A Land Without Autochthons: Anatolian Archaeology in the early twentieth century

Abstract:
Cultural heritage is often used to legitimise territorial claims, with modern groups claiming descent from ancient indigenous inhabitants. However, the 1919-23 war between Greece and Turkey disputed a landscape in which both were migrants. While neither side could claim autochthony, this did not prevent them from engaging politically with cultural heritage. The Greek and Turkish archaeological traditions each developed their own narratives of Anatolian prehistory, both focusing on arrival and civilisation rather than autochthony and indigenous ownership. This example highlight the fact that territorial claims can be made in different ways, and that these claims can use heritage flexibly.

The use of cultural heritage in the legitimation of territorial claims has been widely discussed (e.g. Clogg 2003; Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998; Skeates 2000). In situations of territorial dispute, one side or the other (sometimes both) may appropriate archaeology, history, and cultural heritage to make the argument that they occupied the land in the past, and should therefore have rights to the land in the present. In this context, the groups in question usually claim a connection to the original, autochthonous inhabitants of the land. The word ‘autochthon’ literally means ‘from out of the soil’, and the argument of being autochthonous is therefore a strong way of asserting a claim to the territory. Despite modern research on the migration of early hominids and the fact of constant population movements throughout history, the autochthony model remains a popular form of landscape-heritage claim, especially in the recent era of de-colonisation (e.g. O’Regan 1994; Russel 2005).

There has been a resurgence of political rhetoric featuring autochthony in recent years, fuelled by the concern in many countries over levels of immigration and the rise of rightwing political parties. In western Europe especially, the relationship of migrant groups to their new homelands is an issue of both public debate and popular anxiety. Behind this debate lies the assumption that primacy of occupation is the strongest claim to territory, and that migrants necessarily have a weaker connection to the land. In this context, it is instructive to consider how migrant groups do indeed construct relationships with the land. How would such a group argue its rights to occupy a new territory? How do they root themselves in the new soil? And is there any context where claims based on migration and arrival would trump those of autochthony?

This paper focuses on one instance of a territorial dispute where neither side could claim autochthony, but where both were migrants. However, this fact did not stop either side from engaging with the rich archaeology of the region, and deploying it strategically to bolster their own territorial claims. This paper does not, therefore, simply argue that people use heritage to make territorial claims, but rather that there are different ways in which people can do this.

Anatolia: A Land without autochthons

The case discussed in this paper is that of western Anatolia in the years immediately preceding, during and after the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22. This conflict formed one front of the Turkish War of Independence, and was part of the fallout of the First World War and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire (Llewelyn-Smith 1998). During the intense negotiations, the victorious Allied powers granted Greece the right to occupy a section of western Anatolia based around the modern city of Izmir, then known as Smyrna (Helmreich 1974). The Turkish Nationalist forces, led by Mustafa Kemal (later known as Atatürk) resisted the occupying Greek forces fiercely, and the resulting conflict was bloody, bitter, and brutal, with horrific atrocities committed on both sides. The conflict eventually ended in September 1922 with the defeat of the Greeks, the establishment of the modern state of Turkey in its current borders, and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 agreeing an exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey (Hirschon 2003).

1 Many thanks to: Çağdem Atakuman, Ebru Boyar, Jack Davis, Kate Fleet, David Houlton, Amalia Kakissis, Dacia Viejo-Rose, Natalia Vogeikoff-Brogan, and the organisers of ICANNE 2010. Unless indicated, translations are my own.
During the war, both sides sought to ‘prove’ their claim to the land, and both sides made use of archaeology and cultural heritage in order to do so. However, neither the Greeks nor the Turks could claim that they were indigenous to Anatolia – both groups were known to have migrated to the peninsula in historical time. The Greeks are thought to have arrived in Anatolia in the Early Iron Age. Classical Greek literary texts speak of a mass movement of people from mainland Greece some time in the 11th-9th centuries BC, known as the ‘Ionian Migrations’ (Sakellariou 1958; Vanschoonwinkel 2006). It is now generally accepted that these myths can in no way be taken as historical documents. However, the (in)accuracy of the tradition is irrelevant here – what is significant is that considerable faith was placed in the stories at the time (e.g. Frangoudis 1925; Paparrigopoulos 1925). The Turkish migrations to Anatolia occurred gradually over the course of the 11th-13th centuries AD (Fleet 2009; Findley 2005). A crucial point in the process was the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, fought between the army of the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes and the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan. The battle is usually considered to be a turning point in Anatolian history, marking the decline of Byzantine power, and opening up the peninsula for Seljuk settlement and conquest (Hillenbrand 2007; Vryonis 1971).

During the Greco-Turkish War therefore, neither of the groups disputing the land could claim autochthony. Both acknowledged their own migrant status. So in this context, how was archaeology and cultural heritage used to create a relationship between modern populations and the ancient landscape? Both the Greek and the Turkish scholarly traditions had to focus on the idea of arrival to Anatolia; using the ideas of migration, civilisation, and conquest as key to constructing ownership of the land.

The Greek case: The Ionian Migration

In the years leading up to and during the Greek occupation, there was a clear trend of increasing interest in the Ionian Migration to Anatolia. This ancient claim to the territory was crucial to Greece’s contemporary claim, and the Ionian Migrations are frequently mentioned in Greek political pamphlets of the time (e.g. Efstatiadis 1922; Ion 1918). The extremely early and prehistoric date of the Greek migration was seen as a key legitimating factor, and this was frequently stressed. One pro-Greek American campaigner pointed out that: ‘the Greeks of Constantinople and Smyrna are not immigrant colonists like those of New York and San Francisco. They were colonists when they came to Constantinople from Megara in 658 BC and to Smyrna from Cyme in 1100 BC’ (Ferriman 1918, 3). Similarly, a Greek pamphleteer proudly claimed that: ‘since the eleventh century BC, the whole of Asia Minor … has been occupied by Greeks and only Greeks’ (Lameras 1921, 3).

But it was not just politicians and political activists who engaged in such political campaigning. Many historians and archaeologists also began to promote the idea of the Ionian Migration, seeing it as part of their patriotic duty. At the height of the war in 1920, the Secretary of the Archaeological Society of Athens openly stated the Society’s political agenda:

‘… the mission of the Society is to be present at the side of our fatherland in arms, advancing along on the traces of the old road of Alexander the Great; there it is represented by warriors continuing the work of our ancestors, restoring Greek civilization through repeated victories in the place where it first emerged in time immemorial, at each step meeting ancient ruins, inscriptions and fragments. I say the Society is obliged to reveal the traces of Hellenic genius on the famous soil of verdant Ionia.’ (Dragastes 1921, 13)

This agenda was realised in an ambitious archaeological programme in Anatolia itself, sponsored by the Greek state. At an early stage during the Greek occupation of Anatolia, an official archaeological service was established in Smyrna, fast on the heels of the police service and courts (Kourniotis 1922). The new archaeological service soon embarked on a series of excavations at the sites of Clazomenae, Ephesus, and Nysa on the Maeander. Valuable funds, manpower and supplies were directed to these new excavations, even at the height of the fiercest fighting. Despite being extremely short on resources in 1921 and 1922, the Greek administration in Smyrna still chose to support not only their own excavations, but also an American project at Colophon, even going as far as to remove soldiers from the active front in order to work on the excavation (Davies 2000 and 2003).

The excavations at Clazomenae stand out amongst these projects. Clazomenae was one of the famous Ionian cities of antiquity, supposedly founded as a result of the Ionian Migrations. It is clear from the excavation reports that the archaeologists at Clazomenae had a specific agenda, aiming to uncover the great antiquity of the site and examine its earliest phase of occupation. Giorgos Oikonomos, the director of the project, wrote: ‘The whole of that area was covered with sherds of vessels from the most ancient epoch’ (Oikonomos 1921, 63), and making a point of stressing that in the cemetery the graves were sometimes stacked on top of each other as much as 6 burials deep (Oikonomos 1921, 65). The results of the Clazomenae excavations were very much as the Greek administration would have hoped: they provided the much-desired proof for early Greek occupation of Anatolia and the Ionian Migration.
The Turkish Case: The Turkish History Thesis

In response to these Greek claims on the landscape, a Turkish archaeological tradition emerged which sought to beat the Greeks at their own game. At the same time as Greek archaeologists were focusing on the Ionian Migration, Turkish scholars were trying to outdo them in establishing an antique claim to the territory, also seeking to use archaeological remains as tangible proof of their claim. Pamphlets about cultural heritage were published by the Turkish Nationalist administration in Ankara; even during the height of the Greek occupation itself, when the Greek army was marching into the heart of central Anatolia and the Nationalists were fighting a bloody and desperate war.

In early 1922, when Ankara itself was under threat from the advancing Greek army, an anonymous propagandist book was published called the Pontus Meselesi, which described the outrages perpetrated by Greeks against Muslims in the region of Anatolia bordering the Black Sea. But while the book focused primarily on current ethnic violence, it also contained a lengthy introduction outlining the antiquity of Turkish claims to the land. In particular, it claimed that the Hittites of the Bronze Age were indeed a Turkish population, a claim it inferred from a supposed continuity in cultural attributes such as dress (Erimtan 2008).

‘As a matter of fact, the Turks did not arrive in Anatolia with Ertuğrul Gazi or even with those who constituted the Seljuk governments. The Turkish race has been present in Anatolia since the oldest and most unknown of times’ (Pontus Meselesi 1922, 55, trans. Erimtan 2008)

This idea was taken up again after the end of the war and elaborated on. In the early years of the new Turkish Republic, establishing an ancient Turkish claim over Anatolia became an official state project. Atatürk himself argued that archaeology was vital in creating a new sense of national identity, and it was Atatürk who set the agenda for archaeological research in the next decades (Arkman 2006; Atakuman 2008). In 1930, the Turkish Historical Research Society published a book which established the framework for the new national archaeology: the Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları (Main Tenets of Turkish History). It argued that ancient Turkish populations had migrated out of Central Asia in prehistory, occupying Anatolia but also spreading out to Mesopotamia, Egypt and Europe.

This basic premise was elaborated on over the course of the next decade, with two large-scale international conferences held in 1932 and 1937 as showcases for what became known as the Turkish History Thesis (Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi 1932; İkinci Türk Tarih Kongresi 1939). The central lynchpin of the argument was that there was a genealogical relationship between the ancient inhabitants of Anatolia and the modern ones. Physical anthropology, and in particular studies of cranial measurements, were undertaken both on the modern Turkish populations and on ancient Hittite and Phrygian skeletons in order to prove the ethnic link (e.g. Galip 1932; Inan 1939a).

Migrant Claims: Civilization trumps autochthony

The competing claims as they have so far been described are not yet surprising. With neither side able to claim autochthony, both therefore claimed ancient occupation of the land. What neither side did, however, was to claim that they were the first and earliest occupants of the land. In neither tradition is Anatolia characterised as a previously empty land, waiting for colonisation. What we might expect is Anatolia to be constructed as a kind of Terra Nullius, in much the same way as Europeans characterised Australia or North America before colonisation. However, in both the tradition of the Ionian Migrations and of the Turkish History Thesis, it is recognised that there were other groups on the land first. Neither the Greek nor the Turkish claims, therefore, were made on the basis of priority. Simply being there first did not give you the strongest claim to the land. Instead, the act of migrating to Anatolia is presented as more significant, and supporting a stronger territorial claim.

This stronger claim comes not merely from arriving in Anatolia, but specifically from bringing culture and civilisation to Anatolia. The rhetoric on both sides focuses on this point (e.g. Inan 1939b; Marinatos 1939). The Greek excavator of Clazomenae, for example, made sure to highlight not just the antiquity of the remains, but more importantly the high cultural standards.

‘The design, the symmetry, the choice of colours, and the regularity and execution of composition of the figures has all the characteristic superior points and signs of Greek craftsmanship’ (Oikonomos 1921, 70).

The proponents of the Turkish History Thesis were even more explicit in their formulations. For example:

‘While in other parts of the world, men were still living in trees and caves, the Turks had already developed a civilization of timber and metal … the Turks who had advanced farming and shepherding and discovered gold,
copper, tin and iron about 7000 BC, spread out from Central Asia and diffused the first civilizations’ (Esat Bey, Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi 1932, trans Arkman).

Both Greek and Turkish traditions, therefore, are at pains to stress that they arrived in Anatolia, bringing with them an advanced level of civilization or a higher level of culture. This type of arrival is clearly thought to be a strong justification for their occupation of the land, and even a valid justification for taking that land away from the indigenous inhabitants. Introducing civilization, a superior culture and statehood is, it seems, a stronger and more potent claim to territory than autochthony. For both sides in the Greco-Turkish war, a claim based on migration, conquest, and bringing civilisation appears to have trumped a claim based on priority of occupation.

This type of landscape-heritage claim initially appears strange, in a world where we are so much more attuned to claims of indigeneity and autochthony. However, this model of claim was once common in the context of the European colonial powers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Colonising the land and dominating the inhabitants was thought to be justified if the colonial power was civilising both the land and the people. In the case of the Greco-Turkish War, however, we are not in an imperial or colonial situation. Instead, both sides in the conflict were claiming western Anatolia as an essential part of their central homeland. Given this background, an imperial-style claim to territory is perhaps unexpected.

In response to this, it should be noted that the claims would have sounded a lot less strange at the time. The first decades of the twentieth century was precisely the moment when the old imperial world began to transform into the newer post-colonial world we are now more familiar with. The Ottoman Empire was in the process of being dismantled, and the British Empire was losing its grip on its oldest territory, Ireland. New nationalist movements were gaining strength in the newly-formed Arab states, in southeast Asia, and in Greece and Turkey themselves. These territorial claims were made just on the cusp of the transition – on the very point at which old imperialist discourses were being gradually replaced with new nationalist ones. If the landscape-heritage claims of the Greco-Turkish War seem to belong to the old order, it may be understandable.

Given our contemporary concern with migration and indigenous rights, there are perhaps lessons to be learnt. There is more than one method to relate to a landscape, and there is more than one way to belong to a territory. At different times and in different places, a hard-won and long-sought arrival may provide as valid a claim as simply being there first. While ideas of bringing civilisation may no longer be applicable in today’s globalised and hyper-connected world, the concept of bringing other social contributions (cultural diversity, professional skills etc) may be relevant. The relationships between people and the land they occupy are complex and multiple, and are constructed by interweaving different narratives about the past with assertions about the present and hopes for the future. The claims of migrations are not necessarily weaker than those of autochthons – they are simply different.

Bibliography


Atakuman, Ç. 2008 Cradle or crucible. Anatolia and archaeology in the early years of the Turkish Republic (1923-1938), Journal of Social Archaeology 8, pp. 214-235.


Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi 1932 Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi: Konferanslar, Müzakere Zabıtları, Istanbul


Davis, J.L.  

Davis, J.L.  

Dragastes, I.H.  

Efstatiadis, G.  

Erimtan, C.  

Ferriman, Z.D.  

Findley, C.V.  

Fleet, K. (ed.)  
2009 *The Cambridge History of Turkey: Volume 1, Byzantium to Turkey, 1071-1453*. Cambridge.

Frangoudis, G.S.  

Galip Bey, R.  

Hamikalis, Y.  

Helmreich, P.C.  

Hillenbrand, C.  
2007 *Turkish Myth and Muslim Symbol. The Battle of Manzikert*. Edinburgh.

Hirschon, R. ed.  

Hogarth, D.G.  

İkinci Türk Tarih Kongresi  

İnan, A.  


Paparrigopoulos, K. 1925 History of the Hellenic nation (abridged), Athens.


