmet Özdoğan, and Herman Parzinger. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.



Figure 7. Reception at the Hilton Double Tree Hotel, Şanlıurfa. From left to right: Ivan Gatsov, Vassil Nikolov, Mehmet Özdoğan, and Krum Bacvarov. Image Credit: S. Tsaneva.

suggests that settled communities preceded agricultural practices, with food production emerging as a subsequent development. Distinct from other Southwest Asian Neolithic sites, the Taş Tepeler settlements are notable for their monumental architecture and artistic achievements, providing valuable insights into daily life, social structures, and religious practices. The project also explores inter-settlement relationships, settlement hierarchies, and environmental adaptations during the Neolithic (tenth–seventh millennium BC). In addition to its archaeological objectives, the Taş Tepeler Project emphasizes the protection, preservation, and public presentation of these sites. It also aims to document and safeguard the traditional architecture and cultural heritage of the Şanlıurfa region, marking it as one of the most ambitious and comprehensive archaeological undertakings in Türkiye’s history (Karul 2024, 16ff).

Visits to the stone mounds

The site visits were planned for 6 November. We were divided into four large groups to ensure there were not too many people at each site, with each group following a different route across the locations. Sufficient time was allocated at the sites, enabling us to thoroughly explore them and gain a firsthand understanding of their key features, with some of the site researchers offering on-site insights. The sites are mostly situated on limestone heights and hilltops, dominating the surrounding terrain, complemented by their monumental stone architecture – hence the stone mounds.

Gürcütepe. The first site we visited was Gürcütepe, which consists of eight settlements – four mounds and four flat areas. Occupation began in the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNB) and continued until the Pottery Neolithic. From 1995 to 1999, it was excavated alongside Göbeklitepe by a Turkish–German team as part of the Urfa Project. Research resumed in 2021 under the Taş Tepeler Project. Two main layers were revealed: Large Room Structures and Cell-Planned Structures. Gürcütepe was likely inhabited by different groups in the same period and is considered one of the ‘Mega Villages’ of the Late PPNB (Erdalkiran 2024).

Sefertepe. We visited next Sefertepe, the easternmost site of the PPN settlements on the Şanlıurfa Plateau, where excavations began in 2021 as part of the Taş Tepeler Project. Most of the uncovered structures are quadrangular, similar to those found at Göbeklitepe, and are attributed to the PPNB. They feature benches, platforms, and broken grinding stones embedded in the walls. The floors were made of a lime-clay mortar mixture, and some structures revealed T-shaped, one-sided T-shaped, flat-topped, and quadrangular pillars (Güldoğan 2024).

Karahantepe. The most impressive visit was to Karahantepe, not only due to the nature of the uncovered features, many of which have also been found at other sites in the region, but because of the scale of the excavated area since 2019 (fig. 8). At least three phases, dating from 9400 to 8200 cal BC (PPNA and PPNB), have been identified at the western terrace of the site (Karul 2021; 2024a). Our attention was immediately drawn



Figure 8. *Some of the Bulgarian participants in the Congress at Karahantepe. From left to right: Desislava Takorova, Galina Samichkova, Krum Bacvarov, Nikolina Nikolova, Sevdalina Tsaneva, and Vassil Nikolov. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*

to the largest central structure (AD) of the monumental complex (fig. 9). Built into the bedrock, it features T-shaped pillars, two-step benches, and two central pillars facing each other. However, it was the human head carved into the wall of structure AB, connected to the former structure by a staircase, that truly captured our gaze. Inside this significantly smaller structure, ten phallic-shaped pillars and a serpentine channel, likely related to a liquid-based ritual, were found (fig. 10). Another highlight of the site is located in a public building at the top of the western slope, where a massive human statue sits on a bench along the wall. The statue, 2.45 m tall, has a well-defined face and ribcage, holding an emphasized phallus in its hands (fig. 11). I was also struck by the remarkable quality of the limestone vessels found in most of the small round or oval dwellings, and in the communal buildings as well (fig. 12).

Göbeklitepe. Our next stop was Göbeklitepe, the benchmark for monumentality in the PPN period. No matter what I write about this site, it will inevitably fall short. Göbekli was discovered in the 1960s, however excavations were initiated in the mid-1990s and continue until this day. In 2018, Göbeklitepe was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Clare et al. 2019). It spans at least 1,500 years, dating to the PPNA and PPNB (ca. 9600–8000 cal BC). Initially, research focused on the monumental buildings and their T-shaped pillars, leading to interpretations of Göbeklitepe as a purely ritual site.



Figure 9. *Structure AD at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*



Figure 10. *Structure AB at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*



Figure 11. *Seated human statue at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*



Figure 12. *Limestone vessels at Karahantepe. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*

However, recent studies have shifted attention to the more numerous structures without T-pillars, now interpreted as houses (Clare 2020 and 2024).

As dedicated prehistorians, we were keen to arrive at the site. We were eager to see the round special buildings with stone walls and the incredible T-shaped pillars, especially the various images carved on them (fig. 13). Most of the pillars are interpreted as stylized human figures, confirmed by the application of arms, hands, and clothing elements (belts, pendants, etc.) on some of them. What stood out were the diverse depictions of animals on other pillars – birds, snakes, scorpions, spiders, and predators (Schmidt 2010). We were told that the largest T-shaped pillar likely reached a height of 6 meters and weighed up to 10 tons.

Çakmaktepe. In the late afternoon, we arrived at Çakmaktepe, the second-to-last site on our tour. Excavations began in 2021 as part of the Taş Tepeler Project. The site dates to the early PPNA period (ca. 9600–8800 cal BC), representing an earlier stage of sedentism compared to other PPN settlements in the region. Excavations uncovered round, semi-underground domestic and special buildings, with conical holes carved into the bedrock, similar to mortars found at Natufian settlements. One special building is notable for having pillars that haven't yet taken on the typical T-shape (Şahin 2024). We



Figure 13. *Göbeklitepe.* Image Credit: N. Nikolova.

quickly toured the area, enjoyed the sunset over Şanlıurfa, and headed to our final stop for the evening.

Sayburç. We arrived at Sayburç after dark. Initially, our group harbored some skepticism about what could be observed at the site. However, the researcher Eylem Özdoğan and her team impressed us with their resourcefulness, utilizing a large lantern to illuminate key areas of the site. Excavations at Sayburç, part of the Taş Tepeler Project, began in 2021, revealing two PPN occupations from the mid-ninth millennium BC. The first, with communal buildings, is in the northern part of the settlement, while the second, with residential buildings, lies further south (Özdoğan 2024). It was fortunate that we visited the site at night, as the most notable discovery was challenging to perceive in daylight. A relief was found on the inner face of a bench in a large communal building. The figures are arranged in a linear sequence, with a bull and a male figure facing each other on the left, followed by two leopards and another male figure on the right. The central male figure (fig. 14), depicted in high relief, holds his phallus in his right hand and looks towards the people in the room, while the others are gazing at each other (Özdoğan 2022).

After the unique light show at Sayburç, we returned to Şanlıurfa, filled with impressions from the archaeological sites we visited, as well as the features, artworks, and landscapes we had long hoped to experience.

The city of Şanlıurfa

Modern Şanlıurfa blends the old city's Arabic charm and Middle Eastern architecture with newer districts of modern apartments, restaurants, and so on. Şanlıurfa, regarded as one of the most religious cities in Türkiye, is believed to be the birthplace of both



Figure 14. *Human figure in a wall relief at Sayburç. Image Credit: N. Nikolova.*

Abraham and Job. Balıklıgöl, also known as the Holy Lake, is a beautiful and noteworthy site in the city, a picturesque oblong lake surrounded by buildings and filled with carp, holding religious significance due to its supposed connection to Abraham. The old town is home to a vast ancient bazaar where visitors can purchase everything from traditional crafts, handwoven textiles, leather saddles, and copperware to wooden carvings, gold and silver jewelry, spices, and even second-hand motorcycles.

The city boasts numerous cafés and small restaurants, primarily outdoor, offering traditional local cuisine. The food is heavily meat-based, with dishes such as kebabs, liver, and *köfte* taking center stage. Popular pastries such as *içli pide* and *lahmacun* are also commonly found, and they can be served either with meat or in a relatively vegetarian version with cheese. The area is also known for its many sweet shops offering *baklava* and other desserts, where visitors are invariably served traditional Turkish black tea (*çay*). Furthermore, the local ice cream, *dondurma*, is available in a variety of flavors, though pistachio (*Antep fıstığı*), a characteristic flavor of both Türkiye and the region, is particularly popular. In fact, Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa are responsible for 80 percent of the pistachio production in the country.

It is clear that there could have been no better venue for the World Neolithic Congress than Şanlıurfa. The region's millennia-old history, coupled with significant discoveries and the extensive research associated with the Taş Tepeler Project, offers natural and inspiring setting for bringing together scholars from around the world to discuss the origins of sedentary life.

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