# Komana Pontike: A City or a Sanctuary?

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## *Introduction*

On the border of central Anatolia and the Black Sea region in Turkey there is a site, Komana Pontike, very little known to modern archaeologists and historians (Fig. 1). A mound rising on a natural hill forms the basis of what is considered to be the site of Komana. This hill stands next to the Yeşilırmak river (ancient Iris), 9 km from the modern town of Tokat, ancient Dazimon (Fig. 2). The ancient site of Komana Pontike has previously not been investigated properly but was identified by travellers through inscriptions and ruins found in its vicinity. Hamilton (1842), Hogarth and Munro (1893), Anderson (1903), and the Cumonts (1906) have described the ruins at and around Tokat and Komana in their published explorations, and Wilson (1960) compiled all

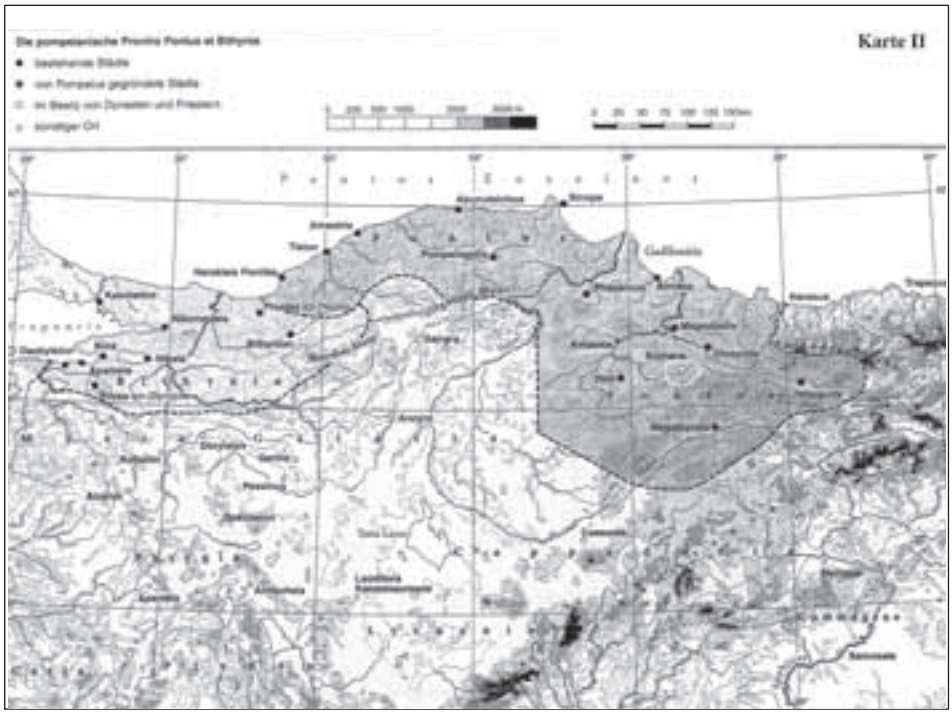


*Fig. 1. Komana's territory during the re-organization of Pompeius (Marek 2003, 182).*

*Fig. 2. Hamamtepe.*

of the information concerning Komana and the smaller settlements in its territory in his unpublished thesis. Marek (1993; 2003) has published two excellent volumes on Roman rule in Pontos and Bithynia, which provide useful information especially on the changing territory of the site throughout the Roman period.

Still, our knowledge on Komana basically comes from the ancient sources including Strabon, Appianos, Cassius Dio and even Procopius. Strabon, who was a native of Amaseia, another major Pontic city 70 kilometers NW of Tokat, is however certainly our best source. The description of Komana included in this article therefore, will be mostly based on the accounts of Strabon and early travellers.

Komana was an unusual settlement since it was a so-called temple state.[1] This meant that the settlement was a religious centre with a self-sufficient economy though probably supporting the kingdom in different ways. The land around the sanctuary belonged to the temple and was tilled by 6,000 serfs according to Strabon (12.3.34). The city was a very busy place with visitors from the surrounding area as well as from Armenia Minor. There were regular festivals during which women residing at Komana performed sacred prostitution.

The worship and celebrations at Komana resembled those at the sanctuary of Ma in Kappadokia. Strabon, in fact, considered the temple to Ma a copy of the temple in Kappadokia (Strab. 12.3.32):

> … and nearly the same course of religious rites is practiced there; the mode of delivering the oracles is the same; the same respect is paid to the priests as was more particularly the case in the time of the first kings, when twice a year, at what is called the Exodi of the goddess (when her image is carried in procession), the priest wore the diadem of the goddess and received the chief honours after the king.

The sanctuary kept its semi-autonomous position throughout the rule of the Pontic kings and even under the rule of the Roman Empire.[2] The territory of Komana expanded under various emperors and its religious activities continued without interruption until the introduction of Christianity to the region.

*The Archaeological Survey*

The idea of conducting an archaeological survey at Komana developed during my doctoral studies, when I realized that there were two unique sites in the central Black Sea region in Turkey, Komana and Zela. These were sanctuaries with festivals, sacred slaves and prostitutes, which are common aspects of a number of sanctuaries in the Aegean. However, these were not linked to a large city as was the case for most similar religious centres in Anatolia such as Didyma near Miletos. This phenomenon led me to inquire into what sort of archaeological data would be recovered from these particular temple states.

The main objective of the archaeological survey project initiated in 2004 was to shed light on the settlement history of Komana through the ages and identify the physical attributes of the site. Komana, as a temple-state, must have had an unusual structure. Its independent political structure, the 6000 temple-slaves cultivating the land around the temple, its position as a religious and trade centre and the fact that it had visitors from the neighbouring regions must have required the city to have both special buildings that would be appropriate for a sanctuary and features such as fortifications that are regularly found in ancient cities. On the other hand, this rather unusual administrative system may have required a totally different structure than those suggested above that could only be revealed through surveys and excavations. This paper aims to identifying the settlement type of Komana through a review of the archaeological fieldwork.

The survey in 2004 only included archaeological investigations at and around the site. In 2005 and 2006 however, we were also able to conduct

*Fig. 3. Pottery collected from the early Bronze Age site near Hamamtepe.*

geophysical surveys at other potential sites in the area.[3] Before the results are presented here, I would like to emphasize that the survey covered only a 2 km diameter area around the hill previously identified as the site of Komana, which today is called Hamamtepe.

Since the purpose of the preliminary survey was to illuminate the settlement history of the site, I will present the survey results in a chronological order rather than in the order of discovery.

The earliest pottery from the survey collection can be dated to the late Chalcolithic and Bronze Age. Towards the northwest of Hamamtepe west of the rock-cut graves there is a gentle slope on which pottery possibly dating to the late Chalcolithic or early Bronze Age was found (Figs. 3-4). No other archaeological material or architectural features that may be connected with the pottery could be detected at the site. The fact that it is a cultivated field probably explains the level of destruction and the lack of further evidence. Early Bronze Age pottery attested in the fields between Kılıçlı and Bula also on a slope could likewise not be connected to any other physical remains.

Several tumuli can be seen on the southern side of the Tokat-Almus road (Fig. 5). Our investigations began with the tumulus closest to the road, Karartıcıtepe tumulus (Bademlitepe). This tumulus (663 m) is situated on a natural hill on the southern bank of the southern irrigation channel. Looters

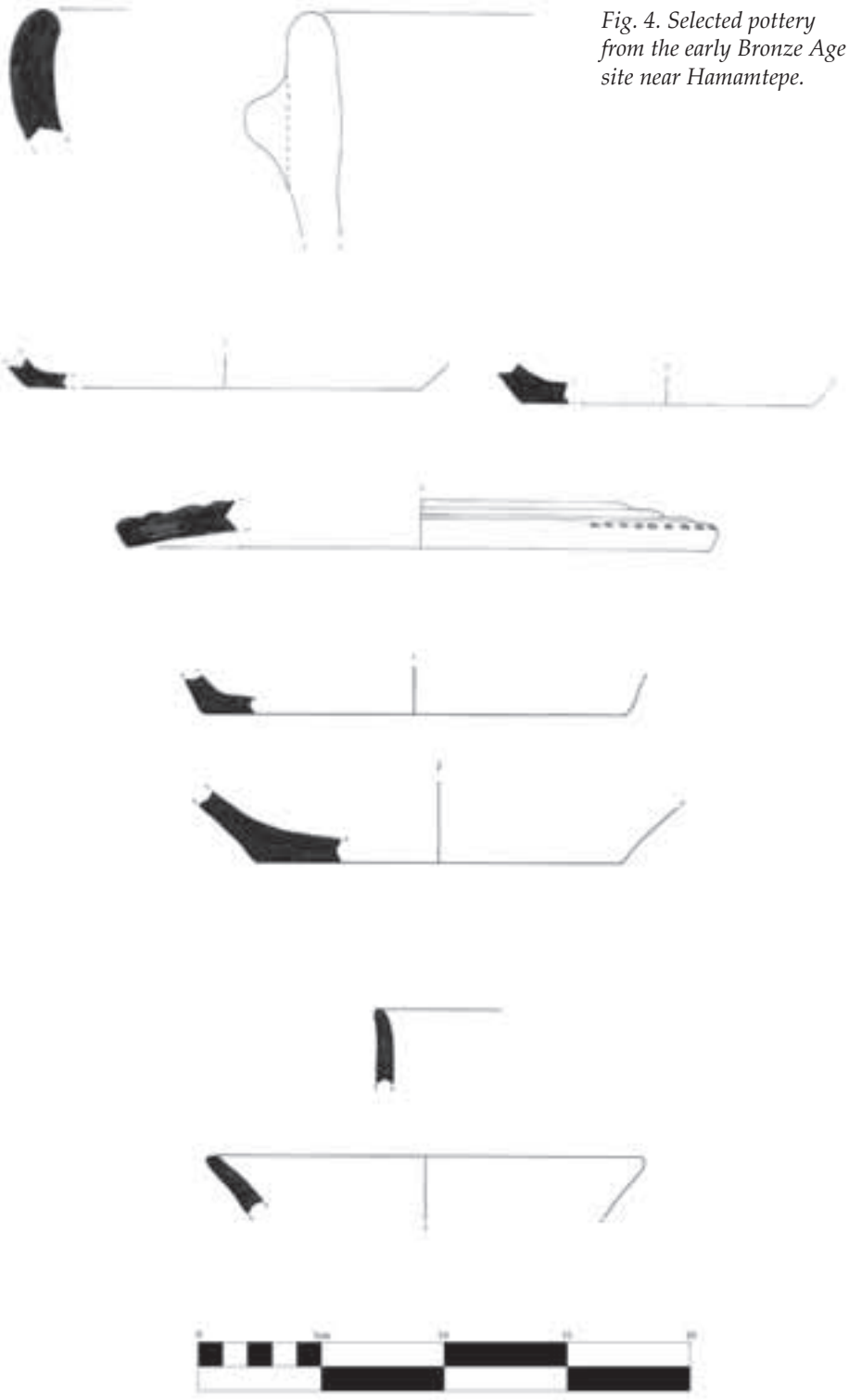

*Fig. 4. Selected pottery from the early Bronze Age site near Hamamtepe.*

*Fig. 5. Tumuli in the vicinity of Hamamtepe on aerial photograph.*

hoping to enter into the burial chamber from its side have dug holes both on its northern slopes, and on top of it, but we believe that they could not reach the grave. However, a plain sarcophagus was recovered from the vicinity, which could have been dug out from this tumulus. The pottery collected on the tumulus dates to the Iron Age but it may not necessarily date the tumulus itself to the Iron Age since the material may have been carried to the top of the mound from elsewhere (Figs. 6-7).

The period between the Iron Age and the 2nd century AD is not well-represented at Komana Pontike and even 2nd and 3rd century AD Roman

*Fig. 6. Pottery collected from the Karartıcıtepe Tumulus.*

pottery could be found at only one site while small amounts were seen among Byzantine collections dispersed across the terrain.

The only archaeological feature that may possibly date to the Hellenistic period is a rock-cut grave already mentioned both by Hamilton and the Cumonts.[4] This rock-cut grave and a türbe are the main attractions for any visitor to the area since they are the only visible remnants of the past here. The rock-cut grave is similar to the Pontic royal tombs with a temple façade and has a secondary inscription. Once, two columns stood at the front of this tomb, but they are now destroyed. There is a shield on the pediment. The entrance into the tomb is through a small window and the interior (2.34 m x 1.65 m) is plain. On the eastern side of the rock there is another grave without an architectural façade. Other fragments of inscriptions datable to the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods were also found in the villages around Komana.

The only site with significant amounts of Roman pottery is situated about 500 m east of Karartıcıtepe tumulus (Bademlitepe) by the road on a flat area (Fig. 8). The pottery is spread in an area with a diameter of approximately 100 m, the centre of which has been disturbed by a high voltage electricity pole. The archaeological material comprises Roman ceramics including large pieces of *pithoi* to the west, and tiles and broken pieces of stone, possibly ar-

*Fig. 7. Selected pottery from the Karartıcıtepe Tumulus.*

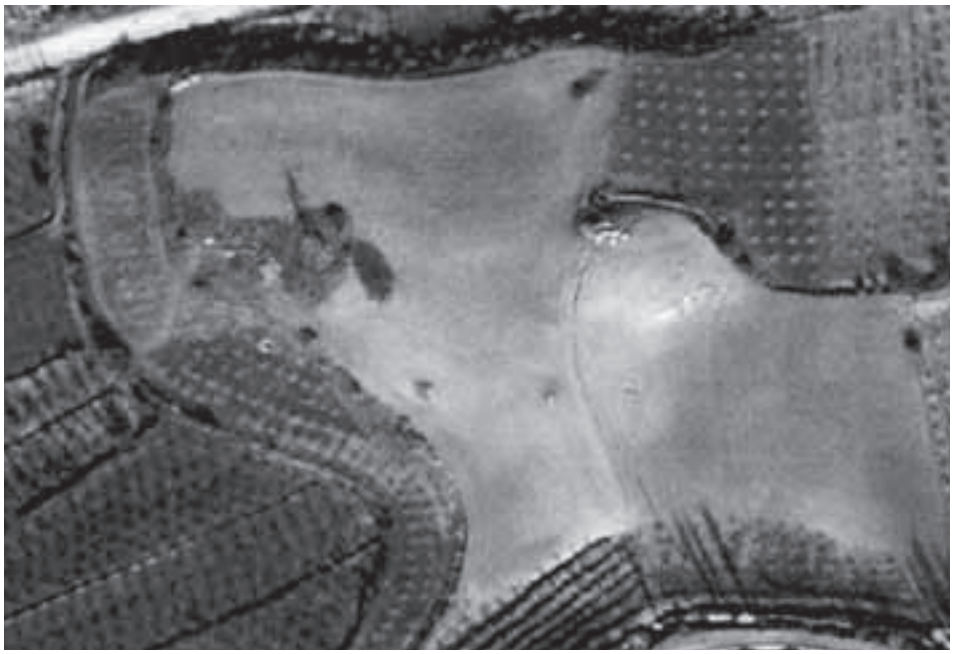

*Fig. 8. The Roman period site at Nüğücük.*

*Fig. 9. Pottery collected from the Roman period site of Nüğücük.*

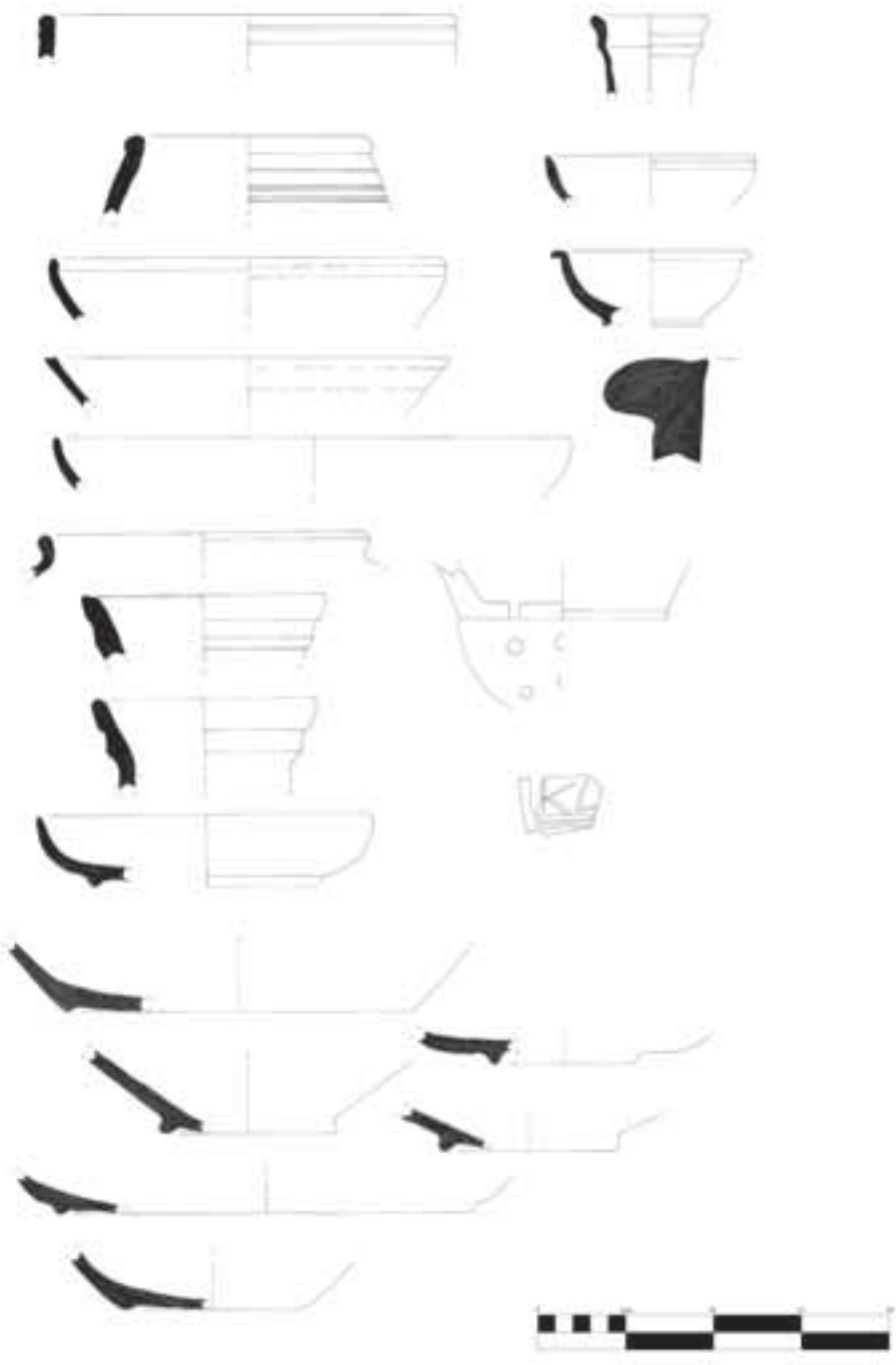

*Fig. 10. Selected pottery from the Roman period site of Nüğücük.*

*Fig. 11. Hamamtepe on satellite imagery.*

chitectural material (Figs. 9-10).[5] Illegal excavations in the area have revealed the foundations of a small structure and a barrel vault.

The archaeological survey at Komana in fact began at Hamamtepe which is 9 km northeast of Tokat, situated by Yeşilırmak river (ancient Iris), near the DSİ Water Regulator with the expectation that we would find the centre of the Hellenistic/Roman site there. This hill had previously been identified as the site of Komana, on which the temple to Ma stood.[6] Hamamtepe is a large hill (approximately 250 m x 150 m) in the shape of a triangle with its long side parallel to the river (Fig. 11). The larger section of the mound was once surrounded by a fortification or a terrace wall, parts of which still survive. The southern section of the mound was unfortunately badly damaged by the construction of the old Tokat-Niksar road and the water regulator. The archaeological material that is visible in the sections along the road and by the channel indicates that the natural slope of the hill once reached the channel, which is part of the regulator construction.

The walls around Hamamtepe are badly destroyed but the rough inner core made of large, irregular stones and mortar has survived in places (Fig. 12). One of these walls, to the southwest, extends outward in a rectangular form resembling a tower. The third wall, to the west of the city, also has an extension to the west. The walls seem to continue to the north, making a corner to the northwest. To the north, the wall also has an outer extension and continues

*Fig. 12. The ruins of walls on Hamamtepe.*

*Fig. 13. Pottery collected from Hamamtepe.*

in two rows. The wall is lost on the south side due to the damage caused by the road construction, while on the east side it has not been possible to detect the wall. An independent square structure, however, was found there. It was furthermore observed that the walls surrounding the hill were at places supported by the bedrock.

It is possible to identify structures with multiple rooms on the mound, but there are no ruins on the surface. The rooms can only be identified through lumps and depressions on the surface. Two structures each with six rooms could be identified towards the southern part of the hill. The gradiometer survey on most of the hill and the resistivity survey in three 20 by 20 meter squares confirmed that there were structural elements below the surface. The multiple layers of structures created a very blurry picture yet to be analysed further.

The pottery from the surface of Hamamtepe is mostly glazed pottery dating to the Byzantine and Ottoman periods while the few pieces from the trench possibly date to the Roman period (Fig. 13).

Not totally satisfied with our knowledge regarding Hamamtepe and its role within the site of Komana, we returned in 2006 and conducted a topographical survey. The main purpose of the survey was to create a digital terrain model of the mound to be utilized in future archaeological and geological studies. Our aims included:

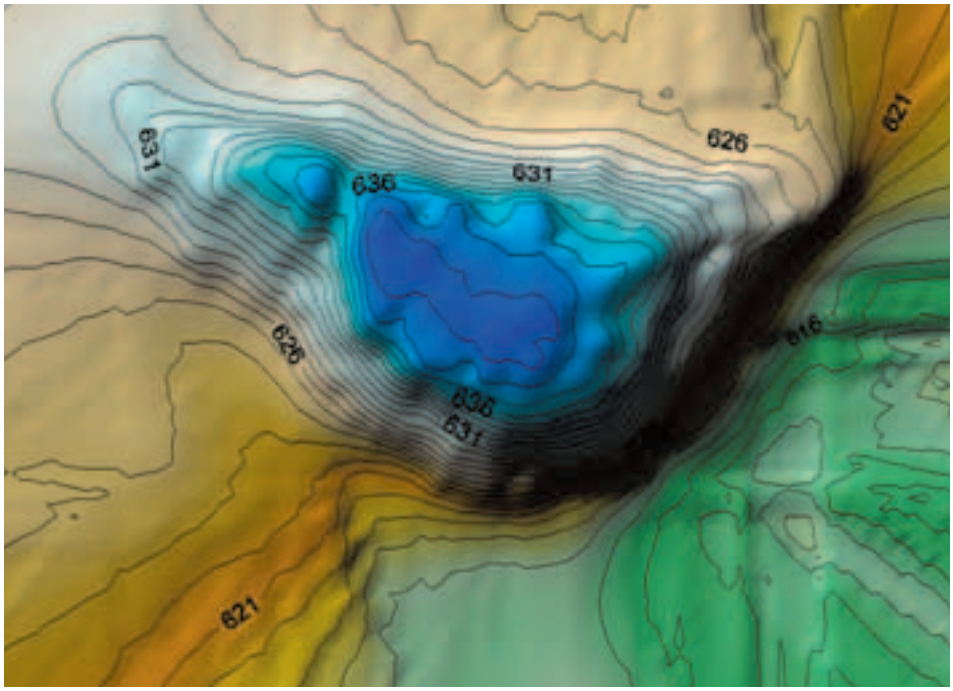


*Fig. 14. Digital Terrain Model of Hamamtepe.*

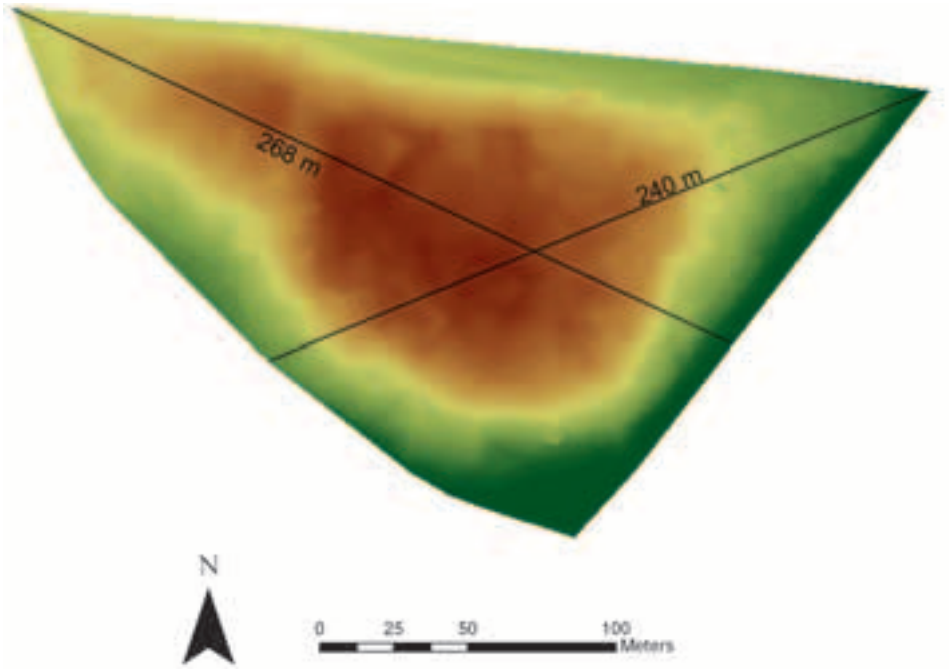


*Fig. 15. Dimensions of Hamamtepe.*

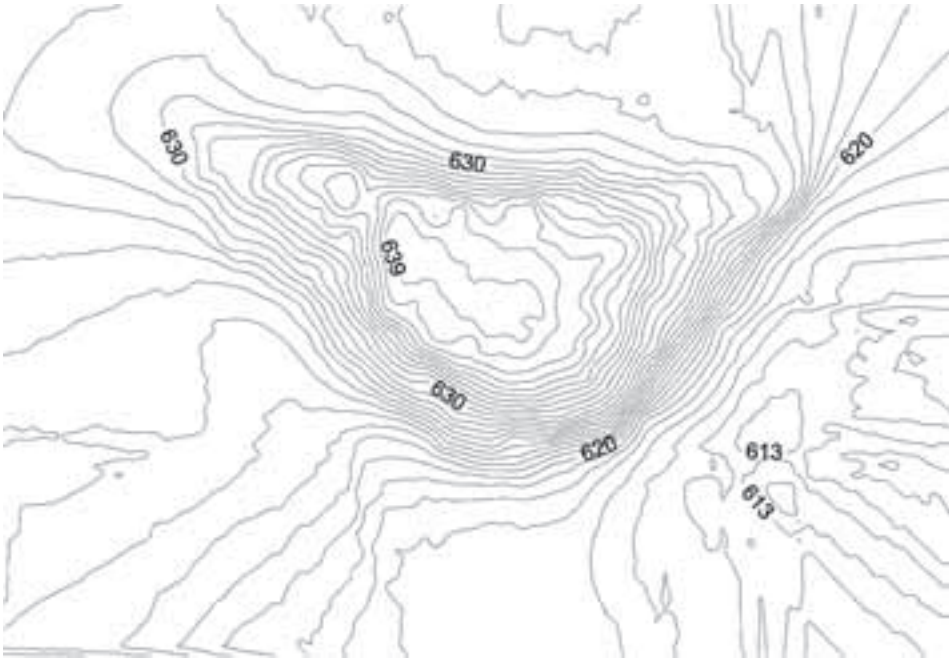


*Fig. 16. Contour map of Hamamtepe.*

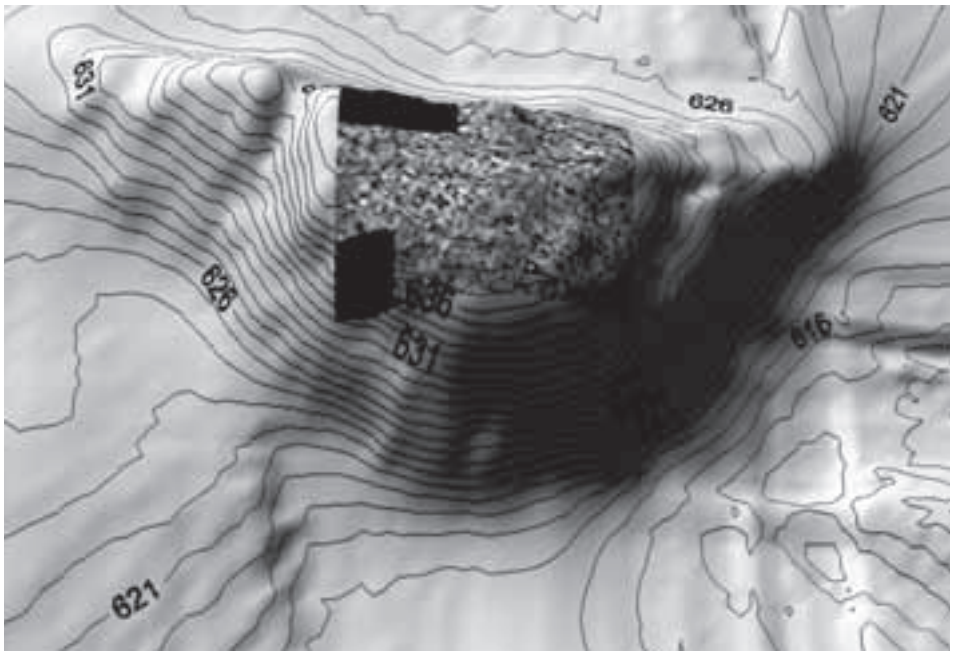


*Fig. 17. Geophysical data overlapped with the Digital Terrain Model.*

- Creating a Digital Terrain Model of Hamamtepe in order to understand the physical features of the hill (Fig. 14).
- Determining the limits of the hill (Fig. 15).
- Examining the relationship between the topography of the hill and the documented structures.
- Creating contour and slope maps (Fig. 16).
- Examining the geophysical data within a topographical perspective (Fig. 17)
- Meshing the satellite imagery with the elevation model, a study which is still in progress.

Also in 2006, we conducted a geophysical survey in a field just to the north of Hamamtepe in order to understand the possible extension of the buildings to the surrounding level areas. This gradiometer survey proved that there were indeed buildings near by the hill although the dates of these are difficult to determine. One of these was a large 30 by 35 meters multi-roomed building with possible hearths situated along the walls of the rooms (Fig. 18).

The area between Yeşilırmak and the old Tokat-Niksar road within the restricted DSİ land was also surveyed and a few architectural fragments and pottery were observed. Also within the restricted DSİ land, on the southern bank of Yeşilirmak, the area which today accommodates a swimming pool was investigated. None of the structures that are known to have been excavated

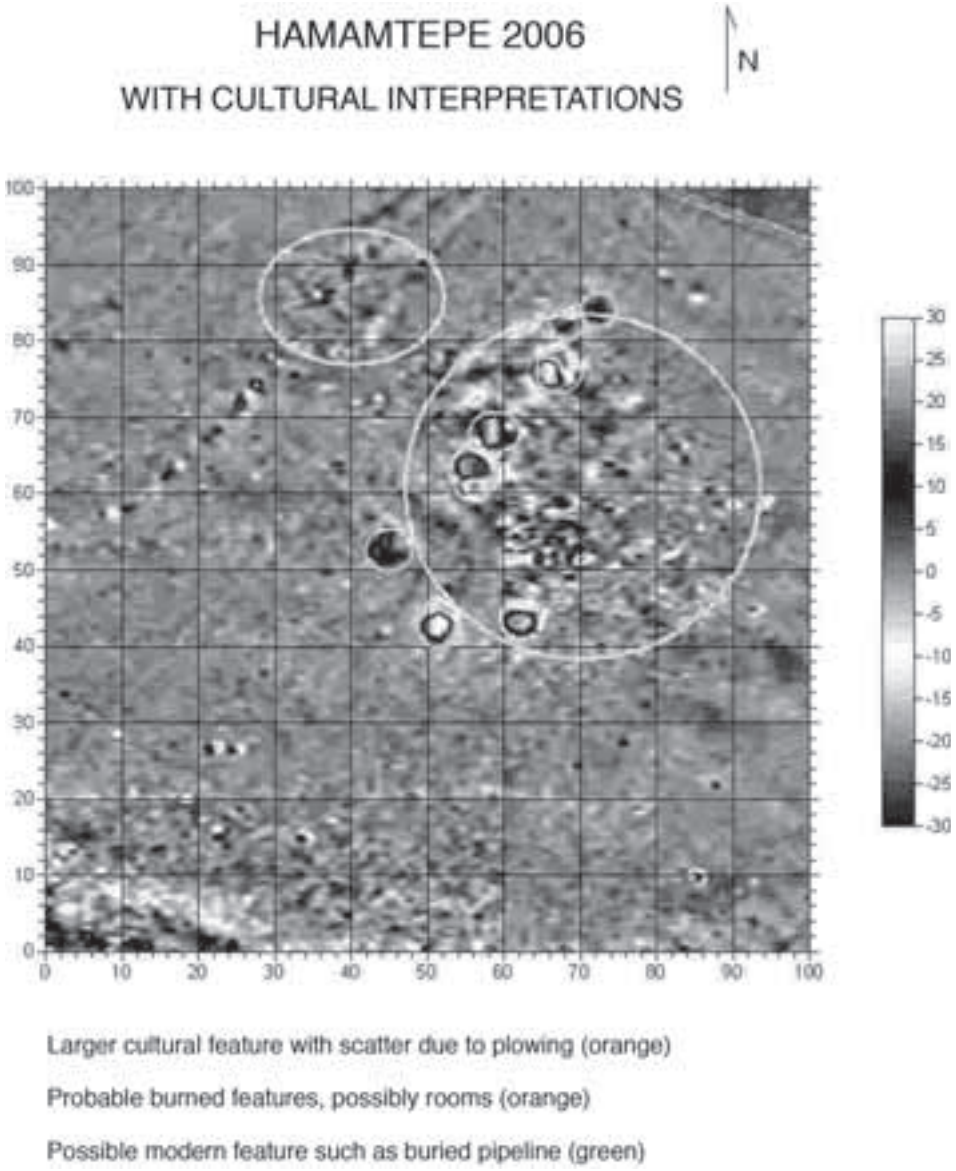


*Fig. 18. Results of the geophysical study conducted in the field next to Hamamtepe (Produced by Dr. D. Monsees).*

during the construction of the pool could be found today (Fig. 19).[7] It is very likely that the structures then excavated were either destroyed or reburied. The DSİ staff is not very clear about the fate of these buildings. The geophysical inspection in the area did not reveal any architectural remains.

The only valuable find within the restricted territory of DSİ is the ruins of the Roman bridge mentioned by earlier visitors to the site.[8] These ruins are built into one of the main walls of the water regulator and are very difficult

*Fig. 19. An old photograph of ruins from the vicinity of Hamamtepe or Hamamtepe itself during the construction of the water regulator (from the archive of M. Cinlioğlu).*

to identify unless the water is below a certain level. Only when the water is held within the Almus dam it is possible to see two blocks with inscriptions on them (Fig. 20). It is pleasing to be able to relocate these previously published inscriptions (*IGR* III, 106). Here, the name of the city appears as "Hierokaesa-

*Fig. 20. Inscription blocks built into the foot of the Roman bridge that is now incorporated into the water regulator.*

*Fig. 21. The architrave in Tokat Museum.*

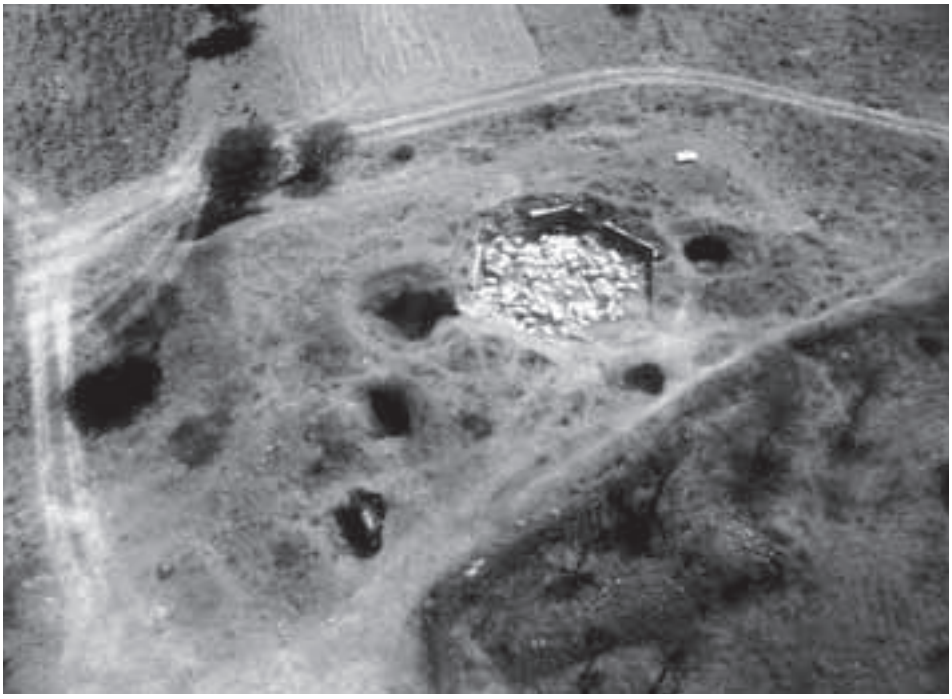

*Fig. 22. The hexagonal pool near Bula village.*

reion Komaneon" and the inscription has been dated to the 160's AD. Three pieces of an architrave were also found in the vicinity; these are now in the Tokat Museum (Fig. 21) and contain a dedicatory inscription to Trajan dated to 116-117 AD.[9]

The most surprising discovery in the vicinity dating to the Roman period was certainly that of a hexagonal pool made of nicely cut blocks (Fig. 22). Each side of the pool is 5 m long and the pool has a diameter of 10.55 m. Several of the blocks were carved to facilitate the flow of water into the pool. The illegal excavation trenches around the pool revealed large terracotta pipes, which must have brought water into the pool from the north in at least two places.

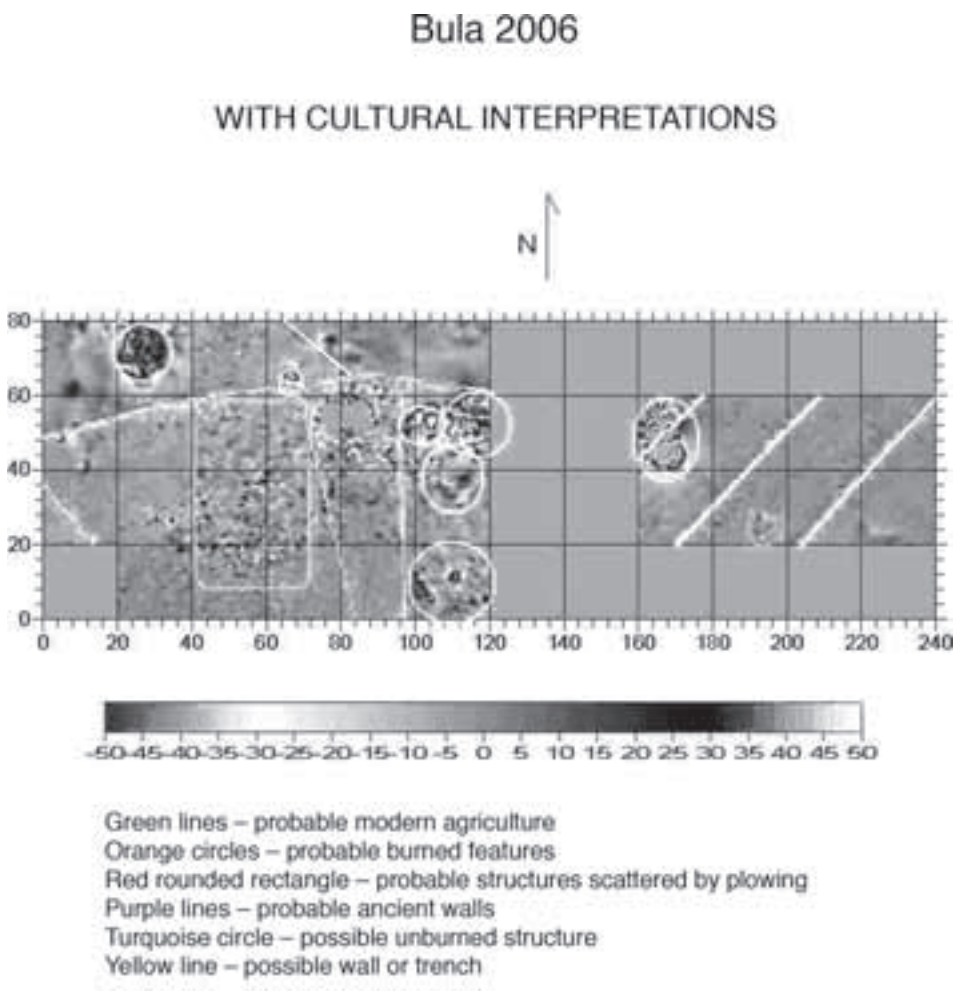


*Fig. 23. Results of the geophysical study conducted around the Byzantine wall (Produced by Dr. D. Monsees).*

There are also three outlets on the floor of the pool. This structure must date to the Roman period, and the pool was used as a water reservoir until 1955. This pool might have been part of a larger structure but our investigations in 2004 did not reveal evidence to support this proposition. So in 2005, we conducted geophysical prospection to the south of the pool. The gradiometer and resistivity survey revealed that there is a wall enclosing the pool on the west and south sides and other structures could be vaguely identified in the vicinity. Still the geophysics was not sufficient enough to suggest a larger complex. Maybe further investigation in the future could help us in understanding the structure better.

While the site of Komana remained a mystery for us, Roman *necropoleis* were among the most visible archaeological remains of the site. On both the

*Fig. 24. Terracotta flowers from around the Byzantine wall.*

southern and northern hills above every village in the 2 km long area it was possible to detect burial sites. As well in every village there were sarcophagus basins, a few lids and a number of grave *stelai*.

The immediate vicinity of Hamamtepe revealed a rich set of Byzantine remains. On the foothills to the north of Kılıçlı village a badly destroyed basilica with three apses, a small stone quarry with marks of tools on the rocks, and a Byzantine structure in the fields dug by the villagers were discovered.

On an exploratory trip to the hills behind the villages of Kılıçlı and Bula, our team discovered yet another possible Byzantine church at an altitude of c. 1000 m totally isolated in a forested area. Later, after the discovery, our geologist colleague Professor Vedat Toprak, while investigating the hills, noticed that the area with the church was in fact on top of a landslide deposit which created a level area suitable for habitation.[10] The presence of a site there has not been confirmed, but it would be worthwhile to re-visit this place to do further investigations.

Below those hills we discovered in 2004 a Byzantine wall in a wheat field, which had been exposed as a result of illegal excavations. When we revisited the site in 2006 we sadly observed that the trenches were enlarged and the field was left uncultivated in order to hide the illegal digging activities. The structure now revealed to a greater extent seemed to be a much larger building than we first assumed and it was quickly disappearing. We decided to carry out geophysical prospection at the site in order to reveal the size of the building and to document this important site before it was completely destroyed. The gradiometer survey proved that there was extensive habitation in the area. Enclosures could be identified although heavily disturbed by farming and other activities (Fig. 23). During the survey we also collected more material from around the building. Especially terracotta objects with

*Fig. 25. Decorated tiles from around the Byzantine wall.*

tips in the shape of a flower and relief tiles suggested that the building was elaborately decorated (Figs. 24-25). A preliminary examination indicated that these terracotta flowers were part of the architectural decoration of mostly middle Byzantine period buildings.[11] Almost all examples still *in situ* derive from churches in the Balkans. These and the examples from Tekfur Palace in İstanbul are dated to the middle Byzantine period.[12] An exception is the Bibi-hatun Türbesi in Tokat, which is regarded as an early Islamic building. The preliminary study has shown that this kind of decoration was used on public buildings mostly in religious contexts or on imperial architecture. These observations seem to have improved our knowledge of Byzantine Komana. For my purposes, however, this find has another significance. In an area where there are no archaeological remains visible on the surface, the possibility of the presence of large structures buried under deep erosion and alluvial deposits – something which was initially contemplated – has been encouraging.

A view from the hills just to the north down towards the field with the Byzantine structure and the pool revealed that there are artificial terraces that

may have acted as settlement levels. Although it would be too immature to suggest this with the amount of investigation that has been carried out, it could be a guide for us in our quest to understand the settlement system at Komana.

Also during an exploratory visit to the town of Akbelen (or Bizeri as it was called until recently) 16 km to the northeast of Komana, further evidence for Byzantine period sites in the territory of Komana was found. Anderson who visited Bizeri in 1903 described an Armenian monastery, which contained a tomb, allegedly of St. John Chrysostom, the founder of the monastery.[13] There are indeed architectural remains dating to the Byzantine period: a tile floor still in use and a large structure (of unknown date) with walls built of irregular stones that is claimed to be the monastery.

## *Conclusion*

The first two seasons of survey at and around Komana indicated that the lands around Yeşilırmak especially towards the hills to the north and south were inhabited in different periods. So far we have been able to identify habitation in the late Chalcolithic, early Bronze Age, Iron Age, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods. The exact location of Komana could not be identified and the exact function of the hill called Hamamtepe could not be understood. However, the Roman inscription built into the water regulator suggests the presence of a bridge from the hill to the other bank of Yeşilırmak, and photographs from the mid-20th century indicated that there were once monumental buildings in the area. The travellers' notes are also encouraging, especially those of Hogarth and Munro, who describe Hamamtepe as the temple mound with potential for excavation.[14] Either the heavy alluvial deposits must have buried the remains or there must have been limited habitation in the immediate vicinity of Yeşilırmak.

The hills on the southern bank of the river and the hills to the north of Kılıçlı and Bula villages were covered with graves mostly of the Roman period and the tumuli on the peaks of many of the high hills further support the supposition that these areas, which are less suitable for habitation, were used as *necropoleis*. The northern side of Hamamtepe, to the north of the Tokat-Niksar road however, must have witnessed a certain amount of habitation especially during the late Roman and Byzantine times. Our investigations suggest that water was very important for the city and so in the future an examination of the water systems and their relation to agricultural activities might be useful. Also further study in the alluvial plain, an extensive survey in the larger territory of Komana and more geophysics will be necessary to understand the structure of this settlement better. Once the excavations begin and the survey is enlarged to the site's territory, we hope to shed light on the political, administrative, economical and religious organization at Komana and in Pontos, and maybe offer better explanations on the Kingdom of Mithridates

about which our knowledge almost only derives from ancient sources. Until then, the question regarding whether Komana was a city or a sanctuary will have to remain unanswered.

## Notes

1 According to Virgilio (1981, 49), the temple-state was a very complex religious, political and economic structure at the center of which the temple stood; and this temple had strong traditions and a strict connection to the village, city or state.
2 Sökmen 2005, 24-28.
3 The funding for the 2006 fieldwork was provided by TÜBİTAK and METU Scientific Research Projects Fund.
4 Hamilton 1842, 350; Cumont & Cumont 1906, 253.
5 I would like to thank Dr. Jeroen Poblome for his preliminary examination of the pottery and his provision of a rough date.
6 Anderson 1903, 350; Cumont & Cumont 1906, 251; Wilson 1960, 231.
7 There are black and white photographs showing large in-situ building blocks that were excavated during the construction. Retired DSİ personnel confirmed that archaeological material was revealed during the construction.
8 Anderson 1903, n. 313; Cumont & Cumont 1906, 251; Wilson 1960, 231.
9 *SEG* 42, 339; Wilson 1960, 233; Remy et al. 1990, 521.
10 I would like to thank Prof. Toprak for visiting the site and sharing his expertise.
11 Eyice 1959, 254.
12 Eyice 1961, 26-27; Filow 1919, 20-22.
13 Anderson 1903, 63.
14 Hogarth & Munro 1893, 735.

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