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Tringham, Ruth

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Dido and the Basket: fragments towards a non-linear history

Ruth Tringham

Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley,
Center for Digital Archaeology (CoDA)

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Dido and the Basket: fragments towards a non-linear history¹

Ruth Tringham



Figure 1: The phytolith shadow of the basket associated with the mature female buried beneath the north-central platform of Building 3 at Çatalhöyük (Image credit: Ruth Tringham and Çatalhöyük Research Project, August 2, 2000)

(I)

The object I have chosen for this exercise expresses the challenges that can be faced in creating the biographies of objects. It is prehistoric with no association with any known person from written records; it is more than fragmentary, being a ghost of its former self, and is, moreover, not aesthetically pleasing; its biography is ambiguous and its story can only be told with a large dose of creative imagination. I have used it as the starting point for a network of fragmentary stories and biographies called *Dead Women do Tell Tales*.²(Tringham forthcoming). I have been interested in biographies of objects – first with the concept of use-life (Tringham 1978) and then incorporating the more humanistic life-history concept (Tringham 1994) – most of my professional life. I feel

¹ Object Stories, by Steve Brown, Ursula Frederick, and Anne Clarke, 161–168. © 2014 Left Coast Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

² http://www.ruthtringham.com/Ruth_Tringham/Dead_Women_Do_Tell_Tales.html

comfortable with the use of my creative imagination to build on my modern archaeologist's empirical observations to create events and multi-sensory experiences in the lives of objects and people. The ambiguity of these interpretations guarantees that they will fall far short of "the truth" but I am encouraged by Neil MacGregor's (2011:xxviii) admiring comment on Albrecht Dürer's depiction of a rhinoceros that he had never actually seen: "Dürer's Rhinoceros stands as a monument to our endless curiosity about the world beyond our grasp, and to humanity's need to explore and try to understand it." As I create the biography of a formless basket buried with a nameless woman 9000 years ago, I am bearing in mind how the imagined actual biography of the basket may have differed from or conformed to its biographical expectations by its maker, its handler, its excavator (Kopytoff 1986). I am aware of the (micro)histories that accumulate during its life both inherent to itself and as it makes a contribution to events and lives that it "touches" (Gosden and Marshall 1999). Finally, as I create a multiscale biography of a single object, I recognize that my personal leaning is towards an agent-centered microhistorical approach (Hoskins 2006) and away from a more evolutionary, essentializing standpoint that we are often seduced into by the nature of prehistoric objects.

(2)

During the summers of 1997-2005, I directed a team from the University of California at Berkeley (BACH team) in an archaeological project of excavation and analysis at the site of Çatalhöyük in Central Turkey, a 9000-year old Early Ceramic Neolithic settlement mound, as part of the overall Çatalhöyük Research Project. The printed monograph report of the BACH project, entitled *Last House on the Hill* (Tringham and Stevanovic 2012) is mirrored by an online digital database also entitled the *Last House on the Hill (LHotH)*ⁱ (Ashley, et al. 2012).

On August 1, 2000 we were 10 days into the excavation season, and for a couple of days Lori Hager, one of our human remains specialists, and I had been defining a burial pit (Feature 634) cutting into the white plastered floors of the north-central platform (Feature 162) of Building 3, the main focus of our project. This was harder than it might have been, because the dark brown fill of the pit was covered with a plaster lid, forming a faux floor almost indistinguishable from the surrounding white plaster floor. On this day, Lori was excavating under the lid in the upper levels of fill when she came across the white phytolith deposits (designated Feature 640) spread over an area measuring 0.35m north-south by 0.16m east-west. In the next couple of days, she defined within these deposits a 4.5cm diameter circle of spiral coils that was probably the base of a basket, and a large linear fragment with 7-8 strips of fiber that would have belonged to the basket side. These two and other smaller fragments are likely parts of the same small damaged basket. (Figure 1)

By happy synchronicity, during these events, Willeke Wendrich, an Egyptologist and specialist in the archaeology of baskets, happened to be visiting Çatalhöyük, and was able to confirm the shape and size of the original basket. Seventeen days later and 36cm deeper on 19 August, 2000, Lori began to excavate the skull of the skeleton that was the interment in this burial pit. The rest of the skeleton was not excavated until the following season (2001) when it became clear that this was the burial of a mature woman in her 40s. The basket fragments (Feature 640) lay directly above her hips. Tucked down by her right side were more basket phytoliths (Feature 760), closely associated with blue pigment fragments (possibly malachite).

The two phytolith concentrations are likely to be part of the same basket, and both are almost definitely part of the burial event of the woman buried in the pit Feature 634. Having said that, we have to point out that such an association is quite unusual at Çatalhöyük. Baskets are predominantly found in burials, it is true, but not those of adults. Baskets usually occur as containers of infants, babies and neonates (Hager and Boz 2012; Wendrich 2005). Thus from this one object and its context a wide net of stories and scenarios can be harvested, many of them written as creative imagination, to understand why a small basket is in the grave of a mature woman. (Figure 2).

The BACH project focused on the life-history of a single house (Building 3). Building 3 itself has been dated to the middle of the life-history of the Neolithic tell settlement of the East Mound of Çatalhöyük (Stevanovic 2012). This mound spans 1400 years of history starting ca. 9400 years ago, during which ceramics increased from virtually absent to commonplace gradually replacing baskets as containers for storage and cooking (Hodder 2006). Throughout its history, however, the configuration of the houses remained remarkably consistent, with plastered platforms around the perimeter of the main room providing the predominant location of burials.

We identified ten main phases in the ca. 80-year life history of Building 3, defined by changes in the location of ovens, hearths and barriers to movement. The earliest burial occurs in the second half of this history (phase B3.3), and is of a baby in a basket in the central floor of the building, i.e. not under a platform; followed by the burial of two children in the same place (Hager and Boz 2012).

The next series of burials (in phase B3.4a) are under the highest and whitest north-central platform (Feature 162) under which four individuals were buried at different times, possibly separated by several years. The earliest were two immature adults (Features 644 and 647), then the mature woman whose basket is the focus of this article (Feature 634). In the subsequent phase B3.4b, the final occupation phase of Building 3, a fourth person – a small child – was buried here in a basket (Feature 617) – the final burial of Building 3. After each burial, the pit was

filled in with dark soft midden earth from below the house and then carefully plastered over with white clay. By contrast to the 10 burials in Building 3, 55 individuals were buried in the neighboring Building I.

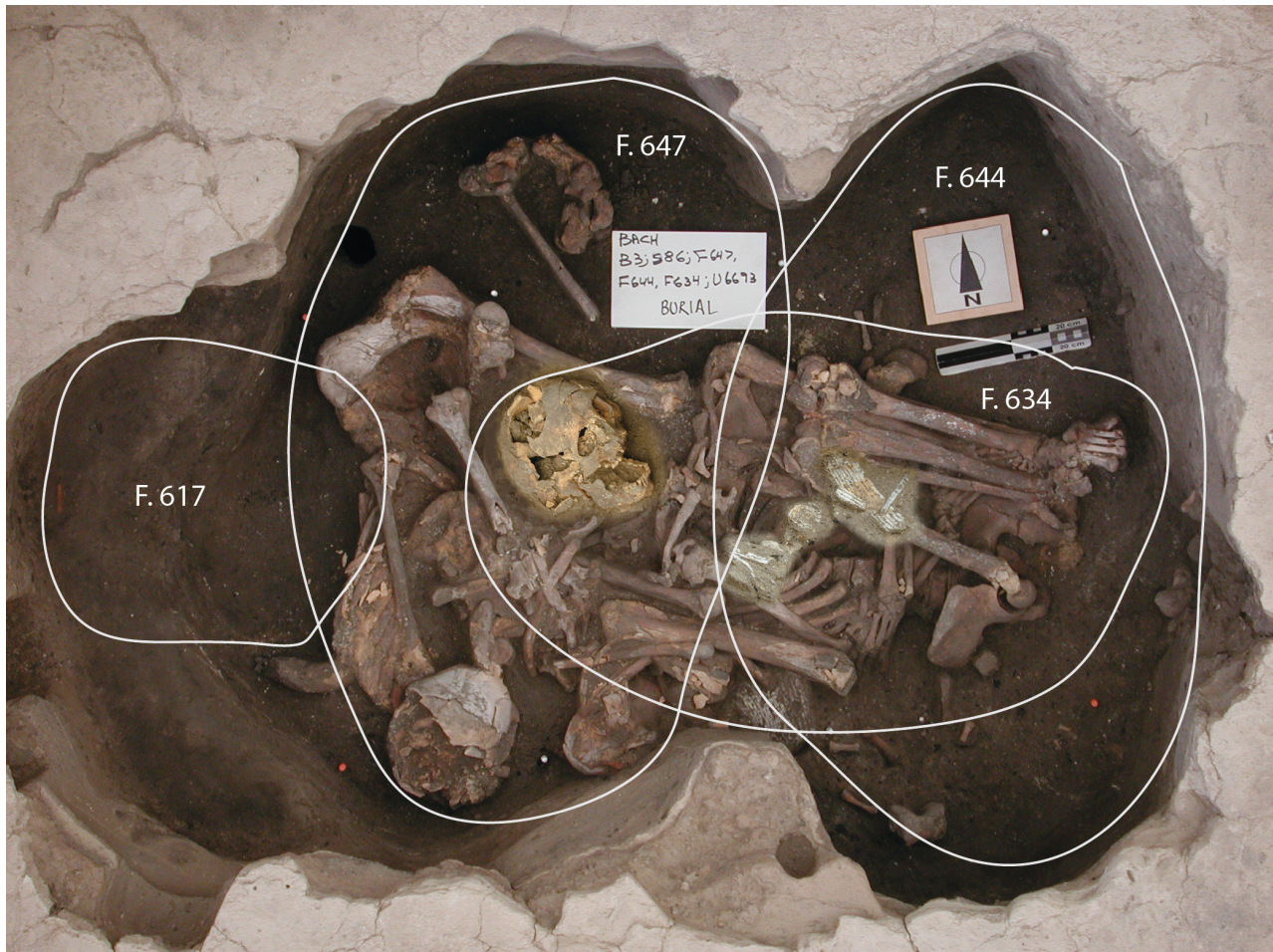


Figure 2: Composite photo of the group of intersecting burials dug below the north-central platform of Building 3 at Çatalhöyük with the skull of “Dido” (Feature 634) and her associated basket remains inserted at their appropriate position. (Image credit: Ruth Tringham, 2014; after originals by Michael Ashley and Çatalhöyük Research Project [2000–2001])

(3)

Jump and pivot through these fragments from Çatalhöyük in Central Anatolia, Turkey; some (NOW) are taken directly from observations embedded in the *Last House on the Hill*; others (THEN) are interpretations wrapped in the enticing clothing of imagined narratives of Neolithic events.

Ghosts

I am a ghost. I am a shadow of my former self. I have almost no substance. Amazingly, I am still with Dido. She is also a ghost, but more corporeal than I, being made of bones. I have been resurrected as ghostly fragments, some by her ankles, some above her knees. How did that happen? Why am I here? Did she climb inside me? Or was I placed next to her in this cave? I can't remember yet. Maybe later. But I do know how I was born in the grassy fields.

Making the Basket

It was my grandmother's sister who showed me how to make my basket. I will be her voice so that you can experience it as I did as a little girl: now my dear, listen and look and then you will feel, and I shall take you through the change of these few strands of grass into your own container, to carry your secrets with you all your life wherever you might be. Watch, listen, feel, and move your hands thus. Later on you'll make other containers, maybe bigger, for your kitchen, and to hide your food from eyes and mouths. But now take the first strands like this, and start at the center of the world, at the core of your body.

My Life as a Basket

I am going to speak as this basket or rather this basket will speak through me. This is not unusual here. Every thing here and every place has a life and a voice. So, *"I am made as an entry basket; the first and smallest basket a girl will make while she is still very young. She is guided along every step of making me. This is an important step in a girl's life. I am never used for cooking or storage. I live with my creator, holding her most precious and secret things. Dido is old now, she has had a long and eventful life and has put many secret and wonderful things in me"*. I cannot tell you what they are because the basket's voice is silent on those details, but they are not heavy and they do not rattle around. I know this because when Dido died, I was the one who held her entry basket and placed it just under the lid that would close her in. That way, she knows where to find her special things when she wakes, which is often, I can tell you that.

Basketry at Çatalhöyük

"Basketry at Çatalhöyük is preserved as phytolith remains, impressions in the soil and on other objects..... Extant phytolith basketry remains occur mostly in relation to burials. During excavation these basketry ... remains are usually discovered when the adhering upper soil layer is peeled back, thus resulting in a 'split' basket with a fragmentary top layer and an often complete bottom layer..(that).. appears as a white, spirally shaped deposit of phytoliths. Coiled basketry thus appearsas white coloured spirals with soil lines visible in between. ...A curved patch of phytolith remains indicates that the basket was damaged before deposition. When the 'winders', the sewing strip that connects the bundles, has worn off, the bundle material is not held together and forms an ongoing patch of plant fibres."(Wendrich, 2005:333)

Grasses

"Baskets appear to be constructed of several different plant types. One of the materials is an as yet unidentified dry-land grass in the Panicoid sub-family...(that) generally grow in dry and warm environments....away from the marshy areas." (Rosen 2005,209). These same grassy fields would have provided the context for cultivating domesticated grasses. A happy opportunity for multi-taskscapes, to use a term that Ingold did not....

Discovering Dido

As I gazed at Lori Hager excavating the layer of bones under the basket, I became aware of a face gazing at me from the ground, the skull of the burial pit Feature 634. Camcorder in hand I recorded the emergence of a Munsch-like "Scream" from the dark soil of the pit fill. Later, in an emotional trance, I extracted the background sound from the video and replaced it with a recording of Janet Murray singing Dido's lament from Purcell's opera Dido and Aeneas with its poignant words "Remember me but forget my fate". Why "Dido", a mature

woman, when a skull can give you no such information? I don't know, but it was proved a female skeleton when we excavated the post-cranial bones the following season. And Dido she remained.

The power of accompanying music!

Dido: Containers

We place our dear ones in a cave under the ancestral platform of the house. It's like a cave below the cave below the surface. You might understand what I am saying better if I say it is a container, because in a cave you can move around, but our dear ones must not move too much. The idea is to make sure they don't get lost and don't get out. Older people, we tie them up to keep them in their containers. Once they are in their containers they are safe, as in mother's womb. We the living can't enter their container. We can reach in and feel the cool earth below our house with our arms and see the life of our house. I will have them put my little basket into my cave when it's my time to go below the cave below the sky. My basket contains many secrets that I would share with a daughter, but I have none, so I shall take it with me, in case I want to come back. I know they will try to stop me, but if I have my basket of secrets with me, I will be able to do that.

Dido and the Basket

I was very young when they chose me to be a wife of a man in the village where we are now. It was very exciting and frightening at the same time. I came here when I was 12 carrying my entry basket and some gifts for my new family. The house I lived in was not new but they had made it stronger and more elaborate for us newly betrothed.

I have had a long life that I mark by the births and deaths of my loved ones, and a few events in between. My first child was dead before it emerged from me. When I was 15 I gave birth to a son who lived, and a second son a year later, maybe longer. And then joy, a year or so later I gave birth to a daughter. For this event we freshened our house for her growing. But alas she died after a few months of joyous life. And then a double tragedy my two young sons died of an affliction. I was by now perhaps 20 or 21 and my basket was full with their tragedies. And then – joy of joy – I gave birth to another daughter. For this event we let our house be reborn and painted it red. A year later I gave birth to another son. When I was 27 I gave birth to my fourth son; he is still alive and will marry soon. I was happy again. At my daughter's 8-year anniversary we celebrated mightily under the moon, but I almost died. I slipped and fell from the roof and injured myself badly. From that day I have slowed down. Even slower when my third son who was ready to marry was gored and killed by an aurochs. We buried him under the white platform. And my beloved daughter too, who lived with us, who died of the coughing affliction two years ago. My basket has no more room in it.

Things as Actors

Outrageous anthropomorphizing! Baskets don't have voices! - But they do have life-histories. A basket experienced many events, many places, many hands during its life. Could one voice tell the story of one basket? I don't think so. If Dido held the basket from its beginning to her end, she could tell most of its story, but only the parts that she remembered. Others would have to tell of its burial in her grave. And yet others of its resurrection nine thousand years later.

The "boneyard"

From 1999 to 2001 we excavated the burials of 4 individuals under the north-central platform. Out of this mass of intersecting burial pits that we called "the boneyard", human remains specialists Lori Hager and Basak Boz were able to distinguish the sequence of four separate burial events during the later part of the life-history of Building 3 – later than the three small children buried south of the platform. First was an immature male (age 14-16), then an immature female (age 18-22), then a mature woman "Dido" (age 40-45), and finally a child (age 3-4). We wondered if the younger individuals were the offspring of the mature woman, Dido, and the mature male, who was buried after Dido's death under the neighboring northeast platform. To try to work out this possibility brings us face to face with the life of Dido and her basket in an uncanny way. At the same time it's a complex algebraic problem to work out the sequence of births and deaths of the Building 3 residents. There is still the question, whose child is the three-year old buried under this platform after Dido's death?

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ⁱ <http://www.codifi.info/projects/last-house-on-the-hill/> (accessed 7/12/2012)