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Pastoralist pride: a footnote on symbols, cattle and community in third-millennium BC northern Central Anatolia

Thomas Zimmermann & Evren Y. Geniş

Introduction and problem setting

The archaeological exploration of the Central Anatolian plateau, which flourished in the wake of the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, has been largely neglected in the ensuing decades and so overshadowed by the investigation of few central places, or urban centres, in the municipal triangle of Ankara, Çorum and Yozgat (Özdoğan 2005: 34–9; Erimtan 2008) (Figure 1). Together with Hattusa, which



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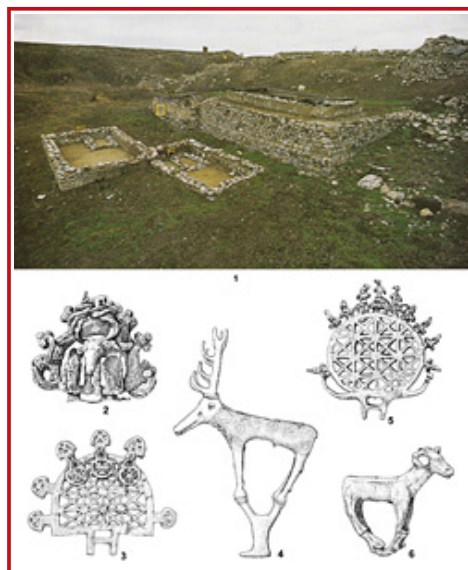
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was, thanks to extensive archaeological and philological research beginning in the late nineteenth century, confirmed as a cultural and political hotspot, the stunning riches retrieved from the elaborate burials at Alaca Höyük (Arik 1937; Kosay 1938 & 1951) — conventionally dated to between the middle and end of the third millennium BC (Özyar 1999; Gerber 2006; Zimmermann 2006-2007: 511-12) — propelled this place to the rank of a 'model study' for the evolution of the early (urban?) elite societies that emerged in this region in the later third millennium BC (Figure 2).



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Figure 2. Reconstructed Alaca Höyük tombs (1) and selection of 'ceremonial standards' from several Alaca Höyük burials (2-6) (after Müller-Karpe 1974 and Efe 2003, scale not indicated).

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Figure 1. Location of Alaca Höyük and sites mentioned in the text.

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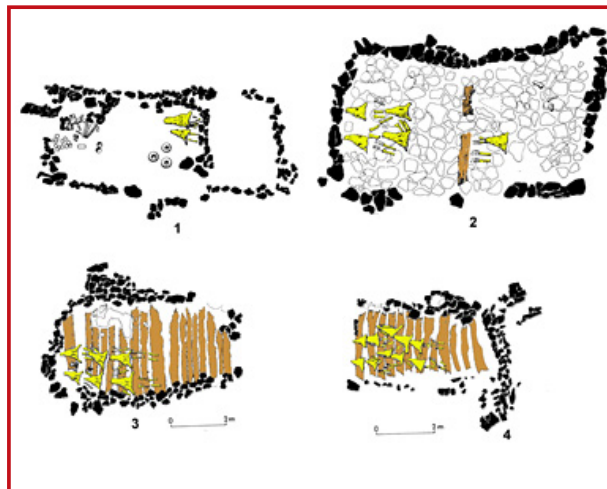
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Figure 3. Graves H (1), F (2), E (3) and L (4) with bucrania and long bones placed on top of wooden beams; 1 & 2: scale not indicated (after Müller-Karpe 1974).

Click to enlarge.

However, a recent reappraisal of some less well known and apparently misinterpreted items challenges this traditional view, and may even help rehabilitate a previously offered alternative proposal for the *modus vivendi* of the Alaca community. A survey of the Early Bronze Age in central-western and central Anatolia reveals that several cemeteries show evidence that points to a recurring preponderance of cattle in funerary contexts (Figure 3). These burial contexts might serve a more specific purpose than merely that of a 'projection surface' for strength and fertility (Rice 1998; Relke 2007; for Demircihöyük Sarıket see Seeher 2000: 30–2; for Resuloğlu see Yıldırım 2006: 7).

A cattle-centred reinterpretation

Pointing to the preponderance of cattle is one thing, but can this be taken further? Can the emphasis on cattle in the Central Anatolian Early Bronze Age, and especially their role in funerary ceremonies, support alternative interpretations and more comprehensive explanations than the

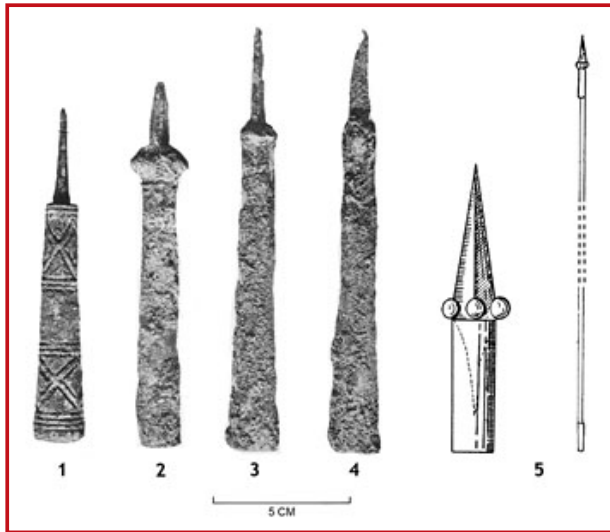
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Figure 4. Socketed points, probably cattle-prods from various Alaca Höyük tombs (after Arik 1937 and Zimmermann 2009).

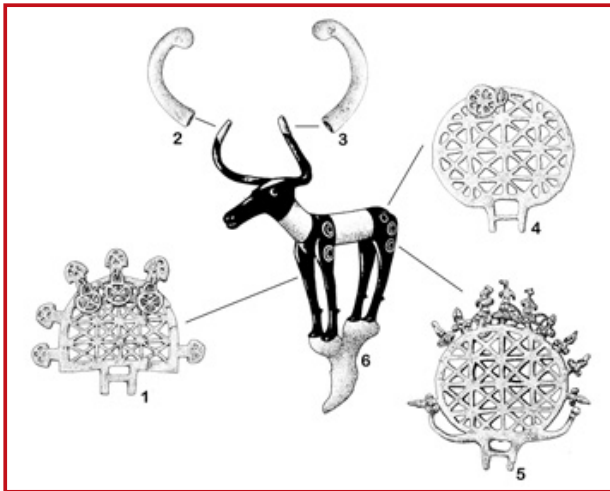
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much-cited commonplace that the animal bones represent banquet leftovers? A clue for an alternative explanation lies in a recent reappraisal of artefacts from several Alaca tombs first published in the 1930s and originally interpreted as socketed point. These objects may have been misidentified and our re-interpretation reveals a new, exciting facet of the material culture of the Alaca Höyük community. These items, variously labelled 'flagpole or baldachin tips' or 'spearheads' in previous publications (see Zimmermann 2009: 145 for a conspectus), bear a striking resemblance to cattle-prods or *stimuli*, designed to encourage an animal to accelerate its pace — or, in the case of more stubborn artiodactyls, to move at all (Zimmermann 2009: 146-9) (Figure 4).

Attached to a wooden shaft, as they obviously were (see Arik 1937: pl. CCVII who mentions traces of wood on the inside; Zimmermann 2009:

147), they would indeed best serve as cattle prods. Such prods, while well attested in European Iron Age contexts such as elaborate burials containing horse riders' equipment (see Krausse 1992), are occasionally associated with earlier Eurasian burial assemblages, and are even visible on plates and reliefs depicting cult processions or related activities (Zimmermann 2009: 147–9).

Bearing in mind the specific function of our *stimuli*, then the many symbolic standards and large bronze 'ferrules' (cf. Figure 5, nos. 2 & 3) from the various graves at Alaca make more sense as special adornments for cattle. These could have been in use at identity-forging festivals, perhaps similar to the *Almabtrieb* (German for descent from high pastures), a festival celebrated in many Alpine regions (Figure 6). This colourful pageant marks the time when flower-adorned cattle are driven down (with cattle prods!) from their summer pastures to their winter quarters in the valleys. Such a hypothetical festival would tie in with Jak Yakar's assumption of (northern) Central Anatolian inhabitants as pastoralist communities (Yakar 2000: 244).



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Figure 5. Large bronze 'ferrules' (nos. 2 & 3) from grave C and standards from various burials at Alaca Höyük (nos. 1, 4 & 5), and their possible representation en miniature on a silver-plated bull statuette from burial H (no. 6) (after Müller-Karpe 1974, modified, scale not indicated).

Click to enlarge.



(/projgall/zimmermann328/images/figure6big.jpg)

Figure 6. *Almabtrieb* (descent from high pastures) in Kufstein, Austria. Courtesy

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kufstein_Almabtrieb_2005.jpg
(GNU Free Documentation License).

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By way of a conclusion, the elaboration of cattle-related equipment in elite burials can be seen, not as an unknown and unrelated phenomenon in Anatolian prehistory and early history, but as a manifestation of the adoration of cattle in ritual contexts, reflecting an essential element of wealth and well-being in Western Asia.

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