

# A FIRST LOOK AT EQUID “IDOLS” FROM TEPECİK-ÇİFTLİK, SOUTHERN CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY

Un primer análisis sobre los “ídolos” sobre falange de équido procedentes de Tepecik-Çiftlik, en la región sur de Capadocia, Turquía

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**ABSTRACT** Excavation at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, Pottery Neolithic, and Early Chalcolithic site of Tepecik-Çiftlik in the Niğde region of Southern Cappadocia, Turkey have been conducted since 2000 under the direction of Professor Erhan Bıçakçı of Istanbul University. The excavations have yielded a rich assemblage of worked bone objects dating to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Periods. One of the striking features of the assemblage is the presence of approximately 250 bone “idols”. These objects were made by flattening the dorsal and plantar/volar surfaces of equid first phalanges. Some also show more elaborate decoration. Measurements taken on these bones indicate that wild horse (*Equus ferus*) and hydruntine (*Equus hemionus hydruntinus*) proximal phalanges were used to produce these bone objects. This paper will illustrate how these how these bone objects were manufactured and how they were distributed chronologically within the site.

**Key words:** Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bone Idols, Tepecik-Çiftlik, Turkey, Equids.

**RESUMEN** Desde el año 2000, el profesor Erhan Bıçakçı de la Universidad de Estambul, ha dirigido diversas campañas de excavación en el yacimiento arqueológico de Tepecik-Çiftlik, en la región Niğde, al sur de la Capadocia. Allí se han podido documentar niveles pertenecientes al Neolítico Pre-cerámico, Neolítico Cerámico y Calcolítico Antiguo. Las excavaciones han sacado a la luz un rico conjunto de objetos de hueso datados en el Neolítico y Calcolítico. Una de las características más destacadas de este conjunto es la presencia de aproximadamente 250 “ídolos” de hueso. Estos objetos fueron realizados sobre la primera falange de équidos, aplanando la superficie dorsal y

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plantar/volar de ésta. Algunos de ellos incluso muestran una decoración mucho más elaborada. Las medidas tomadas en estos huesos indican que las falanges proximales de caballo salvaje (*Equus ferus*) e hydruntino (*Equus hemionus hydruntinus*) fueron empleadas para manufacturar estos objetos de hueso. Este artículo ilustrará cómo estos elementos óseos fueron realizados y cómo se distribuyen cronológicamente en el sitio.

**Palabras clave:** Neolítico, Calcolítico, Ídolos de uesto, Tepecik-Çiftlik, Turquía, Équidos.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Tepecik-Çiftlik is a tell site of about 33,000 m<sup>2</sup> located in the Niğde region of southern Cappadocia, Turkey (Bıçakçı *et al.*, 2011). The site is located near extensive obsidian deposits, and it appears to have played an important role in the obsidian trade. Tepecik-Çiftlik has been excavated under the direction of Professor Erhan Bıçakçı of Istanbul University since 2000, and these excavations have revealed a series of strata that are dated primarily to the Early Chalcolithic (Level 2, ca. 5800-6100 BCE) and Pottery Neolithic (Levels 3-9, ca 6100-?7500 BCE) periods. The lowest levels (Levels 10-14) date to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (pre-7500 BCE). The material from Level 1 includes several graves dated to the Late Roman-Early Byzantine periods.

We joined the Tepecik-Çiftlik excavation project as a bone tool specialist (DVC) and a zooarchaeologist (PJC) in 2014, and our initial research has focused on the Early Chalcolithic bone tools and unmodified faunal remains that have been recovered in recent excavation seasons (Campana and Crabtree, 2018). This short contribution will focus on a class of worked bone objects that have been recovered from both the Pottery Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic levels at Tepecik-Çiftlik, the so-called equid ‘idols’.

## EQUID “IDOLS” FROM TEPECİK-ÇİFTLİK

So far, the site of Tepecik-Çiftlik has produced more than 250 so-called ‘idols’, objects made primarily from the first phalanges of wild equids. These artifacts were made by grinding down the plantar / volar side of the bone at the distal end, which was usually narrowed to varying degrees on the medial and lateral sides as well. Some objects were also flattened on the proximal end, indicating that they were intended to stand on end. A small proportion bears some additional modification, such as a groove cut across the center of the diaphysis or a narrowing of the entire shaft. A few rare specimens are more elaborately modified.

The chronological distribution of these objects is shown in figure 1. Substantial numbers of these objects were recovered from both the Late Neolithic and the Early Chalcolithic levels. The single object that was recovered from Level 1



Fig. 1.—Chronological distribution of equid idols from Tepecik-Ciftlik.

(Late Roman/Early Byzantine) was undoubtedly from a prehistoric level that was disturbed when the historic burials were interred.

These idols were fashioned from the first phalanges of two equid species, *Equus ferus* (wild horse) and *Equus hemionus hydruntinus* (wild ass) (fig. 4). Roughly equal numbers of idols were made from the bones of each species. Zooarchaeological research (Campana and Crabtree, 2018) shows that wild equids made up about 10% of the large mammal remains from the Chalcolithic contexts that were excavated in 2013 and 2015. Wild horses and hydruntines were represented in nearly equal numbers in these archaeological contexts.

While most of these objects are simply narrowed and flattened, a small portion also shows parallel shafts, a narrowed “waist” (fig. 2), or, more commonly, a groove crossing the diaphysis (fig. 3). The minimal effort involved in producing the



Fig. 2.—Equid “idols” showing indented waists.



Fig. 3.—Equid “idol” showing groove across the diaphysis.

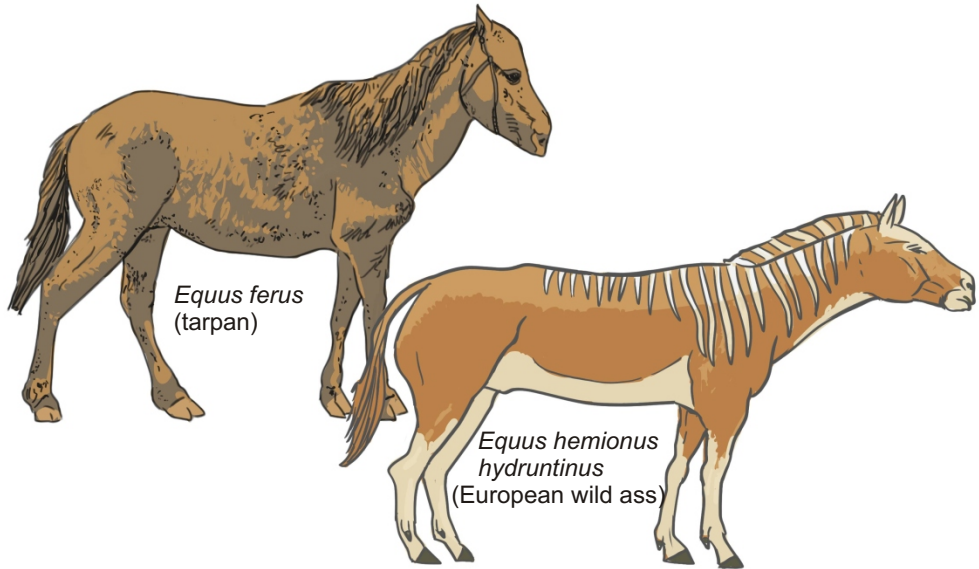


Fig. 4.—Illustration of a wild horse (*Equus ferus*) and a hydruntine (*Equus hemionus hydruntinus*). Drawing courtesy of Tom Campana.

grooves across the shaft suggests that the intent may not have been for decoration but rather to serve as a marker to make these objects distinctive.

## DISCUSSION

Three somewhat similar objects were found at Neolithic Çatal Höyük (Russell and Griffiths, 2013). Approximately 25 modified equid phalanges were recovered from Neolithic Dja'de in Syria (Christadou *et al.*, 2009). They differ in shape and method of manufacture from the Tepecik specimens. The equid phalanges from Neolithic Dja'de were shaped by scraping, and they have been interpreted as figurines. Christadou *et al.* (2009) report that similar objects were found at Mureybet (Gourichon, 2004) in Syria, but the size of the collection is not reported. The large size of the Tepecik-Çiftlik collection of modified equid phalanges is very unusual for southern Cappadocia. At the nearby contemporary site of Kosk Höyük, there were none (Benjamin Arbuckle, personal communication).

The Neolithic levels at Tepecik-Çiftlik include examples of quite sophisticated bone working. By comparison, most of the 'idols' are quite simple, requiring only a small amount of effort to manufacture. Rather than serving a ritual purpose, it seems more likely that their function was more mundane. They may have served as gaming pieces or possibly as markers or tokens that played some role in the obsidian trade.

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