

Çatalhöyük comes Home

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The archaeological site of Neolithic Çatalhöyük, on the Anatolian plain in Central Turkey, has been attracting attention since its initial excavation in the 1960s, directed by James Mellaart. Excavation was restarted in 1993, with a new Research Project, directed by Ian Hodder. The archaeology at Çatalhöyük provides a rich record of the minutiae of the daily life of this early farming community which also produced exceptional architecture and art for the period, making it one of the most important archaeological sites in the world. This article presents an overview of the site and the work undertaken to date, weaving in the story of the two project directors and their connection with the UCL Institute of Archaeology.

In 2007 the Çatalhöyük Research Project, directed by Ian Hodder, relocated its UK office to the UCL Institute of Archaeology from the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge. For the project this was akin to a homecoming as the history of the Çatalhöyük excavations and the Institute goes back to the 1960s when James Mellaart, the original excavator of the site, was a lecturer here (**Fig. 1**). In fact, Mellaart had previously been an undergraduate at University College London, in 1947, pursuing his passion for Egyptology and the Archaeology of the Near East.¹

The Mellaart excavations

It was in 1952 that James Mellaart first noted the site of Çatalhöyük from a distance, as he was conducting a survey of the Anatolian Plateau, during his time as a visiting scholar at the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, but it was not until 1958 that he and colleagues reached the site and recognised it as being of immense importance. Millennia of erosion had scoured clean the



Fig. 1: The Directors of Çatalhöyük, James Mellaart (1961-65) and Ian Hodder (since 1993), both of whom started their archaeological careers at the Institute of Archaeology (photo: Jason Quinlan).

outlines of mudbrick houses, with plastered internal walls, whilst scattered artefacts indicated that the site was wholly Neolithic in date. At the time however, Mellaart was conducting excavations at the Chalcolithic site of Hacilar – and so his excitement of having identified Neolithic Çatalhöyük was not to be fulfilled until 1961, when he began excavations.

As a result of his excavations (1961–65), the site soon became widely recognised as

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Fig. 2: A group of local visitors being given a tour of a neighbourhood of densely clustered, mudbrick houses on the northern sector of the site, on Community Open Day (photo Jason Quinlan).

being of unique international significance. At that time, little was known about the Neolithic outside of the Fertile Crescent, where food-producing societies first emerged – herding livestock, planting crops and building permanent houses. Indeed, it was generally accepted that there was no evidence of the Neolithic in Anatolia due to the cold climate conditions.²

Mudbrick houses and everyday life

Mellaart's excavations were therefore to shift the boundaries of the Neolithic profile westwards, including the identification of crop cultivation and of domesticated sheep, goat and cattle, but the site rapidly became famous for its large size and dense occupation of closely packed, mudbrick houses, interspersed with open areas where refuse accumulated through daily activities (**Fig. 2**). These houses were razed and rebuilt in more than thirteen construction phases, eventually creating the 20m high mound of today, covering an area of over 32 acres and represent-

ing over 1,400 years of continuous Neolithic occupation, dating to 7400–6000 cal BC.

Inside the houses was an array of evidence for everyday life 9,000 years ago. Houses were entered by ladders from roof openings; inside was evidence of daily activities and household production, within a highly organised configuration of 'furniture'. Shallow platforms, benches, defined cooking areas and clay storage bins were arranged into zones of activity that dictated the use of space in a house-plan that was repeated both site wide and through all temporal sequences excavated to date (**Fig. 3**).

Different styles of cooking and food preparation were indicated by the presence of both ovens and hearths, as well as baked clay balls found in large quantities that were used as 'pot-boilers' in cooking. Pottery vessels appear not to have been used for cooking until midway through the sequence, when a gradual change in technology created a stronger fabric that led to an increase in their use. Other vessels were made of wood and basketry. There

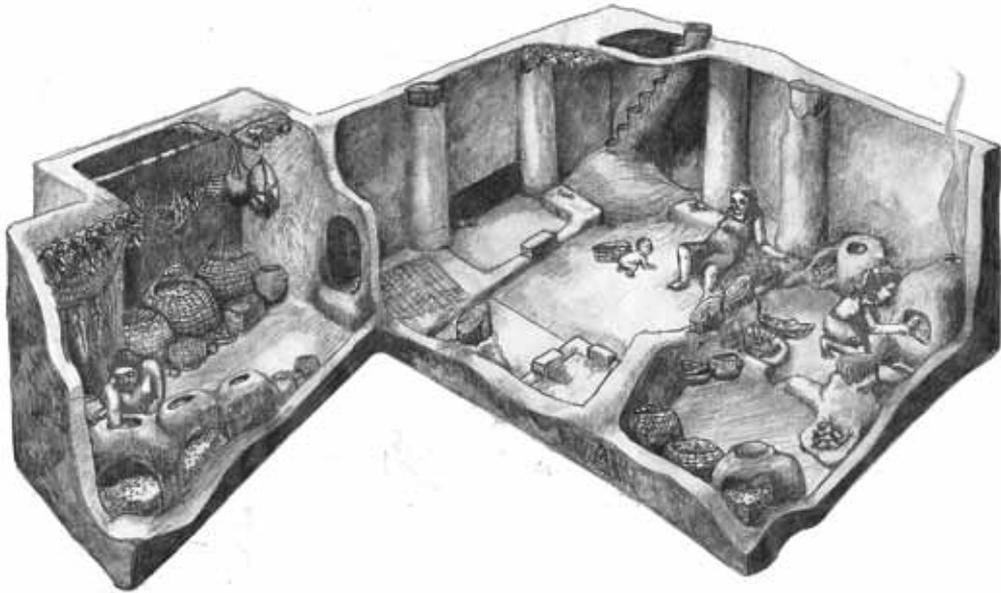


Fig. 3: A reconstruction of everyday life at Çatalhöyük, 9,000 years ago; shallow platforms, benches, defined cooking areas and clay storage bins were arranged into activity zones (reconstruction: Mesa Schumacher).



Fig. 4: Chemical analysis has shown that the people of Çatalhöyük were gaining access to obsidian from the volcanoes of Cappadocia, 190km away as the crow flies, but perhaps more likely a 500km round-trip via water sources (photo: Jason Quinlan).

were different types of stone and worked bone tools, obsidian and flint, all indicative of numerous and diverse activities (**Fig. 4**). Clay and stone figurines, depicting animals, genderless and human beings include the iconic 'mother goddess' figurines – robust representations of fecundity – which have attracted goddess groups from around the world to

visit the site as a place of homage. Items of personal adornment are found, such as beautifully worked, highly crafted bone and stone beads, rings and pendants (**Fig. 5**).

Under-floor burials

Perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of the site is that the dead were buried below the floors of the houses. Whilst this could reflect a prosaic custom, it seems likely to reflect continuity in kin lineage, which can also be identified in other practices.

Some houses had over 60 burials and others as few as two or three, or even none at all, suggesting that some may have been designated as 'kinship' houses, where most of a kin-group was buried. Most of the human burials were primary interments bound by woven reeds or matting into tightly crouched positions (**Fig. 6**). Babies were often buried in baskets made of reeds. The majority had been disturbed as a result of the repeated use of the same burial locations, and it did not seem to matter that, on occasion, stray body parts were kicked into the corner of a



Fig. 5: The faunal team, co-led by Louise Martin, works on all aspects of animals, including such examples of craftsmanship as these bone beads, found associated with an adult female burial (photo: Jason Quinlan).



Fig. 6: The human remains study, co-led by Prof. Simon Hillson, includes dental analysis that reflects diet (photo: Jason Quinlan).

room and left there. It was because of this high degree of disturbance that Mellaart interpreted the practice of excarnation, but current work has clearly illustrated that the burial practice was primary interment. In general, grave goods were not the norm, but when found they comprise a bone ring or pendant, stone and bone bead necklaces or anklets. Sometimes coloured pigment of blue, red or green is found held in a shell container, often together with a small bone spatula. A few skeletons have even been found with their skulls removed which can be linked to the skull cult that was widespread in Anatolia and the Levant in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic periods.



Fig. 7: During the summer season the project conducts a workshop for local children who spend a day on site learning about Çatalhöyük and archaeology (photo: Jason Quinlan).

Art

The site is, however, possibly best known for its concentration of art in the form of wall paintings, relief sculpture and elaborate installations embellished with animal parts – the most dominant of which are wild auroch bucrania and horncores, set in the sides of benches and pedestals. Some of the wall paintings are abstract compositions of geometric patterns, in red and black on the white background of the plastered walls, or are designs of composite handprints. Others are narrative including hunting scenes with small human figures in opposition to oversized wild animals (**Fig. 7**). It is the complex narrative nature of the art, combined with the densest concentration of symbolism from this period so far found in the Eastern Mediterranean, that gives Çatalhöyük its special significance.

The Hodder campaigns

It was during the years of Mellaart's teaching career at the Institute of Archaeology that his lectures on Çatalhöyük caught the imagination of an undergraduate student, Ian Hodder, who was one of the first intakes to the new undergraduate degree offered at the Institute of Archaeology, in 1969.² Those first Çatalhöyük lectures clearly impressed Hod-



Fig. 8: Excavations in progress in the South Area, where the temporal sequence is being explored; continuity and repetition is a prevailing feature at Çatalhöyük, but subtle differences and changes occur through time (photo: Jason Quinlan).

der as, some 20 years into his archaeological career, he began planning a new campaign at Çatalhöyük. Whilst the site had been placed on the global archaeological map, it had lain abandoned since 1965 and, by the 1990s, was a barren mound with heavily eroded trenches – the only indication of the excavations that had made the site famous and changed the Neolithic map of the world.

Hodder had progressed through academia to become a lecturer at the University of Cambridge at the time when he initiated the new Research Project in the early 1990s. He recruited scholars and researchers from all over the UK and, as the fame of the Project grew, it attracted an international group of scholars, so that today the project can boast up to 20 different nationalities in its 120-strong team in any one summer campaign. Hodder's vision of the Project was to restart excavation within a theoretical approach using modern archaeological methods. By utilising the latest techniques, the project is able to conduct intensive and

detailed studies to enhance the large-scale results collected by Mellaart. Numerous scientific techniques and analytical tools are utilised within a robust excavation and sampling framework. In addition, Hodder invited diverse groups of multi-disciplinary scholars to enrich and enhance the archaeological interpretations from different perspectives.

The first campaign in 1993 comprised only a small team, but this included the first intake from the Institute of Archaeology which has continued to this day. Many of the research topics have been developed and led by Institute staff and student involvement has produced Masters dissertations, as well as PhD programmes. Some of these contributions have been published in previous editions of *Archaeology International*.³

Overall, the Project's research direction has been to place the paintings and symbolism within a full environmental, economic and social context. Central questions concern the origins of the site and its early development, the social and economic organisation



Fig. 9: A reconstruction of the settlement during the spring floods; the trees that populated the environs were identified from charcoal fragments by Eleni Asouti, as part of her PhD thesis at the Institute of Archaeology (reconstruction: John Swogger).

and variation within the community, the reasons for the adoption and intensification of agriculture, temporal trends in the life of the community and trade and relations with other sites in the region (**Fig. 8**).

Today we know that the site was founded on a palimpsest of different environments and types of vegetation including marshy areas and perhaps small shallow lakes (**Fig. 9**). This richly diverse environment was bordered to the south and east by the mountain ranges of Karadağ, Karacadağ and Hasan Dağ. The story of Çatalhöyük began near a network of pools joined by small channels, in which the water was relatively slow moving; these pools may have provided clean drinking water. Although they may well have dried up considerably in the hot summers, they supported small freshwater shellfish, waterfowl and amphibians (Christopher Doherty in prep.).

The proximity of the river provided excellent aquatic resources (reeds for matting and roofing), and the juniper and oak timbers used in construction could be brought down

from the mountain ranges. Çatalhöyük's location in the middle of a marsh allowed for the exploitation of an abundance of wild plants, as well as of water birds and their eggs. During drier periods, rich alluvial clays, sand and lake marl clay could be collected from the edges of the settlements for use as building material. It seems clear that the people of Çatalhöyük were able to exploit a wide range of resources, domestic and wild, wet and dry, upland and lowland, animal and plant.

Whilst today Çatalhöyük is still one of the best known Neolithic sites in Anatolia and the Near East, roughly contemporary with later Pre-Pottery and the following Pottery Neolithic in the Levant, much has changed in our knowledge of the Neolithic in Anatolia today – and, in some ways, Çatalhöyük is no longer unique. We know that there are many earlier settled sites, both in eastern and central Anatolia and in the Levant, which compare in size and complexity. We also know that the domestication of plants and animals was well underway in these areas thousands

of years before Çatalhöyük. There are local sequences, which lead up to and predate Çatalhöyük, such as nearby Boncuklu Höyük and Pinarbaşı. In south-east Turkey, the earlier sites of Çayönü and Göbekli Tepe already show substantial agglomeration and elaborate symbolism, whilst, in central Anatolia, Aşıklı Höyük has densely packed housing through the millennium before Çatalhöyük. There are many other sites contemporary, or partly contemporary, with Çatalhöyük that are known in central Anatolia and the adjacent Burdur-Lakes region,⁴ yet Çatalhöyük retains a special significance because of the concentration of aspects of all of these sites in the one place.

The numerous research projects which have been conducted at Çatalhöyük since 1993 can be followed through the annual Archive Reports on the project website (www.catalhoyuk.com), as well as in the Project's publications.⁵ These reports and publications draw on data collated on the Project's centralised relational database; linked through a fixed system of metadata that allows cross data queries to enhance our understanding of the site. It enables all users to understand data within its depositional context, without which the subsequent analysis would merely reflect the type of deposit excavated rather than the spatial and temporal patterns. This facilitates detailed discussions and interpretations of the past. The data is also made available on the project website.

In addition to the full-scale modern archaeological excavation and research, Hodder's aim has been to address global heritage needs of conservation and public presentation within a site-management plan.⁶ The ultimate aim is to provide the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism with a well-planned heritage site. Since the start of current excavations the project has conducted a detailed programme of presentation and public engagement, as well as local community projects to enhance local awareness of the site, the Neolithic and archaeology in general. Teams have been involved with the

conservation and restoration of parts of the excavated areas which have been covered with custom-built shelters, so that visitors can see the Neolithic houses within their neighbourhood setting and also within the temporal sequence. The first of a series of planned replica Neolithic houses has been built for visitor entry, and an on-site visitor centre provides small temporary exhibits that allow the project to test visitor responses and tailor displays to changing interests and populations. There visitors are introduced to Çatalhöyük through an introductory film and information panels about the site, with the work and information being brought together from the excavations and find analyses, thus enabling the full heritage potential of the site to be exploited.

The Çatalhöyük Research Project team is currently preparing a set of four volumes covering work from 2000 to 2008.⁷ These volumes will comprise the excavation reports integrated with contextual and other types of data to mimic the process of collaborative interpretation that takes place during the excavation and post-excavation process. The publications will explore how houses, open areas and middens in the settlement were enmeshed in the daily lives of the inhabitants, integrating a wide range of different types of data, at different scales, and examining subsistence practices of the site's inhabitants. This builds up a picture of how the overall landscape was exploited and lived in; including the site's relationship with, and reliance upon, the alluvial clays that surrounded the site – in terms of its extraction and manipulation for a wide range of purposes (from bricks to ovens, and pots to figurines). Other examples of material technologies are considered, all of which engage humans in specific ways. Evidence from the skeletons is used to examine the health, diet, lifestyle and mobility within the settlement and across the landscape.

Today, James Mellaart has long since retired and Ian Hodder is Dunlevie Family Professor in the Department of Anthropology at

Stanford University from where he directs the Project via head office at the Institute of Archaeology. Global collaborations continue into the final phase of Hodder's work at Çatalhöyük, due to end in 2017. In this final phase of excavation and publication collaboration with the Institute of Archaeology continues.

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