

LETTER FROM TURKEY
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THE BIG DIG

Istanbul's city planners have a problem: too much history.

BY ELIF BATUMAN

Byzantine shipwrecks found during the construction of the first-ever tunnel under the Bosphorus held up work for years.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RAPHAËL DALLAPORTA FOR THE NEW YORKER; SOURCE: ISTANBUL UNIVERSITY YENIKAPI SHIPWRECKS PROJECT



When it came to choosing the exact location of the first tunnel spanning the Bosphorus—the narrow strait that divides the European and Asian sides of Istanbul and links the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara—one of the principal considerations was how to avoid encountering any archeological marvels. The tunnel was for a new high-speed train called Marmaray (a combination of “Marmara” and *ray*, the Turkish word for “rail”), connecting to Istanbul’s metro system. Of particular concern was the placement of the main station on the European shore, on the site of ancient Byzantium and Constantinople: everything within the ancient city walls has been designated both by UNESCO and by the Turkish government as a historical site, and all digging must be supervised by the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. The location that was eventually chosen, in the working-class district of Yenikapı, had conveniently spent much of antiquity underwater. In Byzantine times, it was a harbor.

“What’s going to turn up in a harbor?” one official explained, when I asked about the decision. “Seabed and sand fill. Architectural structures aren’t going to turn up.”

In fact, a tiny Byzantine church did turn up in Yenikapı, under the foundations of some razed apartment buildings. But the real problem was the large number of Byzantine shipwrecks that began to surface soon after the excavation began, in 2004. Dating from the fifth to the eleventh century, the shipwrecks illustrated a previously murky chapter in the history of shipbuilding and were exceptionally well preserved, having apparently been buried in sand during a series of natural disasters.

In accordance with Turkish law, control of the site shifted to the museum, and use of mechanical tools was suspended. From 2005 to 2013, workers with shovels and wheelbarrows extracted a total of thirty-seven shipwrecks. When the excavation reached what had been the bottom of the sea, the archeologists announced that they could finally

cede part of the site to the engineers, after one last survey of the seabed—just a formality, really, to make sure they hadn't missed anything. That's when they found the remains of a Neolithic dwelling, dating from around 6000 B.C. It was previously unknown that anyone had lived on the site of the old city before around 1300 B.C. The excavators, attempting to avoid traces of Istanbul's human history, had ended up finding an extra five thousand years of it. It took five years to excavate the Neolithic layer, which yielded up graves, huts, cultivated farmland, wooden tools, and some two thousand human footprints, miraculously preserved in a layer of silt-covered mud. In the Stone Age, the water level of the Bosphorus was far lower than it is now; there's a chance that the people who left those prints might have been able to *walk* from Anatolia to Europe.

Exciting as these discoveries were for archeologists, they did not delight the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had been championing the tunnel since he was mayor of Istanbul, in the nineteen-nineties. (He has been President since 2014.) Istanbul is one of the world's fastest-growing cities, with a population of more than fourteen million—up from less than a million in 1950—and, according to a recent study, it has the worst traffic in the world. In 2013, at least two million people crossed the Bosphorus daily, by bridge or ferry; the number of motor-vehicle crossings rose eleven hundred and eighty per cent between 1988 and 2012. The tunnel was long overdue.

In 2011, Erdoğan celebrated his fifty-seventh birthday inside the still unfinished tunnel and blamed the construction delays on the archeological discoveries: "Oh, some archeological crockery turned up—oh, some finding turned up," he told the press. "That's how they put obstacles in our path. Are these things really more important than the human?" (In this, as in subsequent remarks on the subject, Erdoğan called the Yenikapı findings *çanak çömlek*: a dismissive term for tableware, generally translated as "pots and pans.") He vowed that there would be no more delays: the train would begin running on October 29, 2013—the ninetieth anniversary of the Republic of Turkey.

Marmaray did open on October 29th. You can now cross the Bosphorus in four minutes. The connecting metro service at Yenikapı began in 2014. One report estimated that it would save Istanbul's commuters twenty-five million hours a year. An engineer once described the Yenikapı station to me as a knot tying together different kinds of rail transport. It's equally a knot tying together different kinds of time: millennia and minutes, eras and hours. The restoration of the ships, employing a technology first used on Viking galleys, takes anything from five to twenty years. Ufuk Kocabaş, the Istanbul University marine archeologist who started working on the ships in 2005, at the age of thirty-five, and is now in charge of their preservation, doesn't expect to see the job completed in his lifetime. A museum and an archeological park are under construction to showcase the findings, and, in an apt figure for the seemingly endless nature of the Yenikapı project, it seems likely that their construction will turn up even more shipwrecks.

When I first visited the Yenikapı excavation site, in July, 2013, the Marmaray station was already nearly completed—a concrete colossus topped by a flat, glass-enclosed rotunda—but the metro station was still an archeological dig. The total site was fifty-eight thousand square metres, about the size of eleven football fields. Workers on the Marmaray side wore fluorescent hard hats with matching vests. On the metro side, they wore faded caps or white shirts tied around their heads, against the blazing sun. They were constructing an edifice of their own, as striking, in its way, as the station: a fortress of plastic milk crates, ten crates high, stretching farther than the eye could see, packed with broken amphorae, horse bones, anchors, ceramic lamps, hewn limestone, mining refuse—anything that had been left there, accidentally or on purpose, by human hands. It was as if you were watching, in real time, the ancient harbor being replaced by a modern station.

To one side stood an armada of long objects, wrapped in white plastic, resembling monstrously elongated pianos. They turned out to be escalators awaiting installation. The shipwrecks were likewise hidden from view, in long white plastic tents, where sprinklers kept them damp twenty-four hours a day. Wood can absorb eight times its mass in water. If allowed to dry naturally, it cracks and warps beyond recognition.

“This work is like surgery—you can’t leave the patient unattended,” Ufuk Kocabaş said when we visited the tents together. He had been directing a team there since 2007. During most of the excavation, there were between six hundred and a thousand workers on-site, plus about eighty archeologists and other experts. The ships really did resemble surgical subjects, their rib cages opened up as each was measured, recorded, and documented by graduate students. Archeology, Kocabaş explained, is a destructive science. The site has to be recorded scrupulously, because the excavation will annihilate it. The Yenikapı team used a dronelike electric helicopter to shoot video from above, while a motorized camera on a scaffold took thousands of photographs and stitched them together into high-resolution images. Students traced a full-size outline of each ship on clear acetate.

“Hmm, these aren’t looking too pretty. I suggest we opt for a Valencia filter.”

Two kinds of vessel were found at Yenikapı: long, light scouting ships and shorter, heavier cargo ships, five of which had their original cargo. One ship, double-bottomed and lined with thick tiles, might have been used to carry marble from Marmara Island. Kocabaş speculates that the ships found with cargo sank suddenly, during storms or floods, which prevented the crew or the owners



from retrieving their lost goods. These disasters would also have sealed the ships' remains in a layer of sand, protecting them from air and from the naval shipworm, a shipwreck-eating species of saltwater mollusk.

Kocabaş was particularly excited about the ship known as YK12, which was recovered along with both a large cargo of amphorae and the captain's personal belongings: a mess kit, a brazier, and a large basket of cherry pits. The cherry pits indicated that the ship sank during the relatively brief cherry season—perhaps during one of the summer storms common in the Marmara region. Most of the ships with cargo date from the ninth to the eleventh century. There were also fragments of empty cargo ships distributed throughout the harbor. The ships had likely been scuttled and forgotten centuries earlier.

After on-site documentation, the ships were transported to a specially constructed laboratory in the twisted back streets of Yenikapı. In several black rectangular pools, up to thirty metres long, dismembered ship pieces glimmered like eels. Nearby, some workers were easing a waterlogged beam onto a custom-built wooden bracket so that they could move it somewhere else. (Ancient shipwrecks have the soft, friable texture of feta cheese, so you can't just pick them up and carry them.) Dark, slightly twisted, the ancient beam glistened in the sun. Steam rose from the surface, contributing to a faint manurelike smell that hung in the air.

"This is a beautiful piece," Kocabaş said. "It's what we call the chin—it's a connector between the stern and the keel. The way it's dovetailed is very interesting—here it's going to lock together. It's a marvellous technology."

Inside the laboratory, a doctoral student was studying a brontosaurus-size rib from ship YK27, one of several ships built using techniques from different historical periods. Ships like YK27 have shed light on a transition in the history of shipbuilding, from the time-consuming shell-based (outside-in) mode of construction, favored in antiquity, to the more efficient skeleton-based (inside-out) mode that prevailed during the Middle Ages.

This shift was originally believed to have taken place around 1000 A.D. The Yenikapı ships suggest that key elements of skeleton-based construction were already known by the seventh century—long before the shell-based construction was abandoned. In other words, the better technology supplanted the older one only after centuries of experimentation, hybridization, and regional variation. In technology, as in other areas of life, progress often comes about almost by accident, isn't immediately recognized, and only later acquires the appearance of a purposeful step.

In addition to the ships, tens of thousands of museum-worthy objects turned up in the harbor: a fourth-century marble Apollo, an ivory carving of the Virgin Mary, a nineteenth-century emerald necklace that someone had dropped in the harbor. There were beautiful miniature ships—exactly like the shipwrecks but smaller and less wrecked.

There was a device that Kocabaş described as “a Byzantine tablet computer”: a seven-inch wooden notebook with five removable wax pages that could be written on and erased again. The “tablet” had an “app” at the bottom: a sliding compartment concealing a tiny assay balance.

In Yenikapı, I visited the makeshift lab where all of these objects are processed by the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. In one trailer, a group of conservators, all women, were restoring small wooden objects. Reaching into plastic water-filled boxes, they fished out dripping marvels: spoons, tiny spools and pulleys, combs. There was a Byzantine child’s sandal sole, and many larger adult soles, gleaming, black, worn out in just the places one’s shoes do get worn out. One smallish sole was engraved with birds and bore a Greek inscription: “Wear it in good health, lady.”

In a shed nearby, a noisy filtration machine was chugging its way through approximately two thousand sacks of Byzantine and Neolithic dirt. Water gushed and cycled through the machine, pushing the dirt through a filter.

“What turns up in there?” I asked the worker in charge of the machine.

“There could be seeds,” he said.

“What else, besides seeds?”

“So far, nothing but seeds.” He showed me a number of eight-thousand-year-old seeds, sorted, labelled, and set aside for the archeobotanists.

The most space in the lab was taken up by thousands of milk crates, which were stacked to the roof in the yard and in the hallways. Their contents spilled out onto tables, where some had been neatly arranged into rows: hundreds of lamps, vessels, and plates in terracotta and ceramic, many with human or animal faces, with big, startled Byzantine eyes. The museum staff had to process fifteen boxes a day, cleaning, recording, cataloguing, and sorting the contents into three groups: display quality, study quality, and uninteresting. The first two groups would be sent to the museum; the third would be put into sacks and reburied. Contemporary Turkish coins would also be put in the sacks, as a message to future archeologists that the materials had been reburied in the twenty-first century.

Leaving the lab, I passed a colossal embankment of sacks, which I had previously mistaken for a sandbag barricade. Inside, thousands of uninteresting Byzantine artifacts awaited their reburial.

At the veterinary faculty of Istanbul University, on a remote suburban campus out past the airport, there is a small research center devoted to the animal remains uncovered at Yenikapı. Vedat Onar, the archeozoologist responsible for the center, took me on a tour this spring. We entered through a padlocked iron gate, passed the word

“osteoarcheology” spelled out in bones, and eventually came to a narrow hallway lined, from floor to ceiling, with three hundred Byzantine horse skulls. No other archeological site has yielded so many Byzantine horse skulls. A few complete horse skeletons had also been found. I saw one in a photograph, laid out on the ground among the mussel shells. It looked like a constellation.

Byzantine horses were crossbred for height and strength, in the Roman fashion. They started carrying heavy loads at the age of two, and were controlled by iron bits, which eroded their upper palates, wearing clean through the bone, and eventually making a large hole that connected the mouth and the nose cavity.

“This great stress on the mouth passed to the whole body,” Onar explained. Though most of the recovered horses had been younger than ten when they died, they were already beset by skeletal disease: “foot problems, vertebral-column deformities, spondylitis, terrible spinal problems—they couldn’t turn right or left.” Once the horses could no longer work, they were slaughtered and flayed. When the skins, horsehair, and meat had been taken, the bones were dumped into the harbor. The Byzantines, unlike the Romans, ate horses.

Byzantine written sources had mentioned nobles eating bears and donkeys, but nobody had known whether the stories were true. At Yenikapı, donkey and bear bones were found with unmistakable marks of butchery. Ostrich bones were found, but only the back legs. “That’s where all the meat is,” Onar explained, pointing at his own leg. People might have eaten the ostrich legs during ship journeys from North Africa. Butchered elephant bones were found, presumably from the circus at the hippodrome. Onar suspects that the thrifty Byzantines had fed the elephants, upon their retirement, to the lions.

From the elephant bones we passed to the skulls of dancing bears. The cubs’ skulls showed compression fractures, from having been hit during training. The adult skulls had marks on the muzzles, from having been bound shut. Dancing bears had been a popular Byzantine entertainment. Empress Theodora’s father was a bear trainer.



VIEW FULL SCREEN

Byzantine horses, bred for carrying large loads, were controlled by iron bits that eroded their upper palates and wore through the bone. Here, a ventral view of a horse skull, from the Middle Byzantine period.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAPHAËL DALLAPORTA FOR THE NEW YORKER

We came to a wall covered with hundreds of Byzantine dog skulls. Onar’s partiality to dogs immediately became apparent. As a student, he had researched the dog burials of Urartu, an Iron Age civilization in the Caucasus, where people had been buried in mass graves with large numbers of dogs so that they could all spend the afterlife together. The Byzantines, he said, had stray dogs, watchdogs, and pet dogs (a sign of social status). When I mentioned that I had a cat, he showed me a small number of cat skulls, and assured me that cats were treated better in the Byzantine Empire than in Western Europe. Gently, as if consoling me for something, he said, “I can tell you this: those cats had no problems that were caused by human hands.” In general, he said, you could tell a lot about a society by the way it treated its animals. I asked what conclusions he had drawn about the Byzantines. “We found a dog with a broken foot, and its foot was set,” he said. “It was treated. The dog didn’t die from that injury. So even the lame dog was fed.”

In April, 2013, Erdoğan drew a telling comparison between the findings at Yenikapı and a controversial new shopping center that he was proposing to build in Gezi Park, near Istanbul’s Taksim Square. The shopping center was to be housed in a replica of an Ottoman barracks that had been destroyed in 1940. At a press conference, a month before the Gezi plan sparked nationwide antigovernment protests, Erdoğan asked why Yenikapı’s Byzantine findings were more worthy of preservation than the Ottoman barracks. “Three or five pots and pans turned up from the bottom of the sea, a spoon

turned up, and these have to be preserved,” he said. “But the barracks, which could save Taksim Square, it’s a perfectly good building, architecturally and aesthetically, and this you won’t preserve. If that’s not ideology, what is?”

He was right: archeology *is* ideology, especially in modern Turkey. Mustafa Kemal, who founded the republic, in 1923, once wrote in a cable to his Prime Minister, “More students should be trained in archeology.” The Ottoman Empire—an entity that at its peak encompassed the Balkans and much of the Caucasus, North Africa, and the Middle East—had recently been dismantled by the Allied Powers, after the catastrophic defeat of the First World War. Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, asserting the principle of self-determination, was one of many signs that the age of multiethnic empires, such as the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian, was giving way to an age of ethnic nation-states. Kemal understood that, if Turkish-speaking Muslims were going to retain any land in the former Ottoman Empire, they would have to come up with a unifying mythology of Turkishness, based on the Western European ideals of ethnic nationalism, positivism, and secularism. Adopting the surname Atatürk (Father Turk), he quickly set about inventing a new national identity. Of course, it couldn’t *seem* invented; that’s where archeology came in.

In 1930, Atatürk appointed a committee to establish an ethnohistorical basis for a Turkish state in Anatolia. In 1931, the Society for the Examination of Turkish History published a radical four-volume history of Turkey, propounding the so-called “Turkish-history thesis.” The thesis held that the Turks were descended from an ancient people who lived around an inland sea in Central Asia, where they basically started civilization all by themselves. At the end of the Ice Age, the sea dried up, propelling waves of Turks to China, India, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Italy, where they intermingled with the native populations and spread their knowledge of metalworking and of domesticated animals. In 5000 B.C., a core group of Turks settled in Anatolia: their second homeland. In a recent article, the historian Clive Foss enumerated other colorful tenets of the theory. In Mesopotamia, “Sumerian Turks” drained swamps and developed a written language; Turkish Thracians founded Troy. Turkish Lydians migrated to Italy, became Etruscans, and so more or less established Rome. The Minoans of Crete, having come from Anatolia, were basically Turks. The Buddha was a Turk; so was the third-century Roman emperor Maximinus.

The theory solved any number of problems. It countered the Allied Powers’ characterization of the Turks as civilization-resistant occupiers of other people’s lands. (“No other race has brought such devastations and massacres, such lasting derangements, into the life of other nations,” a British naval-intelligence publication of the time stated.) By emphasizing a pre-Islamic past, it kept the national identity separate both from the disgraced Ottoman Empire and from the Muslim caliphate. By making the Turks out to be the ancestors of Western civilization, it allowed the nation to modernize without losing face: to “Westernize” was simply to rediscover a lost patrimony. Perhaps most

important, by positing a genetic relationship between the modern Turks and the prehistoric Anatolians, it protected the new republic from territorial claims by the Greeks, the Italians, the Armenians, and the Kurds.

By the logic of the Turkish-history thesis, all prehistoric Anatolian civilizations of unknown origin were determined to be Turkish. Discovering their relics became a matter of national importance, and the emphasis of archeology shifted from the Classical and Hellenistic ruins of the Aegean region to the Neolithic, Hittite, Phrygian, and Iron Age sites of Central Anatolia. Some excavations were led by German archeologists who had fled the Third Reich, and whom Atatürk had invited to Turkish universities. Vast Hittite tombs were excavated. The capital had moved from the Ottomans' beloved Istanbul to Ankara, in the middle of the Anatolian steppe—within driving distance of the Hittite capital of Hattusha. New state banks were called Sümerbank (Sumerian Bank) and Etibank (Hittite Bank). Artifacts from all over Asia Minor were sent to the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara, where, as a child, I spent many hours gazing at eyeless ceramic deer and emaciated bronze stags, developing a love of Hittites, that was not totally unrelated to the snack cakes produced by the Eti (Hittite) biscuit company.

Erdoğan, perhaps the most charismatic Turkish leader since Atatürk, rose to power by specifically appealing to those whom the Kemalist narrative excluded, or seemed to exclude: the emerging pious Muslim middle class, working-class Muslims, and Kurds. This approach meant that Erdoğan had to distance himself from Kemalism, without appearing to do so. (Insulting Atatürk is still punishable under Turkish law.) Where Atatürk was ashamed of the Ottomans, Erdoğan championed them. Where Atatürk expanded Ankara's Anatolian museum, Erdoğan inaugurated a Panorama 1453 Historical Museum in Istanbul, which features a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree painting of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. At the opening ceremony of the Marmaray station, at Yenikapı, Erdoğan quoted Mehmet the Conqueror in Ottoman Turkish, a language drastically modernized under Atatürk. He described the tunnel as the realization of a “hundred-and-fifty-year-old dream,” referring to the first plans for a Bosphorus tunnel, which were drawn up in 1860, under Sultan Abdülmecid I. (The plan, by the French engineer Simon Préault, called for a submerged floating tunnel.)

Erdoğan just isn't interested in archeology—that's not where he's looking for legitimacy. If he's going to dig a hole in the ground, it's going to be to develop natural resources or expand public transit, not to find old pots. The old pots thus become objects of political contention. In 2010, a lawyer associated with the Kemalist party the C.H.P.—the rival of Erdoğan's party, the A.K.P.—launched an investigation into the sacks of archeological material that were being reburied at Yenikapı, and eventually filed a criminal complaint declaring their reburial unlawful. (The Archaeological Museum later confirmed that it had buried sacks of scientifically uninteresting materials and the matter was dropped.)

This legal motion didn't make a lot of practical sense, but it had a certain symbolic logic: if the government was trying to keep something in the ground, dissenters wanted it brought to light.

"They learn how to say 'Gracias' and we're supposed to be thankful."

On a side street near Karaköy, behind a sixteenth-century mosque below the Atatürk Bridge, and abutted by a Genoese rampart, are the Istanbul metro supervision offices of Yüksel Construction. I met there with Esat Tansev, a project director responsible for the Yenikapı-Taksim metro-line extension, the site where the largest number of ships were found. Tansev's office was spacious and well lit, but the air felt dense—with sunlight, cigarette smoke, the rumble of the A.C. unit, and the ceaseless trilling of a canary named Coşkun ("enthusiastic, overflowing, ebullient"). Tansev became involved with the project in November, 1998, when Yüksel and three other Turkish firms were awarded the contract, for a hundred and fifty million dollars. The construction was supposed to take two and a half years. Instead, it took fifteen. One of the other companies ran out of money and backed out of the contract.



Tansev told me that it had been known from Byzantine maps that Yenikapı was the site of a harbor, and that archeological discoveries had been expected—not in the tunnel itself, which runs two hundred metres underground, but in the stations. "Sooner or later, a tunnel has to come up," he said. "When it reaches the surface of the earth, there are historical encounters."

When asked what he had learned in almost two decades of such encounters, Tansev said that he had been most impressed by what a big difference it made whether you uncovered something Byzantine or Roman. Either would mess up your project, but Byzantine artifacts could eventually be moved. "Roman things can't be touched," he said. "With Byzantium, you can find a way around it. But when it comes to Rome—condolences."

He went on, "At the beginning, we all felt some mutual antipathy with Professor Ufuk and the Archaeology Museum. But after a few months we all saw it wasn't the thing to do. Now we all have all kinds of friendships." Tansev also came to feel a kind of collegial warmth toward his Byzantine forebears, who had faced the same problems as engineers today but with fewer technical resources. He had wondered how they put a pier in the ground without industrial concrete, and had been interested to learn that they made mortar out of lime.

Still, Tansev had been relieved when the excavation reached the seafloor, and felt only mild discomfiture when the archeologists asked to perform a further five-square-metre test excavation: what could they possibly find under the seafloor? When the archeologists called him fifteen days later to say that they had found Neolithic traces, Tansev thought they were joking. “What are the chances?” he marvelled. “In a hundred-thousand-square-metre area, you excavate twenty-five square metres, and then you find something! It’s unheard of! Well, then they explained it to me. Under the seabed, there’s a dark, hard, oily clay. Past that, there’s tar. Under that, what they found was some kind of cultivated topsoil. There were seeds planted in it.”

The dig continued. “They expanded the area, and this time they found graves, they found those footprints, they found a jug,” Tansev said. “They found plants and insects, they found every kind of thing. They dug and found, dug and found. In that way, three years passed.”

The Neolithic footprints, Tansev recalled, hadn’t looked like much at first. “Whoever discovered them deserves praise,” he said. “Of course, now when you go to the museum they’re footprints, clear as day. I said to myself, ‘Five thousand feet walked here, maybe twenty thousand—are we going to collect all of them?’”

He showed me a group photograph taken in August, 2006—forty-odd engineers, officials, architects, and students, dressed variously in suits and hard hats, waving happily at the camera from the tunnel of the Şişhane metro station. None of them knew about the immaculately preserved eight-thousand-year-old footprints that were going to cause them so many problems.

I was unable to find Tansev in the photograph. When he pointed himself out, I felt a pang. He looked so young.

I visited Tansev with my friend Sibel Horada, a conceptual artist whose work often involves urban development and the historical legacy of non-Turkish Istanbul. I first met Sibel in 2012, when Istanbul’s matzo factory was being converted into an art space. (Jewish community leaders had found that it was cheaper to import all Istanbul’s matzo from Israel.) For the opening exhibit, Sibel ran squares of thick white paper through the factory’s machine, so that they came out imprinted like matzo. She called the papers “ghost matzo.”

Sibel had been fascinated by Yenikapı for years—particularly by the mountains of plastic crates, and the fate of their contents. Tansev seemed genuinely baffled by her determination to know the exact number of crates removed from the site.

“The essence of all your work is in those crates,” Sibel told him. “It’s not in a few cleaned-up ships in the museum. The real thing is in the boxes.” For Sibel, the most characteristic finding from Yenikapı was precisely “the surplus.” “When one piece is

found,” she said, “it teaches you something. When thousands of pieces are found, it’s something else. At a certain point, you have the knowledge already, and the rest is a surplus.” You don’t have to be a conceptual artist to see in the surplus an irresistible metaphor for certain historical questions in Istanbul: once you start digging, so much stuff comes out that there’s nowhere to put it, and, eventually, you have to just bury it back in the ground.

Tansev seemed moved. He made a few phone calls, and wrote a number on a slip of paper: 83,562—the number of boxes his workers had removed from the site.

Sibel introduced me to her friend Hayri Fehmi Yılmaz, an art historian who worked as a consultant on the metro construction. As with Tansev, his most vivid recollections involved the Neolithic phase. The Neolithic period is when the first nomadic hunter-gatherers began living in settlements and practicing agriculture. In a process that started in the Fertile Crescent around 10,000 B.C. and slowly moved west toward Europe, the human condition underwent changes that we still can’t begin to imagine—in everything from social organization to physiology. Each new site may hold another clue to what happened.

At first, officials had proposed that the entire Neolithic layer be dumped somewhere for the archeologists to sort through: the whole layer had been a bog, so everything must be mixed up in there anyway. The archeologists objected that this wasn’t the case, and that hand excavation was required. One senior official went to Yenikapı and said that all he saw was mud, so why not excavate it with mechanical shovels? Just then, the archeologists discovered the remains of an eight-thousand-year-old forest—nearly sixty trees with their roots spread out—followed by the graves, with human skeletons laid out in fetal-like position between wooden covers, and other human remains in urns. They found three different burial techniques from the same historical period.

When the officials saw the graves, they backed down, and the excavation proceeded by hand. It was then that archeologists found the hut, the pots, the tools, and the footprints. Some of the prints had been left by bare feet, others by wooden slippers. “We had to laugh when we saw them,” Hayri said. “They’re the same wooden slippers we still wear at baths and in mosques.”

Hayri talked about the rules of excavation and the difficulties of getting a construction permit in the old city. Hayri himself has for many years abstained from expanding the basement of his house; because he lives in a historic district, this relatively small home-improvement project could fall under the purview of the Istanbul Archeological Museum. He made it sound like something out of Kafka. “Archeologists would have to do an excavation in my house,” he said. “Who knows how long it would take?”

“Aren’t you curious what’s under there?” I asked.

“No,” he replied promptly. He said that Istanbul homeowners were generally more curious about archeological findings under their neighbors’ houses than under their own.

“Now look down.”

Two years after I saw the ships being excavated, I returned to Istanbul University to see their preservation. Kocabaş showed me two once identical blocks of Byzantine wood: one dried in the sun, and the other preserved by the freeze-drying process used on the ships. The sun-dried wood had shrunk to a blackish twisted jerkylike strip. The freeze-dried wood was an airy, lightweight, bone-colored block, restored to its original size and shape.



Before freeze-drying, each piece of wood must be saturated in a forty-five-per-cent solution of polyethylene glycol, a waxy compound that replaces the water inside the cell walls, preventing shrinking or warping. Because the waterlogged wood is too delicate to be dumped straight into a forty-five-per-cent solution, the concentration has to be increased by five-per-cent increments every month or two. Getting all the pieces of a ship to the full concentration can take years. During the actual freeze-drying, which takes from one to four months, the remaining water in the wood freezes solid, and then, under very low pressure, sublimates to a gas, bypassing the liquid phase.

I looked through the round window of the lab’s freeze-drying machine. In the gloom inside, distributed among six shelves, pieces of Byzantine ship were entering a new phase of existence. Nearby, in forty-ton tanks, some other pieces were marinating in the solution. The level was up to thirty-five per cent; Kocabaş hoped to reach full strength by the end of the year. He seemed more tired than he had two years earlier. He talked about missing the sea, and about how his son had just turned fourteen; he had been four when the ships were discovered.

I went to the Marmaray station. The crates had vanished. The building itself looked flat, glassy, unremarkable. Most of the impressive concrete structure I had seen earlier was now underground.

Although the shipwreck museum and the archeological park have yet to materialize, there is now a sixty-five-acre “meeting space” alongside the station. Built mostly by dumping a large amount of infill into the Sea of Marmara, the concrete protuberance quickly became known on social media as “the tumor,” and has been used almost exclusively for pro-A.K.P. gatherings. The A.K.P. held its first rally there before Erdoğan

ran for President, in 2014, after he had exhausted his party's term limit as Prime Minister. Newspaper estimates of attendance ranged from hundreds of thousands to more than a million. Erdoğan himself said it was two million.

In 2015, an A.K.P. rally called the Feast of Conquest was held at Yenikapı to mark the five-hundred-and-sixty-second anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople—one week before the June general elections. In the presence of five hundred and sixty-two historically costumed Ottoman military personnel, Erdoğan read from a chapter of the Koran known as the Conquest sura, and spoke of the upcoming election as a future “conquest,” reënacting the triumph of Mehmet the Conqueror.

The following week, the A.K.P. lost its absolute majority for the first time in thirteen years, and a new party, the H.D.P., passed the ten-per-cent threshold required to win seats in parliament. The H.D.P. is a spinoff of pro-Kurdish and leftist movements that gained momentum from the Gezi protests. Led by a Kurdish human-rights lawyer, it actively solicited female and L.G.B.T.Q. candidates. The party slogan, “Great Humanity,” comes from a poem by Nâzım Hikmet, whom many consider the greatest twentieth-century Turkish poet, though he spent most of his career in prison or in exile because of his Marxist views. “Great Humanity” isn't Hikmet's most subtle work, but there is a certain power in the sweeping panorama and the concrete detail, and in the way that each sentence ends unexpectedly, tripping up against itself:

The great humanity is the deck-passenger on the ship
third class in the train
on foot on the highway
the great humanity.

On the escalator at Yenikapı, the great humanity wore a tired expression and was often staring at its cell phone. It stepped on your foot, the great humanity. We descended to a cavernous rotunda with a skylight and pillars. High above the turnstiles, a fresco showed two stylized Byzantine slipper soles, resembling exclamation points.

I found myself remembering Erdoğan's exasperation: “Are these things really more important than the human?” I remembered, too, how Kocabaş had told me that, of all the discoveries at Yenikapı, he was most moved by the Neolithic footprints: because they “directly evoke the man,” they tell us something that none of the other objects, even the shipwrecks, can. “They represent the human without mediation,” he said. Back in the Stone Age, far fewer things mediated between humans and the world. There were no nations, no third class.

Few find a seat on Marmaray: each carriage accommodates five standing passengers for every seated passenger. Like Neolithic man, I crossed the Bosphorus upright, “on foot on the highway.” I went to Asia and back again. I got off at the first European stop: Sirkeci

Station, the old terminus of the Orient Express, where the Marmaray platform is connected to the surface of the earth by a twenty-story escalator—the longest in Turkey. Strange questions may pass through your mind as you travel on this escalator. If fifteen houses are built on top of one another, which one is the most important? Whose voices should be heard—those of the living or those of the dead? How can we all fit in this world, and how do we get where we're going? ♦



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