

MAKING ANTHROPOLOGY AN ACTION OF ENLIGHTENMENT: PROF. DR. YILMAZ SELIM ERDAL

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You have an important position in the field of anthropology in Turkey. In order for us to know you better and understand the reasons why you faced towards science, could you please tell about your childhood? How was the environment that you grew up in, what other things guided you?

I was born in a village located in Taşova, Amasya as a child of a teacher in 1960s. In the environment that I was born, I have learned reasoning, generating, questioning and synthesizing information from a teacher who grew up with the heritage of Village Institutes, namely my father. My father, a member of TÖBDER¹, was an educator having a humble library 80 years ago. He used to repair the village school, put up and paint walls. This was a part of the education perspective of that time, a notion of all-out development. Moreover, he used to design experiments at school, make us excavate the skeletons in the old village graveyard, enable us to learn our bodies. In the festival of sacrifices, he used to store the cauldron brought by each student in formaldehyde about a year and teach the soft tissues and their functions by demonstrating. Thus, a teacher who was educated by Turkey's resources, made me aware of the world that we live in and perceive the environment. Of course, not only my father, but also growing up with the children of eight siblings whose ascendants in those days, at the end of the Ottoman era, by taking their formal education, being in a large family composed of intellectuals in their own way, made it possible for me to learn the scientific approach. Furthermore, my mother's ability to think rationally and with her ingenuity paved the way for me in my life.

I was born in a village, I grew up by playing, sharing and struggling with children in the village. I completed my secondary education in a town belonging to Taşova district. Our village was about 8-9 kilometers away from the town. We, the village youth, covered this distance by walking almost every day of our secondary school and high school. However, what was bothering in terms of education was not about the distances. There were painful remnants of the events happened in the years just before the 12th of September² on the formal education system. There were not enough teachers, they would not stay in the town for a long time, the schools

were frequently closed due to political conflicts. Nonetheless, these circumstances would also apply to many places located in Anatolia. The disruptions in the system of education were really devastating. I could not say that I took nourishment from the sociopolitical entities in this time period. Yet, I was always curious about learning. Albeit, my accumulation of knowledge and my formal training were not enough for me to be a college student in a university having a quota on the number of their students. I worked in the agricultural labour with my family. I had learned cultivating tobacco, onion, sugar beet and wheat, and harvesting. On the other hand, I was in search of a college to be freed from the tedious village life. With the suggestion of my uncle who is a student of the Faculty of Languages and History-Geography (DTCF), Ankara University, I included departments of Prehistoric Archeology, Archaeology of Asia Minor and Anthropology among my choice list. Luckily, I was qualified for the Department of Anthropology. Anthropology is a very exciting field of science. It tries to understand and explain human beings as a whole with an integrated approach. However, besides the thrill evoked by science, the department one comes from, the



Picture 1. Yılmaz Selim Erdal's parents while working in the village
(Ayşe-Bahattin Erdal)

1 TN: All Teachers Unification and Solidarity Association.

2 TN: Prof Erdal mentions the coup d'etat which occurred in 12th of September in 1980.

assistants, the instructors and the student communities are far more important. When I came to Ankara, I was defining myself as an idle brain in a city only with vain village experience. When I came to Ankara University, DTCF, we used to gather with the graduate students and assistants of several faculties such as archaeology, ethnology, folklore and sociology as well as Erksin Savaş Güleç who was an assistant professor at that time. Ankara University and the tea house in Sakarya together with some other social environments provided the settings for a disciplined system of scientific thinking. My adventure in science of anthropology has begun in this way.

You have been the head of the Department of Anthropology in Hacettepe University since 2012. Can you briefly talk about the story of the department?

In 1971, the Department of Anthropology, Hacettepe University was founded by Prof. Bozkurt Güvenç who is also one of the founders of the University itself. Growing an interest into anthropology after architecture, Master Bozkurt being a part of school of American Anthropology set up the department in Hacettepe. The department shapes with the heftiness of sociocultural anthropology focusing on the analysis of cultural structure integrating humans, communities and cultures. Since the beginning, it concentrates not on undergraduate, but on graduate education. The aim is not generating information in the field of anthropology for the graduates of anthropology. The aim is to increase the knowledge on humans, communities and cultures from various disciplines and accumulating that knowledge in the field of anthropology. In order to achieve the goal mentioned, the department is built consisting of people from different disciplines. Having undergraduate degree in any of the fields is thought to be sufficient and bringing that knowledge into our field is thought to be more efficient. Linguists, ethnologists are welcomed in the group. First students with graduate degrees are raised. Although he is highly known with the establishment and sphere of influence of social anthropology, Prof. Metin Özbek, who is also one of the pioneers in biological anthropology joins the group. The notion of humans being not only a social or cultural entity, but also being a part of nature and a biological entity introduced to anthropology by Master Metin. I have joined this department in 1988 right after graduating from Ankara University, DTCF. By experiencing both biological and social anthropology, contributed me to see humans with a holistic point of view. With this scientific perspective, we have provided graduate education since 2018. In the year 2018, our department has started to provide undergraduate education with a decision of the council of higher education.

Until the ends of 90's, the Department of Anthropology, Hacettepe University, associated with social and cultural anthropology. The reason why is that the department provided graduate degrees in the field of socio-

cultural anthropology driving the field with a number of instructors being experts in this area. Since 2000's, a great majority of the social anthropology instructors in the department had left the department by resigning or retiring because of various staff problems, personal preferences or administrators' callousness. During this period, the social ground of anthropology begun to weaken, and biological anthropology gained strength gradually. During this refreshment period, instead of the physical anthropology approach categorizing people into races, biological anthropology approach grounding 1930's in the world, supported by several instructors in Turkey, some friends in İstanbul University, and a group including myself reflected itself in Hacettepe analyzing adaptation models of humans to their environments, ecological niches and cultures. Hence from the 2000's, with a team which has a substantial part composed of my students sophisticated over different areas, the field of biological anthropology has improved in Hacettepe University exceeding its limits and becoming an internationally recognized unit. These advances are achieved thanks to Prof. Dr. Metin Özbek's route, vari-



Picture 2. Yılmaz Selim Erdal, Ömür Dilek Erdal and Eylem Özdoğan discuss new researches on Neolithic skeletons excavated from Çayönü (Diyarbakır) and new working order of Husbio_L...

ous approaches and scientific groundings of students and instructors including myself.

Your research area has a lot in common with archaeology. You have been working with human remains obtained from many Anatolian archaeological sites. Could you please mention about your main findings?

A good deal of information is somehow related to humans, either in a direct way or in an indirect way. However, studies directly exploring humans have developed after other research areas. We can think of this situation as valid for archaeological studies as well. Human past has been an area of interest of anthropology for a

long time. Investigating distant ancestors of humans is a very exciting area and it is also one of the first developing areas of anthropology. However, who is a human? Where did it originate from? What are its characteristics today? Why there are differences between humans? Keeping in mind that these ancient questions have long been attracting researchers, cultural history had become important by focusing on material culture explored in archaeology in order to understand recent human history with the idea that human characteristics are innate, that they cannot change at all. People who actually created those cultures have been ignored. The things that are being investigated in those times had been mainly the skulls. However, if we are in search of our past, it seems impossible to unravel it only with a cultural aspect. Another way to understand our past is to analyze the humans ourselves, the communities who created that culture, who generated it, who affected it and also who is affected by it. With this perspective, one of the most appropriate characteristics that can represent humans are the biological remains. These remains include skeletons, mummified bones and teeth.

As in the development of anthropology discipline, until the nineties, humans were evaluated by being categorized into races. In my master's thesis, I used "race types" in order to understand human diversity. Yet currently, many ritualistic behaviors related to human societies such as burial customs, many skull and body alterations related to aesthetics and identity, eating and drinking habits, the contents of the food that they ate (meat or plant-based diet, which animals? Details considering the types of plant-based nutritional source.), population size, structure and movement, human height, growth and development, effects of labor conditions on body, and many diseases leaving an impression on bones can be trackable from human remains. Social



Picture 3. Yılmaz Selim Erdal excavates skeletons in Külliöba.

status of societies, inequalities, relations of production and consumption, eating habits can be resolved from the materials describable as remnants of material culture. However, it is not possible to determine which parts of the society is affected in a positive or negative manner. Hence, directly investigating the individuals affected by these circumstances makes it possible to answer these questions more reliably. Socioeconomic differences and inequalities of income, diets and preferences have ideological and cultural foundations, nonetheless, they directly affect human body. Thereby, reading these directly from bones enables answering many questions relating past. With this point of view, stages like transition to sedentary lifestyle and revolution in consumption/production relations affecting human health and eating habits are being investigated with several studies comprising Anatolia.

For instance, the origin of violence is a topic of a very long debate. The question of nature or nurture is still continuing as from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Hobbes. The relationship between violence and several notions as adopting a sedentary life, agriculture, personal property, increase in human movement, trading, power elites are being investigated. Anatolia is one of the regions that very early forms of neolithization process, urbanization, and many notions mentioned above are emerged compared to other parts of the world. Very early incidences of violence among individuals are observed in settlements as Körtik Tepe, Demirköy and Aşıklı. However, violence marks resulted in deaths are very rare. This suggests that in the early periods of Neolithic, sedentism and agriculture are not increasing violence, in other words violence is not a very common behavior in that era. Nevertheless, after 3500 BCE, there had been a period in which every society in the Late Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age frequently experienced battles and massacres. It is also known that governing power is at the hands of a specific group, and religious and political elites emerged at this era with the help of the analysis of remains of ancient Anatolians.

How did Ancient DNA studies contribute to anthropology?

Since the beginnings of 2000's, humans are mainly studied macroscopically by visual methods. However, remains of any organism have a great potential since they hold and preserve the genetic/molecular structure. Molecular anthropology studies have begun in 70's, and accelerated from 2000's. Especially, advances in sequencing technology and improvements in DNA isolation protocols has brought new approaches into molecular studies. With these new methods understanding humans not only with physical characteristics, but also with genetic characteristics became possible by using bones and teeth remained under appropriate conditions. Today, we are able to understand better a million-year-old mammoth preserved under appropri-

ate conditions or a Denisovan stayed in a cave for tens of thousands of years, Neanderthals, Paleolithic and Epipaleolithic hunter-gatherers, Neolithization process, first farmers, societies doing animal husbandry, complex societies, social structure models such as migration, selection and adaptation by analyzing ancient DNA. We have learned that genetic changes are slower than cultural changes and not every cultural change has an impact on genetic make-up with these studies. Moreover, we solidified that the groups referred as races do not hold a genetic/biological explanation by developing molecular studies.

Anatolia is very rich for archaeological and anthropological studies. This richness creates competition over materials obtained from Anatolian samples in terms of genetic studies as well. METU, Hacettepe, and Stockholm University preferred to work together instead of rivalry by building up various projects and achieved pioneer work in genomic studies. One of them being in Hacettepe, two aDNA laboratories are established. Human_G laboratory at Hacettepe is the first laboratory solely designated to this purpose and possesses almost every property that an advanced laboratory has. The crew has a highly dynamic and productive nature. As a matter of fact, the scientific papers published in the last two years has provided leading information in understanding neolithization process.

This area is new, but it is not limited with only humans. Molecular studies comprising animals, plants, microbes, the sediments where these organisms live in will help us understand humans and their environment. With this property, these research areas will become a new



Picture 4. Yılmaz Selim Erdal explores Paleolithic and Mesolithic cultures in Gobustan Museum (Azerbaijan)

scientific field. All in all, we are now in a better place to understand past compared to twenty years before although the molecular studies are very recent.

Recently, there has been claims that societies having classes are originated from Mesolithic-Neolithic periods. Have you ever encounter an evidence of social inequality before the Chalcolithic Period in Anatolia?

When did societies with classes begin is a very old question. Small hunter gatherer groups being relatively more egalitarian has been shown by ethnographic studies. Lately, groundbreaking excavations in the Southeast Anatolia (such as Göbeklitepe and Karahan Tepe) has sparked off new questions. Especially, there has been new claims suggesting hunter-gatherers living on a wide range of wild plants and animals are societies with classes grounding the scraped low reliefs on architectural structures, drawings, sculptures, depictions of humans and animals, many depictions related to life and death connecting with above mentioned magnificent structures. However, studies conducted on the human remains retrieved from several settlements from the Neolithic period showed no evidence of a social structure or inequalities with classes according to lifestyle, eating habits, mobility, burial customs or burial goods reflected on skeletal framework. For example, burials goods with the people buried under the houses in Körktiktepe, paint, plaster or coatings on dead of places that they were buried in did not show a difference. The wounds on the skeletons, new bone formations in ears, grooves on teeth resulted from rope production and proportion of meat consumption are similar to each other. There are no differences in shelters. Together with this, in the late Neolithic societies, where agriculture has become more and more important in daily life, it is shown that health problems between sub-adults and adults, women and men, diets, burial locations started to differ significantly. This situation has become more and more apparent in the Late Chalcolithic Period, and it can be said that the societies with classes in today's context has consolidated with Early Bronze Age societies.

In anthropology, it has been seen that there is ideological guidance on interpreting objective data. What do you think about the reason for this observation?

Scientific thinking is not independent from the problems that the society is experiencing. Yet, political powers sometimes take advantage of these ideologies in order to shape the society and uses science as a tool. For instance, the efforts trying to categorize people has gained strength after the second half of the nineteenth century, and these lead to statements suggesting everything related to human societies can be explained by "races". This suggestion made it possible for the governors to create nations and form social history by using these notions. Similarly, the notion of "environment" was hold responsible for every explanation in the 1930's and 40's, today the trend is to explain everything with "climate" due to experienced climate crisis.

The ideology that the inequalities between humans are innate and cannot change is still an effective ideology. It is believed that inborn inequalities are as a result of creation, and no one has a right to change it. As a result, this ideology is used as a tool to maintain present ide-

ologies and existing inequalities. This is a reflection of unchanging human manifestation on social and cultural domains. This ideology contributes to subsistence of inequalities by using different instruments every time and explaining different subjects with this perspective. The reason for all these is the efforts of the political powers to be able to keep their ruling powers. Knowledge has always been used for such purposes. The only notion that is not changing, perhaps, the idea that the thing political powers trying to keep under control is destiny. Inequalities, the effects of environment on human body, climate change, conflicts, battles and gender differences are all destiny and people have to live with those. The political powers try every way to legitimate inequalities. The science of anthropology, in my opinion, has an important position in the disciplines attempting to symbolically comprehend and explain this kind of ideological deviances.