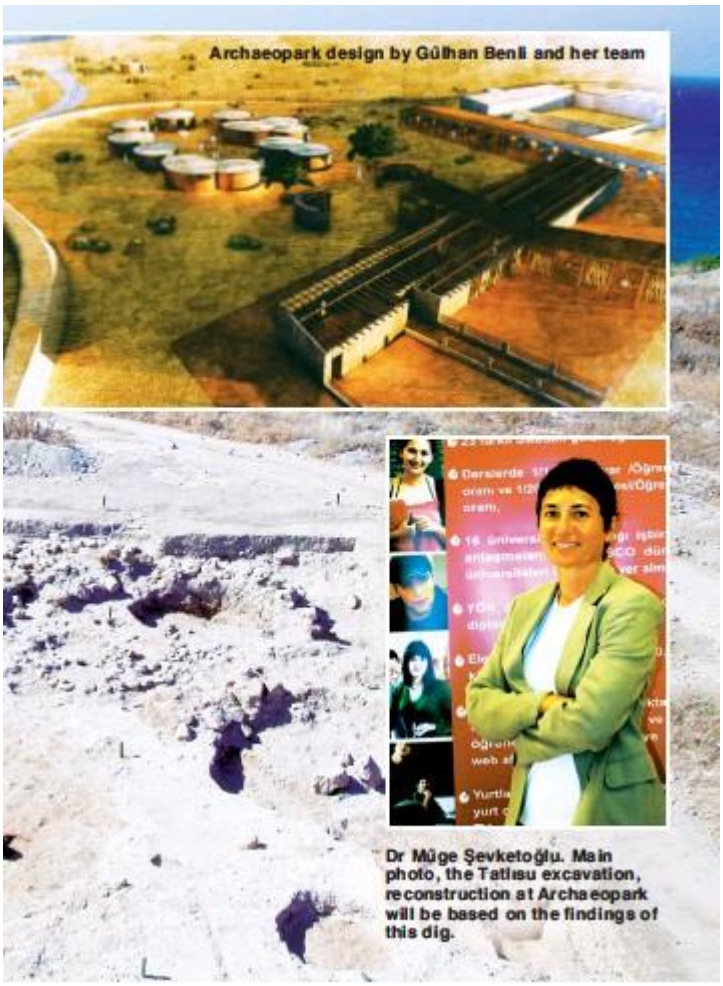
Amazing wealth of heritage

A team of specialists are pooling their skills to bring the ancient past back to life at a unique project on the TRNC's northern coast.



The Anglo Turkish Association of Northern Cyprus has provided annually financial funding for the excavation and reconstruction of the Neolithic Çiftlikdüzü "Archaeopark" project at Tatlisu.

Archaeopark design by Gülhan Benli and her team Dr Müge Şevketoğlu. Main photo, the Tatlısu excavation, reconstruction at Archaeopark will be based on the findings of this dig.
STATE-of-the-art technology and age-old construction skills are working hand-inhand to create a "historical experience" showcasing life in North Cyprus's oldest known settlement.
Years of painstaking digging have led a team of experts to pool their efforts to recreate a Neolithic village, complete with visitor centre and other facilities, at the coastal site where its inhabitants lived more than 10,000 years ago.

The Çiftlikdüzü "Archaeopark" project, on coastal land near Tatlısu, is spearheaded by archaeology Associate Professor Müge Şevketoğlu, who first discovered the ancient settlement and started exploring it in 1998.

Now artefacts collected from the site, along with high-tech scientific data, have yielded enough information for her squad of specialists — including archaeobotanists, soil analysts, flint, bone, mud-brick and plaster experts — to collaborate on recreating life at Çiftlikdüzu as a brand new educational resource.
The project has won the financial backing of Tatlısu Municipality, through its mayor, Hayri Orçan, and the Turkish Embassy, and has been adopted as a cause by the Anglo Turkish Association.
Dr Şevketoğlu has said the current estimate was that the Archaeopark should be completed hopefully in 2020, adding: "But the work will never be finished as we intend to renew, change and add as we go along. It will be self-sustainable, so we need to be creative all the time."

The idea of the reconstruction was first dreamed up more than 13 years ago, with the first prototype Neolithic mud-brick hut constructed, with United Nations Development Project funding, in 2005.
Since then, groundwork for taking the vision forward has involved collecting seasonal materials, such as hay and cane, and building the skilled team able to put it into practice. The replica village is being created

on and around sheds on the edge of the archaeological site, formerly used for pig and chicken farming, with one old outbuilding being knocked down and others adapted for visitor facilities.

Two wild fig trees that had damaged the foundations of the building lined up for demolition will be kept and "the build will age with them", said Dr Şevketoğlu, who added: "Fig trees are important as in Greek the name of the site's locality is Arkosykos, which means wild fig." She said three geophysical studies — ground penetration radar and metering of resistivity and magnetism — had revealed "significant" elements of the Neolithic site that remain under ground, so "since there will be no foundations and everything will be built on the present surface, in effect [the scheme] is a form of protection".

The finished Archaeopark is expected to comprise 12 Neolithic mud-brick huts, decorated with replicas of artefacts found during more than two decades of excavation. "One will be a fisherman's hut, another a farmer's, another a hunter's, a flint maker's and so on. The [old] sheds will become the visitor centre, store rooms for the excavation where specialists will work and will be part of the display, a café and gift shop, technological learning with interactive systems, and workshops for children and adults — for example an experimental farm area for planting ancient seeds and other interesting plants."

For Dr Şevketoğlu, it will be "more than just a museum" and will both protect the relics of Çiftlikdüzü, and engage and educate the local community. "We intend to reach out to everyone and change the views of those not so positively disposed towards archaeology. "It will be a living, smelling experience for Cypriot heritage. It will be our school where the young will learn; awareness-raising is our target and this is a project to invest in the future. "We have creative ideas even about what gifts should be sold, made by the women in the village and representing historic archaeological artefacts, spices, crops etc. We want to bring in villagers to contribute and feel part of this; architecture students learning traditional building crafts; visitors of all ages watching excavation in progress, talking to archaeologists, conservators, flint and other specialists, and giving it a go."

Among those sharing the vision are two architects who designed the Archaeopark concept and are bringing to bear their "green building" experience — Assistant Professor Gülhan Benli, from İstanbul Medipol University, and local conservationist Özge Özbek Eminoğlu, of Cyprus International Univerity — and Büyükkonukbased traditional crafts expert, İsmail Cemal, well known locally for his ecotourism involvement and his restorations of vernacular architecture. Mr Cemal and Ms Eminoğlu both worked with Dr Şevketoğlu on the 2005 prototype Neolithic hut. Dr Şevketoğlu said she was lucky to have assembled a team sharing her ethos and embracing the "inseparable" issues of cultural heritage and nature, and commented: "We need more citizens who care for their environment and value it more than money. Inspiring young people to care about the heritage and environment is our target. Youth are the leaders of social change and they do have the capacity to create a better future."
She added: "This project should not be mixed up with normal construction. All details are from the results [of excavations] and those we don't have we experiment and use common sense to reconstruct. In other words, we stop thinking like the modern human and start thinking like Neolithic man.

“When we think like [that] we realise we have to be practical geniuses and more environmentally friendly, as Neolithic people were dependent on their natural resources. There must have been a beautiful balance between humans and their environment — something we lack today.”
Dr Benli said they were all part of a special cultural heritage management group which takes every decision about the site, explaining: “The area is a first-degree archaeological monument, therefore what can be done is limited and must be considered carefully.”
Ms Eminoğlu voiced pride in being part of what she called “one of the finest projects North Cyprus will see”, which had won the support of TRNC Antiquities authorities.
“My team and I recorded the site’s fallen farm building in the heat of the summer, warding off snakes and jumping over fallen fences. We overcame all of these difficulties because we believe in this project.”
Consultant Mr Cemal, the “artistic hands” of the project, explained that the “archaeological evidence” was key, and that no modern machinery or materials would be used.

“This project is important in understanding ancient construction techniques; to record the experience during reconstruction for a better interpretation of the technology of this period . . .
“To be able to educate young people and the public through reconstruction of a village will bring to life the fragmentary evidence that non-archaeologists may have difficulty in understanding.”
Skilled in traditional local crafts, carving and stonework, Mr Cemal is an expert in construction using “kerpiç” mud bricks and ageold roofing techniques, and became known to thousands for his demonstrations at Büyükkonuk’s yearly EcoDay festivals.
“Mud brick has been around for thousands of years,” he said. “It’s the most ecological building material; just earth and straw and water. When a mud building is no longer needed it can be ploughed back into the land and planted on.”
Originally from the Paphos area, before a 19-year spell in Australia, he recalled neighbours making homes from mud bricks when he was a child. In Büyükkonuk, where he worked on the restoration of an olive oil mill, he consulted local old folk about where to find the best earth to make the bricks.
“Then there is the straw. Combine harvesters cut the straw too short. We found a way to make the shredding machine go slowly so the straw was longer and better for the mud bricks. It was a learning experience for all of us.”
With 30 years’ archaeology work under her belt in Cyprus, Dr Şevketoğlu has been involved in digs and surveys — some of them underwater — across the TRNC, from exploring for pigmy hippo fossils to “countless” excavations of tombs, “from the Bronze Age to Romans” along the Girne coastline, from Esentepe to Akdeniz, and in the town itself, where the centre is built over many ancient burial sites.
“These were all rescue excavations found during construction works or accidental discoveries, collapsed tombs or lootings as in the case of Vounous.

“I also worked at Esentepe Ağırsu in collaboration with the Antiquities Department. This site was unique because before it was damaged by constructors it contained more than a 10-metre height of uninterrupted archaeological deposits from Middle Chalcolithic to Aceramic, roughly dating from the seventh millennium to the third millennium BC.”

Çiftlikdüzü has proved special, however, and significant in several ways. Known to date back to around 8200BC, there are hopes that radiocarbon dating could yet reveal even more ancient roots. “Tatlısu is a coastal site, on a clear day you can see the Taurus mountains of Turkey. It is a landfall site, and with thousands of obsidian blades, it’s indisputable that these early settlers — in one of the oldest [habitations] on the island and the oldest in the North — came from Anatolia, a question that had no black-and-white answer. [The site] points to overseas contacts and relations, and the origin perhaps of the first Cypriots on the island.

“Farming and animal domestication are important here, with early domesticated dogs and cats found here, as is seafaring, fishing etc. Life 10,000 years ago is finally getting clearer now, after 22 years of work.”

That work has required “patience and more patience and a lot of sacrifice”, as well as dedication, discipline and a passion for a tiring, sometimes discouraging job which takes you away from friends and family — and which “never finishes”.

Dr Şevketoğlu points to teamwork as key to overcoming problems along the way — “I look at them as challenges to overcome” — but also to highlights which provide their own reward.

Early in her career, she recalled finding what she almost discarded as an amphora handle. “Having a closer look it had a face. In fact it was identical in size and everything to the ‘Lemba lady’ [limestone idol] exhibited in the Cyprus museum. Except ours only had the face and the neck — the rest is below the ground, I hope waiting to be discovered.

“Again on the same site, years after this discovery, with a close archaeologist friend who is now a professor, we found a carved picrolite head of an animal. These little things that are lying on the surface after thousands of years makes your day.”

At Tatlısu, in early 2000, the team exposed a very strange group of bones — square pieces side by side in a regular form — and called in experts from the Marine Turtle Conservation Project to help identify what they suspected might be turtle remains.

“It was a great moment as we discovered several others later with skulls and could identify them as green turtles.”

The 20 plus years at Çiftlikdüzü have revealed the area to have an “amazing wealth of heritage”, and identified some 450 dönüms, both on land and in the sea, of potential importance for investigation and protection. Despite opposition from some quarters, she said, saving the site is “all or nothing”.

“I know I can lose all the work I have put in or I can win and protect it all — it’s worth a try.

“In my twenties I thought I could save all of the heritage in the world. In my thirties this was reduced to Cyprus. In my forties I realised I can only save the north of Cyprus and now in my fifties I hope to be able to save Tatlısu.”

The site of Tatlısu-Çiftlikdüzü, also known as Akanthou-Arkosykos, is located on the north coast of Cyprus, and has been dated to Early Aceramic Neolithic or Cypro-PPNB/MPPNB, with calibrated carbon dates of 8300–7600 BC. It has been revealed as one of the most important early Aceramic Neolithic settlement sites in Cyprus. Rescue excavation began in 1999 to assess the site and preserve it from agricultural damage and threats from erosion and construction. A wider landscape of Neolithic land use has been identified through field and geophysical survey. The settlement site and surrounding area are now protected as registered monuments. Further work to assess impacts and damage to the archaeological record are being undertaken to ensure sites are protected.

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