

Neolithic by the River: Dhali-Agridhi, Cyprus

In archaeology, it is easy to take the materials out of the ground; the difficult part is in interpreting it, placing material remains symbolically into an ideological framework.

Previous to this investigation, the conventional theory was that people first came to Cyprus from Turkey. The 5500 year old site in the middle of Cyprus, modern Dhali, ancient Idalion, shows that the settlers came instead from the Levant, presumably brought in rafts by the current that flows from Israel to the coast of Cyprus. From the Levant, on a clear day, you can see the tops of the mountains of Cyprus.

There are no multi-layer tells on Cyprus; all remains are single layer, so habitation sites are not as readily discernible. The site at which Professor Lehavv dug was on the banks of a river, now a wadi that is dry in the summer because over pumping has depleted the water table, but flowing year-round in neolithic times. The bank is currently being dug out for its gravel, so archaeologists are running against time.

The first step in the excavation was finding the site, indicated by the presence of trace remains and confirmed by a trial dig which exposed a baulk with an ash layer. Next was the establishment of a grid on the alfalfa field and the cutting of test trenches, which revealed some animal bones. A 5x5 meter square was then excavated down to bedrock/virgin soil, yielding a quantity of bones from four species: fallow deer, sheep, goats and pigs.

The dirt was removed 1" deep at a time and all the materials identified, mapped and recorded before the next inch was removed. Various clusters appeared, with bones in one cluster, stones and pottery in another, which allowed the interpretation of various living/working spaces. Note: no human bones from Neolithic times were found on the site or elsewhere, as yet, on Cyprus.

The second year of excavation another square was tackled, 100 meters away from the first. This yielded a paved floor, 70% of which was made from broken vessels and the remainder from sandstone, brought from about 30 miles away, probably originally for use as sandpaper on stone vessels. Pollen, which is deposited in layers in the ground, was analyzed level by level to tell what was growing when (e.g., oak, pine, pistachio, willow), thus revealing climate changes. Water is needed to separate clay, sand and everything else through a sieve, bucket by bucket, to give 100% retrieval rate for a site and thus require less wide an excavation - important for financial reasons.

The next year, a test trench was again sunk down to bedrock. Finds included a stone bowl with incised decorations (the inside having been scooped/sanded out), a stone roller for a quern, a stone pounder for grain, a sharpened bone tool, a boar tusk (ornament or piercer?), and obsidian. Since there are no volcanoes on the island, this volcanic glass was fingerprinted by neutron activation to reveal trace elements that can then be linked to specific volcanoes. This obsidian came from a volcano in Cappadocia, near Lake Van, and thus shows trade activity. Also found were some small beads and agate triangles. Of the two levels explored, the upper is aceramic and the lower ceramic, perhaps the first pottery on the island, its color due to oxidization in the kiln, at this point not yet under control.

Ethno-archaeology looks at the present day life at sites to see what might suit the area: e.g., there are lots of sheep now and there were lots of sheep bones from neolithic times. A threshing mat (wood with inset flints) found at the site is the same as the ancient type, so you cannot tell at sight whether one is old or new. In the case of stone tools, wear is examined under a microscope to determine how it was used. The dig was abandoned at this point because of the Turkish invasion and the continued fighting. At the end of each season, the pits excavated have to be filled in again so the farmer can use the site, but old pits are not reopened, since they had already been dug down to bedrock.

What can we determine about the original areas of animals whose bones were found here: fallow deer, pigs, sheep and goats? They all must have been brought over from somewhere else, but Turkey has no fallow deer. Turkey had cows, but there were none on the island in neolithic times. The fallow deer existed only in Neolithic times, all having been killed off before the Bronze Age. So, prehistoric settlers must have come from the Levant, not from Turkey or Greece.