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Recent Archaeological Investigations at Canhasan, Karaman - Türkiye (2021-2024)

Karaman Canhasan'daki Güncel Arkeolojik Araştırmalar (2021-2024)

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive evaluation of the first four seasons of renewed excavations at Canhasan, which recommenced in 2021 following a fifty-year hiatus. The primary objectives are to delineate key developments and provide a synthesis of findings. The site, comprising three sites, has remained uninvestigated since the 1970s. The original excavations, constrained by the technological capabilities of the 1960s, preceded significant methodological advancements in archaeology over the subsequent five decades. The renewed project employs contemporary methodologies to reassess these settlements, which are critical for understanding the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in Central Anatolia and the Konya Plain. The excavation strategy was redesigned based on initial site assessments and a re-evaluation of the earlier work conducted by D. French. The project's scope extends beyond archaeological investigation to include cultural heritage evaluation. The resumption of work after five decades, alongside evolving contemporary contexts, has introduced new dynamics to the fieldwork. The impacts of these developments for each season are examined below. Furthermore, the project has already begun to exert a discernible influence on the local culture and economy. Although the project's systematic process is modelled on that of Çatalhöyük (initiated in 1993), it is rapidly establishing its own distinct economic and cultural significance. This article summarizes the work conducted during the 2021–2024 seasons.

Keywords: Canhasan, Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN), Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Konya Plain

Öz

Bu çalışma, Canhasan'da elli yıllık bir aradan sonra 2021'de yeniden başlayan kazı çalışmalarının ilk dört sezonunun kapsamlı bir değerlendirmesini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Temel gelişmeleri vurgulamak ve özet bir bakış sağlamak hedeflenmiştir. Bilindiği üzere, Canhasan üç höyükten oluşmaktadır. 1970'lerden bu yana bu höyüklerde herhangi bir çalışma yürütülmemiştir. Önceki kazılar, 1960'ların teknolojik imkânlarıyla gerçekleştirilmişken arkeolojik metodolojiler son elli yılda önemli ölçüde gelişmiştir. Yenilenen kazılar, Orta Anadolu ve Konya Ovası'nın Neolitik ve Kalkolitik dönemlerini anlamak açısından kritik öneme sahip bu yerleşimleri, son 40 yılda yapılan araştırmaları da dikkate alarak ileri metodolojilerle yeniden değerlendirmektedir. Kazı stratejisi, alanların ilk değerlendirmelerinin ardından ve D. French tarafından daha önce yürütülen çalışmalar göz önünde bulundurularak yeniden tasarlanmıştır. Çalışmalarımız yalnızca arkeolojik araştırmalarla sınırlı kalmayıp kültürel mirasın değerlendirilmesini de kapsamaktadır. Ellinci yılın ardından kazıların yeniden başlaması ve değişen zamanlar, saha çalışmalarına yeni dinamikler getirmiştir. Aşağıda, bu değişimlerin her sezon üzerindeki etkileri ele alınacaktır. Çalışmalarımız, yerel kültür ve ekonomi üzerinde etkisini göstermeye başlamıştır. Projemiz, 1993'te başlayan Çatalhöyük'tekine benzer sistematik bir süreç izlese de ekonomik ve kültürel önemini hızla ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, 2021-2024 sezonlarında gerçekleştirilen çalışmaları özetlemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Canhasan, Çanak-Çömleksiz Neolitik, Kalkolitik, Konya Ovası

Recent Archaeological Investigations at Canhasan, Karaman - Türkiye (2021-2024)

The Canhasan sites (I, II, and III) (Figure 1) are situated northeast of Karaman province (Figure 2a), approximately 12.5 kilometers from the city center (Figure 2b), in the direction of Sudurağı (Figure 2c), within a village formerly known as Canasun or Canhasan and presently designated Alaçatı. The road to Sudurağı intersects Canhasan sites I and II. It is plausible to consider these sites as a single entity featuring two distinct elevations; however, Canhasan II is generally dated to a later period. Canhasan III is located approximately 650 meters from Canhasan I, with the total distance between all sites exceeding one kilometer. Although once located in a region of high fertility and abundant water, the sites now present a different landscape due to a decline in the water table to levels below 300 meters and increasing aridity.

This study primarily aims to present the work conducted at Canhasan Höyük during the 2021–2024 seasons in a simplified and summary form. The objective of this research is neither to explicate the broader research conducted across the Konya Plain and nearby regions -theories proposed on the basis of Canhasan, such as the grand narrative of 'Neolithisation'- nor to furnish evidence for the subsequently developed 'packages' approach (Özdoğan, 2005; 2010). Instead, the study focuses on the second phase of archaeological investigations that have been undertaken in the Konya Plain and its immediate surroundings since the 1960s, including those initiated by French teams nearly a quarter-century ago, which remained incomplete. This focus is maintained while simultaneously acknowledging the extant problems and proposed views concerning the Central Anatolian Neolithic period. These complex issues were also mentioned within the study published in 2002 (Gérard & Thissen, 2002). Within the scope of that earlier work, the Central Anatolian Neolithic was specifically evaluated with regard to fauna, flora, chronology, and internal cultural dynamics. Consequently, within the present work's purview, these specific details will not be extensively discussed. The contributions of the Canhasan sites within the framework of these topics, as revealed by the recent research at Canhasan Höyük and subsequent developments, will, in turn, be evaluated in a formal academic context during the ensuing stages of the research process. Accordingly, this article also aims to provide a brief, step-by-step summary of the work carried out during the project's first four seasons.

As indicated by workers who contributed both to the studies conducted approximately fifty years ago at Canhasan Höyük and to the present research, the current state of this plain—once a wetland—and the water level that precipitated the cessation of sondage work at Canhasan Höyük III have primarily brought to the fore the necessity of prioritizing paleo-ecological and geographical investigations. Consequently, when the fact that animal bones and botanical studies have not been exhaustively investigated at the sites is also taken into consideration, the general trajectory for the excavation work has become roughly apparent. The existing sondage studies from 1969–1970, being both confined to a very small area (2 x 2 meters) and having their analyses remain incompletely evaluated—coupled with the fact that these studies for Canhasan III persist merely as a preliminary report—has prevented the true potential of the site from being revealed. In particular, the process whereby the rapid and detailed studies conducted at Canhasan I Höyük were quickly transformed into publication has resulted in the Canhasan sites being generally mentioned and recognized today primarily in association with Chalcolithic period finds.

In the present day, while the excavations at Çatalhöyük in the Konya Plain, initiated by I. Hodder in 1993 concluded in 2017 (Hodder, 1996), they were subsequently resumed at short intervals under the directorship of Ç. Çilingiroğlu (Çilingiroğlu et al., 2022) (Ege University) and A. U. Türkcan (Türkcan et al., 2025) (Anadolu University) after 2017, and have most recently been continued under the directorship of A. Ozan (Pamukkale University). Alongside Çatalhöyük, the excavations at Pınarbaşı—under the successive directorship and scientific advisorship of T. Watkins (Watkins, 1996) (University of Edinburgh), D. Baird (Baird, 2007, 2012; Baird et al., 2011, 2013)(University of Liverpool), and currently G. Mustafaoğlu (Hacı Bayram Veli University)—as well as Boncuklu Höyük under the directorship of D. Baird (Baird et al., 2011, 2012), and Gökhöyük under the directorship

of R. Gündüz (Selçuk University) (Gündüz, 2020), were established as long-term and significant excavations in the southern part of the Konya Plain. Apart from these, situated in the Cappadocia region and, like the southern excavations, significant for the Central Anatolian Neolithic due to their early chronology, are the excavations such as Musular (M. Özbaşaran – Istanbul University) (Özbaşaran, 1999), Aşıklı Höyük (directed successively by U. Esin, N. Balkan-Atlı, M. Özbaşaran, and N. Kayacan – Istanbul University) (Özbaşaran et al., 2018), together with Chalcolithic site of Güvercinkayası (S. Gülçur – Istanbul University) (Kiper & Gülçur, 2007), Sırçalıtepe (Balcı et al., 2021) (Istanbul University), Tepecik-Çiftlik (E. Bıçakçı and Y. G. Çakan – Istanbul University) (Bıçakçı, 2001, 2001), and Köşk Höyük (Öztan, 2002; Silistreli, 1986). These sites, which possess chronologies extending from the Early Neolithic to the terminal Chalcolithic, constitute a significant potential for understanding the cultural structure and dynamics of the Konya Plain. All these settlements and the long-term excavation studies conducted at them contribute broadly to a more comprehensive understanding of the Central Anatolian Neolithic. However, the Canhasan sites, which were left incompletely understood and interrupted by short-term research, in addition to being an important link in this research chain, will also be a source of answers for many problems observed within the Central Anatolian Neolithic sequence. For instance, while obsidian use is very common in all settlements, why is incised decorations on obsidian tools found predominantly in the Canhasan examples? Alternatively, what was the specific role of Canhasan within the broader obsidian trade networks? How did chronological continuity develop across all these settlements? How did kinship relationships develop among the populations attested at these settlements, from a genetic perspective? While marsh environments were predominant in all the southern settlements, what was the prevailing environmental situation in the north of the Central Anatolian Plataeu? In what ways did living conditions affect economic and technological development?

The Canhasan sites excavation and research project, which has been restarted as a unifying element wherein all these questions can be addressed, has been designed explicitly to serve this purpose. Beginning with the first season in 2021, during which archaeological work was initiated through clearance operations on the sites, a concurrent search for solutions to problems pertaining to excavation strategy and methodologies was also undertaken.

The Aims of the New Project

The research that may be defined as the second-period excavation studies at the Canhasan sites primarily necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the studies conducted in the 1960s, including their underlying rationales and methodologies. This constitutes a significant step for determining which studies have been conducted and which are specifically required for Canhasan. It is possible to delineate the objectives of the second-period excavation studies by explicating them as follows.

1. To conduct excavation and research studies by utilising modern excavation methodologies for documentation and data collection.

Primarily, the earlier excavation studies present themselves as works that were meticulously executed in the 1960s but which emerged as low-budget endeavours. Notwithstanding this, the Canhasan excavations constitute one of the exemplary projects in which the most advanced research techniques of its time were employed. The excavation methods that were used were carried out at a work tempo predominantly involving labourers utilising implements such as picks, shovels, trowels, brushes, buckets, and wheelbarrows. In general, excavations were conducted with labourers procured from nearby villages, who performed the greater part of the manual work. In these excavations, which were structured upon a field study into which trained, experienced archaeologists intervened at sensitive points, work was conducted within grid systems, with natural and cultural strata being meticulously followed. The methodology applied at Canhasan also pioneered the system known contemporarily as the ‘single context’ approach (Westman & Archaeology Service, 1995). In the present day, this system is encountered in nearly all British archaeological excavations, having been further developed by MoLAS (Museum of London Archaeological Services, 1994).

With regard to documentation, photographic captures were undertaken, but generally, black and white photographs were executed either from towers or through methods such as kites. In addition to this, plan and section drawings executed by hand were endeavoured to be rendered as accurately as was possible. Within the documentation on paper forms during field studies, soil type, the contexts of finds, and necessary interpretations and definitions were specified. The finds, furthermore, were collected in the field and labelled; subsequent to being washed and classified, their drawings were then executed by hand.

Scientific analyses, and in particular botanical studies, were applied for the first time in Anatolian archaeology within the Canhasan excavations and have since become an indispensable element of contemporary practice such as botanical analysis (Figure 7). Thus, archaeological materials that may be defined as ecofacts were taken into consideration. Certain of the radiocarbon dates from the Canhasan sites were processed in the Hacettepe Laboratories.

All these methods present to us the highest-level theoretical and methodological approaches of their time, indicative of the quality of the excavation and the level achieved in the production of knowledge. In the present day, certain of these methods have ceded their place to digital documentation and computer-mediated processes.

Within the second-period excavation and research studies that have been initiated, while the working methodology sustains the developed ‘single context’ excavation method, it is now rendered compatible with digital databases. In the field, work is conducted by specialised archaeologists who execute tasks, utilising a range of tools from picks, shovels, hoes, trowels, brushes, and wheelbarrows, down to dental tools for diminishing deposits and executing detailed excavations. While measurements are performed with total stations and laser scanners, a transition to open-area excavation strategies has been made within the working areas. Through the utilisation of drones, aerial measurements and photographic methods are combined with photogrammetry, enabling daily photographic documentation and planning for the entire area and between the sites. Within an extensive and comprehensive database, not only are the excavation documentation processes integrated, but also lithic, archaeobotanical, zooarchaeological, and ceramic data are instantly incorporated into the system. Through cloud-based storage, data are preserved on secure channels to which experts may attain access for publication purposes when desired. Thus, while rapid data flow and the potential for information synthesis and interpretation are provided, the system also permits rapid consensus during publication phases. The trajectory of developing analytical studies within a framework of collective opinion may thereby be pursued. All plans and finds, with all their coordinates, are recorded and processed simultaneously within a Geographic Information System (GIS). This circumstance allows for different find types to be visualised in three dimensions, being documented both horizontally and vertically, either simultaneously or within their own categories, within architectural units or across the entire excavation area. Detailed digital photography and the utilisation of 3D scanners also permit, beyond traditional drawings, comprehensive three-dimensional documentation. Prior to the determination of excavation areas in the field, the areas to be investigated are identified through georadar applications. In this manner, a course towards the conservation of time and labour is also being pursued.

2. The analysis and evaluation of the acquired data by means of modern methods

In the studies of the 1960s, separate record cards were kept for the evaluation of all finds, and analyses were conducted upon these. These forms, in essence, are presently processed into a database that has been implemented, with their contexts recorded through laser measurements and subsequently analysed with the assistance of purpose-specific analytical programs such as R and through GIS visualisations. All processes are able to be executed not post-excavation, but within the same day. The methods utilised in excavation and documentation within field techniques, as they accelerate the flow of information, also enable the execution of daily interpretations. Although human skeletons have not been encountered extensively until now, the planned presence of experts who will execute their analyses—alongside comprehensive studies extending to aDNA analyses—places the project within a chain of modern methods whereby isotope analyses can also be performed. The constant presence in the field every season

of specialists in zooarchaeology and archaeobotany, by accelerating feedback, is also assisting in the collection of daily analytical data.

3. The better comprehension of the information revealed up to the present day by the archaeological excavations and surveys conducted within the Konya Plain and its immediate environs, and the filling of the gaps

The long-term excavation studies at sites such as Çatalhöyük, Aşıklı Höyük, and Boncuklu Höyük chronologically illustrate the development of Neolithic cultures on the Konya Plain and in the Cappadocia Region. Evaluations from the Çatalhöyük and Boncuklu Höyük excavations specifically suggest that Boncuklu Höyük was a precursor to Çatalhöyük.

Furthermore, when the findings from Boncuklu Höyük and Pınarbaşı are considered together, it has been proposed that these cultural connections also extend to the Cappadocia Region. However, the site of Canhasan has been largely excluded from this narrative, primarily because the excavations at Canhasan III were discontinued after 1970.

Now, with new excavations underway at both Gökhöyük and Canhasan in Konya Plain, the information gathered from these sites will necessitate a comprehensive revision of our understanding. This reassessment must address both the established chronology and the nature of cultural development and interaction. Ultimately, it requires the establishment of more detailed network models between the sites, moving beyond simple analogies.

4. The Comprehension of the Cultural Dynamics and Relations within the Konya Plain across Cultural, Artistic-Aesthetic, and Genetic Dimensions

The artistic artefacts, such as those witnessed beginning with Mellaart and subsequently in the Hodder period excavations at Çatalhöyük, including wall paintings, emerge in central Anatolian Neolithic as the most significant and singular centre for the externalization of the symbolic world. This circumstance, namely its persistence for years as a phenomenon unique to Çatalhöyük and the sole location where it manifested at its highest level, originates from the fact that sufficient data concerning its development and its attainment of this elevated level could not be gathered in the excavation studies within its immediate vicinity. The symbolic and potentially ritual objects found at settlements in its immediate vicinity, such as Boncuklu and Pınarbaşı, are insufficient for a complete understanding of the transition to the wall paintings observed at Çatalhöyük. However, the wall plasters witnessed at the Canhasan No. III settlement and the coloured paints between them, alongside the paints encountered on house floors, strengthen the probability of Canhasan III being a locus where this transition might be observable.

5. To Re-evaluate the Central Anatolian Neolithic Specifically in the Context of Canhasan and to Investigate its Regional and Inter-Regional Cultural Relations

Regarding the Canhasan sites, attention has been drawn to the similarity between some types of pottery found as a result of the excavation studies conducted particularly at Canhasan I and the pottery observed in the Halaf culture (French, 1962, p. 29). This similarity, whether direct or indirect, indicates a relationship between Canhasan and Northern Mesopotamia. Furthermore, upon close examination of the motifs found on the incised decorated arrowheads encountered at Canhasan III, which is dated to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, it is provisionally possible to perceive the depictions on them analogously as having possible relationships with Southeast Anatolian cultures. However, current research has focused on the stylized incised markings; by analyzing their style and shapes, one may hypothesize about possible connections (Cartolano & Ferrara, 2025). However, to demonstrate such analogies more scientifically by establishing communication networks and influences constitutes another objective of the project.

The 1960s at Canhasan and Konya Plain

In the 1960s, excavation work initiated by Dr. D. French, concurrently with Çatalhöyük, was carried out on Canhasan I for approximately seven years, focusing on the highest point of the site (French, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1968). French later shifted his work to Canhasan III in 1969, conducting surface cleaning over an area of approximately 600 m^2 (Figure 3) and initiating sondage work in trench 49L (French, 1972 and Figure 4 and 5). French began the sondage with a 4 x 4 m area, reducing it to 2 x 2 m after reaching a depth of approximately 2 meters (Figure 5). The aim of this deep sondage was to explore all the cultural deposits of the site to the day the settlement started. However, the high water level in the area hindered French's work. French reached the water table approximately 4 m from surface level. Following this, a core sample taken by N. Roberts provided information on the extent of the cultural deposit (French, 1972). In 1970, French left the Canhasan sites to participate in dam projects in Eastern Anatolia, where he conducted excavations at Aşvan Höyük (Mitchell 1980). Later, he directed excavations at Tille Höyük (Blaylock et al., 1990, Summers 1993) in the Atatürk Dam area but did not return to Canhasan. Nevertheless, French continued to prepare publications on the Canhasan sites until his passing. Archaeologists such as J. Mellaart (Çatalhöyük), D. French (Canhasan), and I. Todd (Aşıklı Höyük), through their discoveries and work in the 1960s, shed light on the early periods of Central Anatolian archaeology. Today, many excavation projects, particularly in Central Anatolia, continue and build upon these studies, establishing the "Central Anatolian Hub" for Neolithic research.

Over the 65 years between 1960 and 2025, numerous new excavations and surface surveys, including those initiated by these British archaeologists, have been re-launched and completed. Central Anatolian Neolithic research has undergone an intensive period over the past 65 years. In addition to restarted projects such as Çatalhöyük, Aşıklı Höyük, and Canhasan, many other projects have also been developed within this framework. Alongside numerous surface surveys, projects such as Musular near Aşıklı Höyük, Güvercinkayası, Tepecik-Çiftlik, Köşk Höyük, Balıklı (Duru, 2025; Duru & Kayacan, 2018), Sırçalı Tepe, and the recent Göllüdağ project (Kayacan, 2025) can be mentioned. Within the scope of these projects, it has become possible to refer to the Neolithic in this region as an "Cappadocian Neolithic" which, in fact, awaits definition of its cultural characterization, unity, and/or differences from the other regions of its Neolithic cultures rather than geographical attribution. On the other hand, the restart of Çatalhöyük by Hodder in 1993 led to the initiation of the Konya Survey (D. Baird), Pınarbaşı (T. Watkins), Boncuklu (D. Baird), and later Gökhöyük (R. Gündüz) and renewed Canhasan excavations (A. Baysal). The Pınarbaşı excavations were also continued by the museum after Watkins by D. Baird and G. Mustafaoğlu's advisory. Recently, the Gökhöyük and Canhasan excavations have been added to these still ongoing projects within the Konya Plain (Fig 1 and 2).

Excavation Work in the Konya Plain

The excavation work conducted across the Konya Plain primarily focuses on the Neolithic period. As a result of these investigations, it is possible to outline a comprehensive Neolithic profile. Among these projects, Çatalhöyük and Aşıklı Höyük (Cappadocia) stand out as central excavation sites and are the primary sources of the majority of the information produced. Additionally, Canhasan, which includes the Pre-Pottery Neolithic and the less-researched Chalcolithic periods, broke its half-century-long silence with the initiation of work in 2021. The Canhasan excavations demonstrated their significance from the very beginning. This importance stems from the fact that Chalcolithic cultures are best observed in Central Anatolia, revealing their relationship with Mesopotamia.

Moreover, it remains one of the best-documented Chalcolithic excavation sites today. The presence of Neolithic layers alongside Chalcolithic ones, as well as its contemporaneity with Çatalhöyük, provides crucial data for understanding Central Anatolian cultures and the reasons behind Çatalhöyük's highly symbolic and artistic development. French passed away before publishing the data from the Neolithic layers at Canhasan I. However, he did publish the Chalcolithic layers, which are now well-documented (French, 1998; 2005; 2010). Although the published area represents only a small percentage of the site's size, future work will enable a better understanding of

the Chalcolithic and Neolithic periods on both sites of Canhasan I and III.

French's Work at Canhasan I and III

The excavation work at Canhasan I, conducted by French between 1960 and 1967, indicates the presence of seven cultural layers at the settlement. French numbered these layers from top to bottom, suggesting that while Layer 1 might be considered Late Chalcolithic, it also contains finds from the Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, and Byzantine periods. Below this layer, French identified Layers 2A and 2B, which he described as entirely representative of Chalcolithic period artifacts and architecture. In Layer 3, materials indicative of the Late Neolithic/Early Chalcolithic transition were encountered. Layers 4 through 7 were entirely defined as Neolithic. Regarding Canhasan II, French did not conduct any extensive work but characterized the site based on finds and he attributed to later periods. He suggested that the settlement likely dates to a time frame spanning the Hellenistic to Ottoman periods.

At the settlement of Canhasan III, the research activities were conducted in the years 1969 and 1970. The studies commenced with extensive surface scraping across a broad area and the excavation of two 4 x 4 meter sondages (Figure 5). Subsequently, work continued in only one of these sondages, progressing to a depth of approximately 2 meters, after which a 2 x 2 meter area was further excavated to an additional depth of about 2 meters. Upon reaching a depth of approximately 4 meters, the work was halted due to the high water table. Through his work at Canhasan I, French defined the cultural layers and recorded the radiocarbon dates obtained. The architecture uncovered in the Chalcolithic layers is of a type previously unseen in Central Anatolia and is highly intriguing. The work brought to light numerous artifacts of material culture. However, what it primarily offers is the opportunity to observe, in the best- preserved manner, the transitions from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) to the Neolithic (PN) and from the Neolithic to the Chalcolithic period in Central Anatolia. The Canhasan sites are not only significant for tracking cultural transitions but also for observing socio-economic, technological, cultural, and political changes and developments through the material culture that emerged during these periods. When examining the general characteristics of the settlements in the southern Konya Plain, Çatalhöyük, particularly East Çatalhöyük, with its 25-meter height, demonstrates a settled agricultural and pastoral economy and the establishment of a highly symbolic structure. The presence of the Chalcolithic period has been reported at West Çatalhöyük. Due to fewer excavations, until now, we have relied on data from the excavations at Canhasan I for information on the Chalcolithic period. Boncuklu Höyük belongs to a single-period,Pre-Pottery Neolithic phase. Pınarbaşı, located within the borders of Karaman province, is considered a site where Epipaleolithic and 9th millennium BCE cultures are studied. Therefore, considering the evidence from Çatalhöyük, Boncuklu, Pınarbaşı, and Canhasan, as well as from sites further west such as Süberde and Erbaba (Bordaz, 1973) that were excavated in the 1970s, it is evident that the Konya Plain represents the only region in Central Anatolia where the entire, uninterrupted process of transition from the Epipaleolithic to the end of the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age can be observed. Within this chronological framework, significant technological and symbolic advancements are also clearly documented. Canhasan, now revitalized through a renewed excavation project, is positioning itself to contribute substantially to archaeological knowledge and address a wide range of research questions. Furthermore, Canhasan's location at the forefront of the Göksu Valley and its role in cultural exchange with the Mediterranean via this route further enhance the importance of the Canhasan sites. In short, it is not only a site where Central Anatolian cultural processes can be best observed and characterized but also an important center for understanding potential relationships with Mediterranean cultures.

The Konya Plain and Cappadocian Neolithic

In addition to the excavations conducted within the Konya Plain, the data obtained from other settlements now grouped under the Cappadocian Neolithic settlements reveal a wealth of comprehensive information (Duru & Kayacan, 2018; Gülçur, 2012; Özbaşaran, 2000; Stiner et al., 2022). However, as knowledge has expanded, become more detailed, and evolved, a noticeable gap has begun to emerge. One of the most suitable sites to fill this gap, based

on current knowledge, is the Canhasan sites. For scholars of Neolithic archaeology on the Konya Plain, the Canhasan sites remain a critical unknown, holding key pieces to the region's puzzle. Future work there could, for example, clarify kinship relations through aDNA analysis. More broadly, renewed excavation should generate vital data on the local, regional, and interregional character of the Neolithic. This is especially relevant to the origins of Çatalhöyük, for which Boncuklu Höyük is currently the sole proposed local precursor. Intriguingly, the abandonment of Canhasan III around 7200 BC nearly coincides with the earliest estimated establishment of Çatalhöyük. Within this general framework, excavation work at the Canhasan sites began in 2021. The developments during the first four seasons of the planned long term excavation project are summarized below by each season

2021 - Summer

The work at the Canhasan sites in 2021 was not long-term, as it was the first season. Additionally, during the peak of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic, the work began with a very small team and was conducted with extreme caution, adhering to health regulations of the time. To address the issue of accommodation for the excavation team, negotiations were held with the Museum and Provincial Directorate of Culture, and lodging was arranged at the guesthouse of the Karaman Special Provincial Administration. Our 2021 season began with Serkan Camcı from the Istanbul Museum as the representative, Assistant Excavation Director Hande Bulut, and three students from our team (Y. B. Çalışır, E. Biçer - Ankara University, and Aydilge Turan – Trakya University). During our first visit to the sites, it was noted that Canhasan I was littered with garbage and debris that had accumulated over time, while three-quarters of Canhasan III had been subjected to agricultural activities, resulting in significant damage. Similarly, Canhasan II was also identified as an area where agricultural activities had been conducted. The "Mudbrick Excavation House," built by D. French in the 1960s using workers brought from Denizli/Çivril, islocated at the foot of Canhasan I and was found to be heavily vandalized. The tin sheets on the roof had been removed, the interior architectural units were broken, the walls were covered with "interesting" graffiti, and the courtyard was filled with garbage. The storage area was being used as a toilet by seasonal workers. Our initial tasks included determining the boundaries of the archaeological sites and assessing the extent of the damage. Additionally, the parcel status of the sites was investigated. It was discovered that the sites had been registered in the 1980s, but no zoning or conservation plans existed, and the entire area was divided into parcels. Priority was given to halting the damage caused by seasonal agricultural activities on Canhasan III.

Cleaning work also began on Canhasan I. As a result of the clean-up efforts conducted at Canhasan I, over 70 tons of waste, consisting of building debris, general trash, animal carcasses, and similar unwanted materials, were removed. It is deeply regrettable that the site, which was left abandoned after excavation activities ceased post-1970, was used as a dumping site. This situation highlights the need for greater attention to the preservation and protection of such historically significant sites. While the cleaning work continued, aerial photography using drones and topographic measurements were conducted to determine the site boundaries. The DEM files and data obtained allowed us to visualize the actual dimensions of the sites and establish first-degree site boundaries. In collaboration with experts and officials from relevant institutions, the first and third-degree site boundaries of Canhasan I were redefined, and the modern cemetery area on the site was also included in the protected zone. In the initial registration, only the summit area of site I and the small area where D. French conducted excavations in the 1960s were designated as first-degree sites. The village cemetery, located on the site, was not included in the site boundaries. As a result of our work, the site boundaries were expanded to include the cemetery for protection. Adjacent to the site, there was a camp area belonging to Karaca Construction, which had been working on behalf of the State Hydraulic Works (DSİ) in 2016. This area was also included within the third-degree site boundaries. The registration process for Canhasan I was repeated for Canhasan III, and the entire area where the cultural deposit spread, rather than just the highest point, was registered as a first-degree site. Thanks to our aerial photographs and topographic plans, the registration process was also carried out for Canhasan II. However, it was found that agricultural activities had begun to level the site, 40 meters to the east and 50 meters to the south of it. Following the completion of the cleaning work at

Canhasan I, a ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey test was conducted on a 25 x 25 m area of Canhasan III. If the initial results proved promising, the subsequent steps involved conducting a large-scale scanning of the area. This included employing ground-penetrating radar (GPR), performing a surface survey, and initiating a systematic gridding process across the sites. Although the 2021 summer season was short, it was a significant step in terms of completing technical tasks and establishing the infrastructure for future work (Baysal, 2023).

The 2021 season of our work was primarily focused on general clean-up activities, the determination of the site boundaries of the sites, and conducting topographic surveys to establish these boundaries using modern methodologies. Based on these efforts, the strategies for future work were defined, and plans for the next phase of activities were established. It has been observed that the application of modern techniques and technologies will significantly enhance the efficiency of studies conducted on the sites. Furthermore, this approach has proven highly effective in enabling the long-term planning of our research endeavours, ensuring a more systematic and sustainable framework for future investigations.

2022 - Summer

Following the work conducted after the 2021 season, it became possible to plan the next phase. Our 2022 work season began in July with the participation of our representative Aysun Akı and students from Ankara University. First, the camp area within the third-degree site boundaries, which had been used by Karaca Construction for State Hydraulic Works (DSİ) projects in 2016, was donated to our project, along with central office containers and partially functional concrete slabs. This allowed our team to stay in these containers for a while. Although the limited number of containers was insufficient, additional containers provided by the Karaman Municipality and a shower/toilet cabin supplied by the Special Provincial Administration alleviated some of the team's difficulties during the 2022 season. After the temporary resolution of the accommodation issue, the first task was to initiate a systematic surface collection survey on the sites. Given that three-quarters of Canhasan III had been damaged by agricultural activities, it was thought that systematic collection would have limited significance. However, a survey was conducted at 1 m intervals along the north-south and east-west axes of the site. Despite a systematic collection on the site this work did not entail an intensive surface collection, as agricultural activities continued on the site until 2021, after the French's archaeological efforts had been concluded. Based on ground-penetrating radar (GPR) readings, surface scraping began in a 35 x 5 m area designated for excavation on the site. This work revealed that deep plough marks from agricultural activities had damaged the architectural fabric. However, the presence of architectural structures was an encouraging factor, as these structures were close to French's work area and aligned with the GPR data. Our goal was to reach the easternmost structures in the area where French had conducted surface scraping in 1969 and 1970. In this context, our work in a 5 x 35 m area, including a 5 x 10 m section at the highest point of the site, uncovered one of the structures shown in French's architectural plan (Fig. 4). The walls of this structure were made of coarse, sandy, pebbly mudbrick, and the floor was decorated with black and red paint. All soil from the excavation was dry-sieved through 0.5 mm screens. The primary goal of this season was to reach French's architectural structures from 1969-70 and to bring structures matching his plans back to light (Figure 6). After this, the plan was to continue work from where French had left off. We achieved this goal, and no artifacts were found inside the structure later named Building 3. However, it was observed that the walls had been deeply damaged by plough marks. Among our work during this season, we focused on cleaning the finds and planning the transformation of the "old mudbrick excavation house" into a future visitor center. During this work, it was noted that the field road passing just 1 m from the house could cause its collapse. As a result of the work conducted during the 2022 season, architectural remains were uncovered in a 5 x 10 m area, linking the work to the 1969-70 excavations. At the same time, artifact groups such as obsidian tools, bone artifacts, and grinding stones were classified and prepared for study and publication. During this season, plans for the general direction of the project and future work were initiated.

2023 - Summer

Our 2023 work season officially began with the opening and organization of the excavation house. The primary goal of this season was to confirm that the structure identified on Canhasan III during the 2022 season matched the one documented by French in 1970 and to expand the work area (Fig. 3). To this end, surface scraping and soil sieving continued in the expanded work area to the north and west, reaching the level established in the 2022 season. During this process, metal tags used in the corners of French's trenches from the 1960s were found. These findings confirmed that the work was progressing in the right direction. However, it was understood that agricultural activities had continued on the site after French's work in 1969-70, resulting in the destruction of approximately 50-70 cm of cultural deposit. This was confirmed through discussions with those who had cultivated the site.

The architectural details uncovered during our work were documented by numbering each structure or space. Accordingly, 11 enclosed units were identified. These units were evaluated not as the structures themselves but as enclosed spaces. While they matched the units where French had conducted surface scraping and published plans, some differences were observed. These differences were attributed to damage caused by agricultural activities rather than errors in past documentation. The structures are rectangular in plan, and no doorways were identified. Units such as hearths and silos were encountered. These units not only indicate the continuity of daily life but also provide information about subsistence activities and economic structures. The thickness of the walls corresponds to the mudbrick size, though non-standard thicknesses were observed in some structures. The mudbricks in some structures were made of fine gravel and sand, while others were a mixture of marl and clay. No double-row mudbrick construction has been identified so far. The hearths inside the structures are horseshoe-shaped and can be located in different corners of the house. This suggests that hearths and interior organization were not standardized. The walls were plastered multiple times on the interior, with plaster layers approximately 1 mm thick. The total plaster thickness may have reached 12-20 cm over the house's use period. Colours such as red, black, and orange were observed between the plaster layers. The proximity of the walls and floors (wall height 10-20 cm) currently limits our ability to gather more detailed information about the plaster and paint. The floors inside the structures also exhibited different characteristics. For example, the floors of Structure 1 were hard, 1.5-2 cm thick, and created using a lime-burning technique. Additionally, traces of black and red paint were found on them. Structure 1, located at the highest point of the site, is one of the last houses before the site was abandoned. In terms of interior organization, the hearth inside was larger than those in other houses and had undergone at least five renovation phases. The hearth in front of the southern wall was initially located near the southeast corner but shifted westward over time. Structure 1 was also damaged in the west and southeast corners due to two garbage pits dug from upper levels. The pit in the west shows that the walls of the structure were approximately 1 m high. Considering the areas damaged by agricultural activities, this suggests that the preserved wall levels on the site are around 1-1.5 m. It should be noted that no doorways were identified in the structures, or such information has not yet been found. However, the presence of pillar-like supports for the roof in various parts of the structures is noteworthy. These supports are typically located at the corners or in the middle of the structure, in front of the walls. Among the finds uncovered during the work, obsidian tools, bone tools, and grinding stones stand out. Among the obsidian tools are blades and arrowheads, while bone tools include examples such as awls (Fig 6 - 8). Additionally, broken and burnt grinding stone fragments were found. In addition to the work on Canhasan III, work was also carried out on Canhasan I. The interior and exterior plans of the mud-brick excavation house and storage area used by French and his team in the 1960s were drawn. These plans were processed by an architect, and initial steps were taken to transform the site into a cultural and visitor center. The field road passing immediately in front of the structure was identified as a threat, and an alternative route was proposed. During the 2023 season, electromagnetic measurements were conducted on Canhasan I and II, and a large area was surveyed. As a result, architectural remains were identified just below the surface. This type of work was applied for the first time on the sites, using a technique unavailable in the 1960s. This will guide future excavation work and save labour.

2024 - Summer

Our 2024 season began with a slight delay. However, the work program planned after the previous season was carried out to obtain paleo-ecological data and understand the lake bed and its boundaries. Thanks to these efforts, core samples taken from between and on top of the sites were evaluated to determine where the cultural deposit and lakebed begin. This work is a continuation of the sondage conducted earlier at Canhasan III. The results will provide important data for a better understanding of the settlement. We are confident that it will also offer valuable insights into the climate and environmental conditions of the Neolithic period. Given the multi-purpose nature of the paleo-ecological study and the positive results from the test samples, the work was expanded to larger areas and carried out under a detailed program. Following this study, the focus shifted back to Canhasan III. Priority was given to carefully excavating downward within the structures while detailing specific units inside them (Figure 8 and 9). For example, the hearths in the northeast corners of Structures 6 and 7, the silos inside Structure 2, and the partition walls in some houses were examined in detail. The use of thin partition walls inside the structures indicates the specialization of space usage. These thin walls may have also contributed to the structural stability of the buildings. It is not yet known whether these walls extended to the roof. However, the use of a low-level unit between the walls, even if minimal, has been considered an important support element. The placement of houses on slopes in mound-type settlements is particularly significant for structural stability. Of course, these partition walls also served to divide spaces. There is currently no clear information and evidence on the freedom of movement or activities within the relatively small areas of these internally divided structures. Notably, raised platforms like those at Çatalhöyük or burials within such platforms have not yet been encountered in our excavations. This is an important feature that distinguishes Canhasan from Çatalhöyük. When we closely examine the floors inside the houses, two significant observations emerge: on one hand, the structures beneath the settlement were tightly filled, and new structures were built on top of them; on the other hand, the presence of subsidence and slopes caused by the terrain is noticeable. These slopes likely caused problems during the habitation of the houses. However, such slope differences can be resolved through the renewal or filling of the floors. Generally, no artifacts are found inside the structures. They appear to have been left almost entirely clean. This suggests that the houses were deliberately emptied before being abandoned. Another reason for the lack of artifacts could be that the houses were abandoned for the construction of subsequent structures, and any artifacts were removed during the filling phase of these new constructions. Nevertheless, among the rare artifacts discovered, bone tools and axe-like objects stand out. Among the general finds, tools made of obsidian, primarily blades and arrowheads, can also be noted (Figure 10 a, b, c).

At the Canhasan I site, the work carried out has been primarily limited to the repair, maintenance, and restoration of the old mudbrick excavation house, which is planned to be repurposed as a cultural center. The modern waste layer, approximately 20 cm thick, accumulated in the courtyard of this structure since 1970, has been removed. After the removal of the waste layer, the level reached corresponds to the courtyard and walkway used in the 1960s. The cleaning of the inner courtyard has been largely completed, and work to prepare the courtyard for re-organisation will continue into 2025. It is urgent to close the road passing in front of the old mudbrick excavation house and to carry out the necessary repair, maintenance, and restoration work.

The transformation of this structure into a cultural center is expected to serve both educational purposes and as a venue for showcasing excavation-related information and local history, thereby playing a prominent role in tourism activities. If the necessary budget and sponsorships are secured, the completion and opening of the structure could be achieved within a year. Currently, the deteriorating condition of the structure due to rainwater leaking through the roof and exposure to harsh weather conditions presents a regrettable situation.

Discussion

The defining characteristics of the Central Anatolian Neolithic were more clearly articulated and consolidated within academic discourse through a seminal 2002 publication (Gerard & Thissen, 2002). This study posited that the Central Anatolian Neolithic was governed by its own unique dynamics (Binder, 2002; Bischoff, 2002; Düring, 2002; Gerard, 2002; Martin et al., 2002; Matthews, 2002), with the process of Neolithisation unfolding according to these specific regional parameters. The region's economic self-sufficiency, its symbolic and cultural world, and even its chronological framework were all delineated as distinctive features (Asouti, 2002; Asouti & Fairbairn, 2002; Özbaşaran & Buitenhuis, 2002). Nevertheless, researchers working in the area, both in past and present contexts, have predominantly addressed these characteristics through the lens of individual settlements. This approach has frequently resulted in a neglect of broader regional trait analysis and a deficiency in the application of comparative methodologies that could more effectively elucidate interregional features. An examination of the scholarship dedicated to the Neolithic period in the Konya Plain reveals that research remains largely concentrated within a limited number of settlement sites. While projects initiated in the 1960s, which have since evolved into long-term endeavours, have successfully stimulated further scholarly investigation, these efforts are often circumscribed by layered and highly specialized scientific inquiries. Among these, the excavations at Çatalhöyük and its associated surface survey projects, alongside excavations at Boncuklu Höyük (Baird et al., 2011; Baird, 2018; Baysal, 2013), Pınarbaşı (Baird, 2012), Aşıklı Höyük (Stiner et al., 2022), and the surrounding surface surveys, in addition to ongoing research at settlements such as Musular (Özbaşaran, 1999), Güvercinkayası (Gülçur, 2012), Balıklı (Goring-Morris et al., 2024), Tepecik-Çiftlik (Bıçakçı et al., 2012), and Sırçalıtepe (Balcı et al., 2021), have collectively contributed to the formulation of a distinct character and identity for the Central Anatolian Neolithic.

As is evident, the Neolithic period excavations conducted in Central Anatolia, particularly within the Konya Plain, have attained a considerable level of maturity. However, as archaeological data from the Konya Plain continue to accumulate, lacunae in our comprehension of a complete portrait of the Neolithic period concurrently become apparent. It is anticipated that these gaps in understanding will be substantially addressed through further investigations at the Canhasan archaeological site. For instance, questions regarding the origins of the pioneers responsible for the artistic and symbolic world observed at settlements like Çatalhöyük, their geographical provenance, and their genetic connections represent highly complex inquiries whose answers are likely to be found at Canhasan III; this currently represents a promising line of scholarly inquiry. Among the rationales for this expectation is the fact that the inhabitants of Canhasan III, who occupied a nearly identical ecological environment, shared broadly similar lifeways with those of Çatalhöyük—albeit not entirely identical—and are chronologically dated to approximately 750-800 years earlier. At the present stage of excavations at Canhasan III, pigments observed on house floors and within plaster layers also indicate architectural parallels. Recent ancient DNA (aDNA) studies have established genetic connections with Boncuklu Höyük, while Baird has highlighted the existence of such connections within a symbolic context as well. This situation, constituting a substantive argument for future discussion, will facilitate the reconsideration of Çatalhöyük as a centre that received migratory influxes.

Conclusion

Since the inception of excavation activities at Canhasan Höyük, the resultant findings have constituted significant contributions to archaeology on a global scale. However, the data derived from these regional excavation efforts have remained underutilized and have not been fully integrated into the broader discourse of archaeological research. The delayed comprehensive publication of the Canhasan I excavations and the unpublished status of the findings from Canhasan III have undoubtedly been central to this scholarly oversight. Furthermore, a historical lack of a unified focus in scientific inquiry and a deficit of synthesizing studies within the regional research tradition have compounded this issue.

In this regard, specifically concerning the Central Anatolian Neolithic, it is evident that the Canhasan settlements functioned as a significant central actor throughout all phases of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, as well as in subsequent developmental processes. This pivotal importance was, in fact, intimated even by the short-term excavations conducted between 1960 and 1970. In light of the available data, Canhasan stands out as a key settlement possessing the potential to illuminate regional distinctions and interrelationships with greater clarity than some other, more extensively excavated sites.

Beyond the Neolithic context of the Konya Plain, both previous excavations and ongoing research suggest that the Canhasan settlements were not merely regional actors but also functioned as interregional players. Particularly within the symbolic realm of the material culture uncovered at Canhasan —such as the incised arrowheads (Ataman, 1988)— indicates that, even in the absence of direct material cultural parallels, symbolic data provide compelling evidence for communication and interaction (Cartolano & Ferrara, 2025) with the Neolithic cultures of South-eastern Anatolia. This further substantiates Canhasan's role as an interregional nexus.

The data obtained from both earlier and recent excavation seasons suggests connections to a degree with the Cappadocia region, so far particularly Sırçalı Tepe, the Konya Plain, South-eastern Anatolia, and even the Eastern Mediterranean. These findings underscore the site's function as a cultural and historical hub, highlighting its critical importance for understanding broader interregional interactions and cultural exchanges during ancient periods. Consequently, Canhasan Höyük is not only critical for understanding local and regional dynamics but also serves as a vital centre for deciphering long-distance cultural relationships. It stands as one of the rare key settlements where the complex processes of Neolithisation and Chalcolithisation can be observed in exceptional detail. As such, Canhasan sites represents an indispensable resource for archaeological research, offering profound insights into these transformative epochs of human history.

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Figures

Figure 1

Konya Plain and The Sites Dated to Neolithic

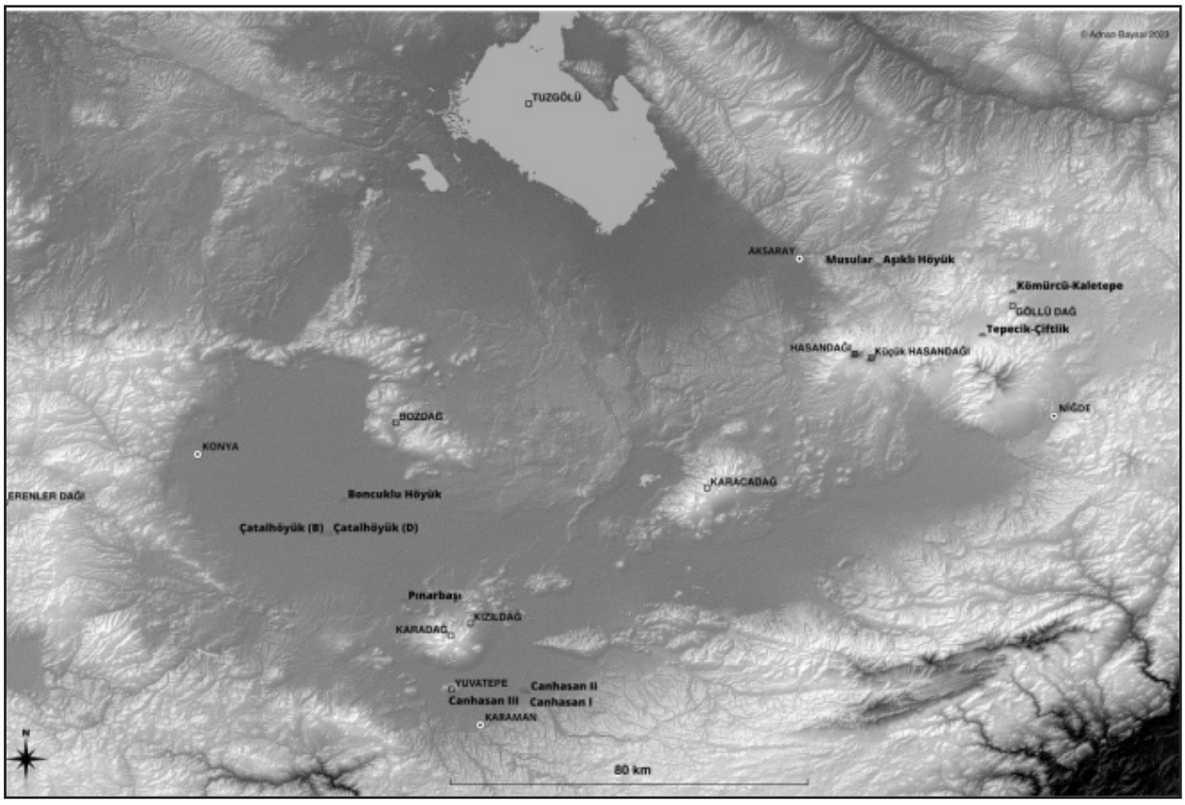
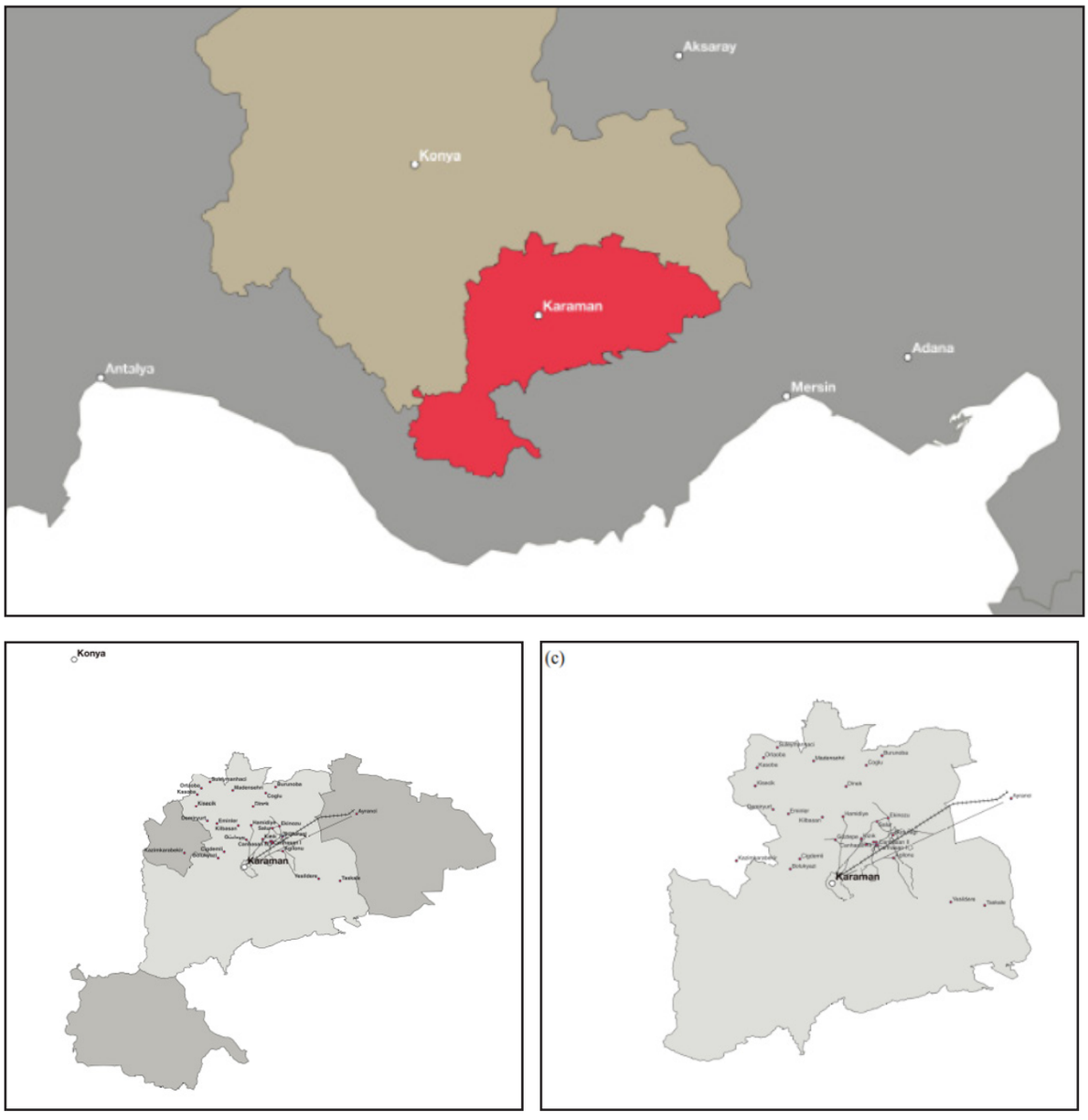


Figure 2

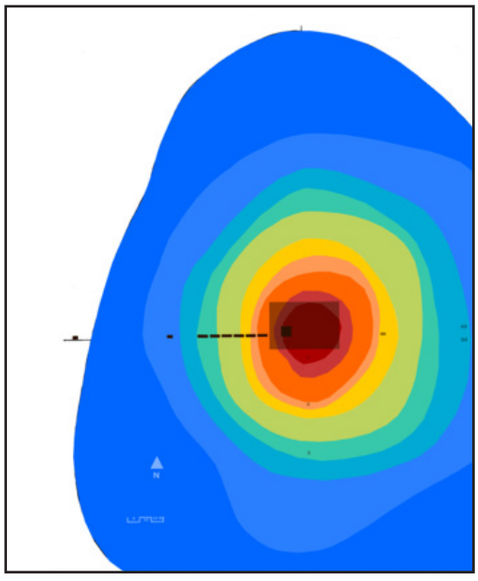
Location of Karaman Province, Central District, Villages and Canhasan Mounds



Note. a) Karaman Province, b) Central District, c) Villages and Canhasan Mounds

Figure 3

Canhasan III, the Scraped Surface Area and Sondage Location in 1969–1970



Note. After French

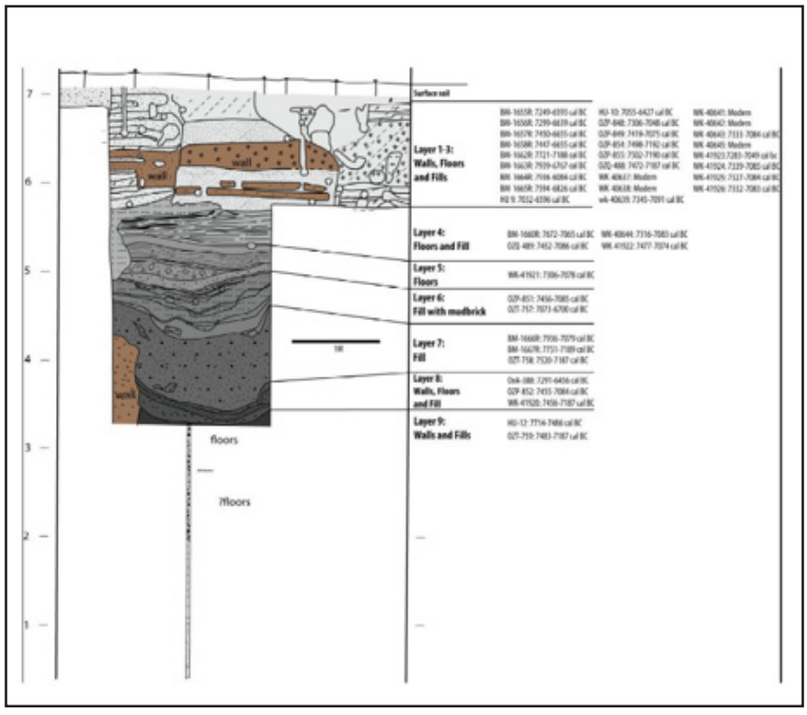
Figure 4

Canhasan III, 1969-1970 Total Scraped Area and Exposed Architectural Remains (20x30 m)

Note. Grey coloured areas later period pits.

Figure 5

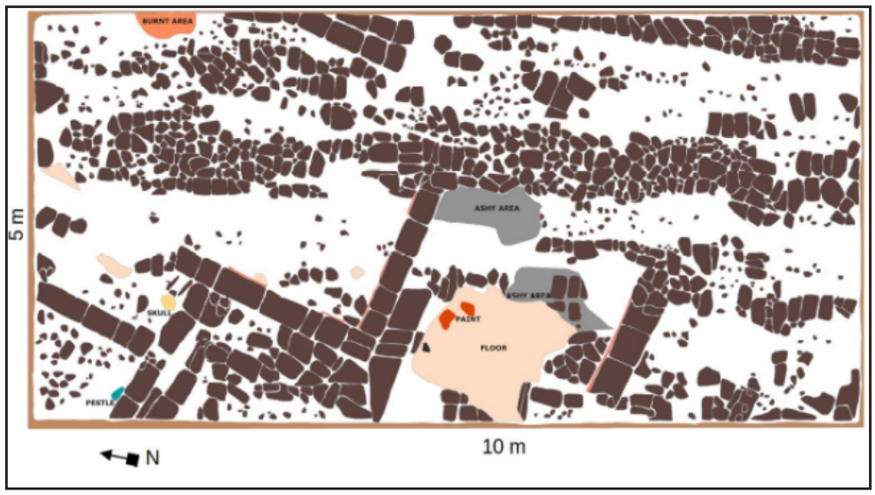
The Southern Section of the Sondage



Note. Operations conducted in the 49L area during the 1969–1970 seasons was initiated as a 4x4 meter square, which was subsequently reduced to a 2x2 meter square.

Figure 6

Canhasan III



Note. After 2022 season.

Figure 7

Canhasan Sites, Archaeobotanical Studies and Floatation

Figure 8

Canhasan III, After 2024 Season in Relation to 1969-1970 Scrape Areas

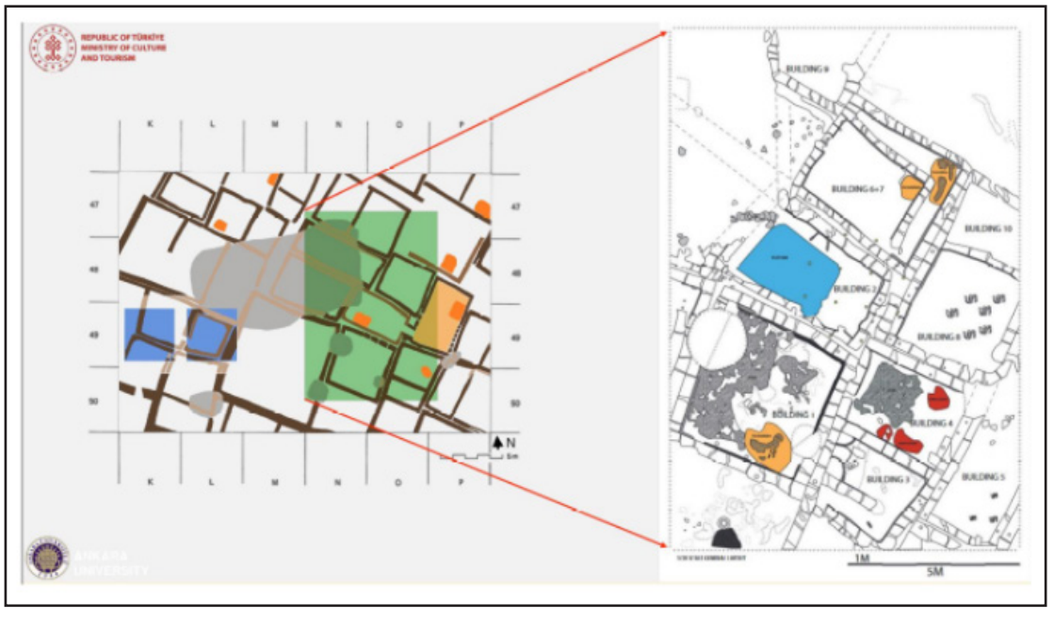


Figure 9

Canhasan III, Site Plan after2024 Season

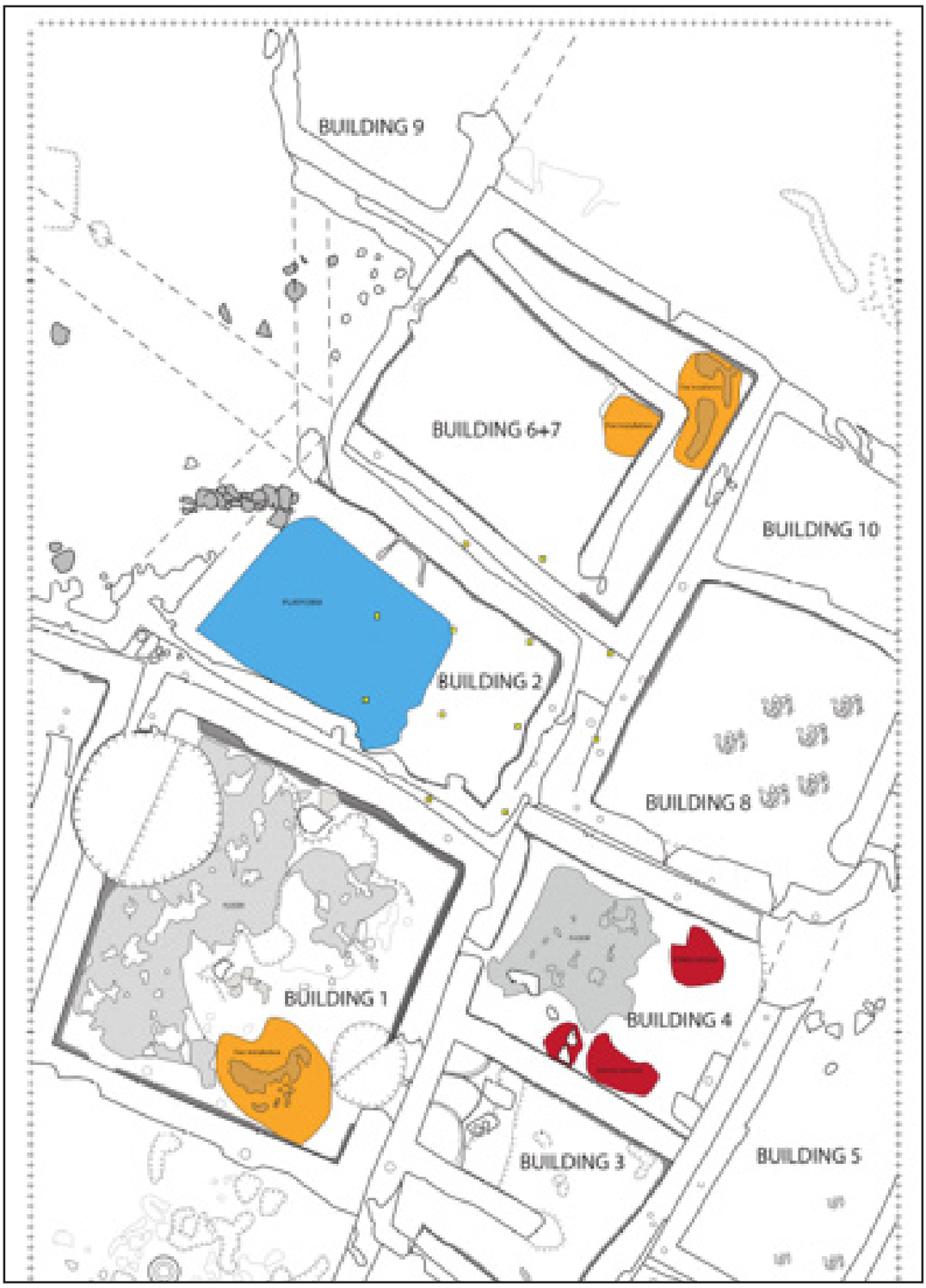


Figure 10

Canhasan I and III, Some Important Finds

Note. a) Obsidian mirror; b and c) Incise decorated obsidian tools.