

## HABITAT & SETTLEMENT IN PREHISTORIC, HISTORIC & CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

This strategic research initiative supports research focused on assessing long-term change from prehistory to the present day. Anatolia has one of the best-defined long-term records of settlement during the Holocene period, and its study is central to a range of questions in prehistory, including the changing relationships of humans with the environment, the formation of large-scale settlements and shifts in urban-rural relationships. Developments in the Black Sea coastal region sometimes ran parallel to changes in Turkey, but followed a different course at other periods, creating interesting comparisons, parallels and alternatives. Of particular interest are mankind's attempts to live in as well as adapt to and change conditions set by the environment through time and also the effect of human beings on their natural environment and landscape.

doi:10.18866/biaa2021.13

### 25 years of work at Çatalhöyük: a summary

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The final round of publications is in the works. The Çatalhöyük Research Project that I directed from 1993 ended in 2018 and we are now seeing the final volume, number 15 in the project series, through the British Institute at Ankara's publication process. There will be other volumes produced by ancillary projects, dealing particularly with the late Neolithic, Chalcolithic and post-Neolithic material as well as with an ambitious dating programme, but this is a good moment to take stock of the results obtained by the main project that worked on the Neolithic East Mound for 25 years. What have been the main conclusions and achievements?

Çatalhöyük was first excavated by James Mellaart in the 1960s and he was very adept at publicising the site. The amazing art paintings and relief sculptures that he found in the houses quickly achieved global renown. The site had been inhabited from 7100 until 6000 cal. BC and consisted of hundreds of houses densely packed together so that there were

few streets and people moved about on the flat roofs, going into the houses down ladders. The inhabitants of the houses buried their dead beneath platforms on the floors of the houses and they also installed bull heads and horns, reliefs of bears and leopards on benches, platforms and walls in the houses. They frequently painted the walls, especially those near the burial platforms. These paintings are mostly geometric designs but Mellaart found some extraordinary narrative scenes of people hunting, teasing and baiting wild animals.

Some of the main results of the 25-year project concern the role of Çatalhöyük as a heritage site. When we arrived in 1993 it was in a sorry state. There had been much erosion of important archaeological layers in the trenches left by Mellaart and there were very few visitors. Our main task was to build infrastructure so that the site could take its rightful place as a globally important heritage destination. So we constructed a dig house with laboratories and



The dig house at Çatalhöyük (photograph by Jason Quinlan).



Excavations under way beneath the shelter in the South Area (photograph by Jason Quinlan).

accommodation, a visitor centre and shelters over the two main excavation areas. We also reconstructed some Neolithic houses, started outreach and educational programmes and created a web presence (<https://www.catalhoyuk.com/>). As a result of all this work, the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism was able to nominate the site for UNESCO World Heritage status – and this was achieved in 2012. The site continues to be visited and new excavations have started under the direction of Ali Umit Türkcan.

But what of the main research results? Our methods were reflexive and increasingly digital. Up to 160 people worked each year in over 30 specialisms ranging from the study of bile acids to the 3D reconstruction of the living spaces and open areas between them. Work was slow and forensic, and it remains the case that even including Mellaart's faster style of digging we have still excavated only about 5% of the large 13.5ha and 21m high East Mound. We have done as much surface probing as we can, but it remains difficult to assess whether the excavated portions of the site are representative of the whole. This issue is most relevant to the key question about the site: how was it organised? How and why did so many people congregate together and how was social order created? We had initially estimated that 3,500–8,000 people lived there at the time of highest density, but advances in dating allied with the use of Bayesian statistics have shown that many of the buildings we assumed were contemporary were in fact not. One result of our work has been to date

buildings to within 25-year time slices – this is remarkable for a 9,000-year-old site. The fact that at any one time many buildings were not inhabited has allowed us to lower the population estimates to between 1,000 and 3,000 people. So this lessens the problem – there were fewer people to organise than we had thought.

It has often been assumed that even this smaller population size would have required some centralised organisation, but it is clear that the society was egalitarian – or rather that it had mechanisms to dampen social hierarchies when households tried to aggrandise. Individual houses that Mellaart called 'shrines' and that we have called 'history houses' were not able to amass resources in such a way that they dominated the society as a whole. Society was also fairly equal in terms of gender relations. It seems that elders of both genders played a stabilising role. But the most distinctive aspect of the social organisation was a series of very complex overlapping associations – some based on ancestry and kinship and others based on cross-cutting sodalities such as hunting or medicine societies, with their specific rituals. Many of these networks seem strange to us. For example, it seems that people were buried preferentially in certain houses (the 'history houses') and that these same people ate together during life (the latter information has been obtained from isotope studies of the human bones by Jessica Pearson). And yet these co-burying groups were not from the same biological family. Work on genetic proxies





Platform in the northeast corner of Building 77, beneath which were found many burials. This building is categorised as a 'history house' because of its elaboration and large number of burials (photograph by Jason Quinlan).

such as tooth shape and on ancient DNA (the latter by a team based at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, led by Mehmet Somel) has shown that those buried together were often not close biological kin. It is possible that children from one house group were fostered or adopted out into other house groups, and that individuals thus had both biological parents and the parents with whom they grew up. The complex fabric of cross-cutting relations created a tightly knit community that was a safety net in times of hardship, but it also produced a rich, diverse and complex ritual world. Whether or not large specialised ceremonial structures are found in unexcavated parts of the site, it is clear that the house and the house group were important foci of domestic and ritual life. The domestic building itself was animated and enlivened by the ancestors beneath the floors and by the bulls, leopards and bears installed on the walls.

The more we found out about the social structure of Çatalhöyük, the more complex it became. And indeed this has been a pattern throughout our work. For example, early on the palaeo-environmentalists at the site argued that the area around the site had been so severely flooded that agricultural fields would have been located far from the settlement. Further coring of the sediments around the site produced a different and more complex picture of interlaced branching channels with a mosaic of different environments that included drier land for agricultural fields near the settlement (work conducted by Gianna Ayala and John Wainwright). Overall, the subsistence economy was based on a diversity of resources, from cereals to a range of wild plants, and from domestic sheep to an array of wild animals. Cattle were gradually domesticated over the life of the settlement, but they always remained small in number in comparison to the heavy focus on sheep herding. The sheep were kept in pens on site but they were also herded across the Konya plain. However, they were rarely taken up into the

surrounding higher land. The focus on sheep resources is also seen in the evidence from the houses of intensive processing of sheep bones, fats, grease and meat, as seen in pottery residues and use-wear on obsidian tools. Milk was also processed in pots from at least the mid-levels.

Another example of the transformation of hypotheses as the team changed and as more data were collected is provided by our understanding of the burial process. Mellaart, digging with little money and time and in a different era of archaeological methods, excavated very quickly and was unable to tease apart the complex relations between the burials beneath house floors and the multiple layers of flooring. He thus thought he saw a jumble of human bones beneath the floors which he assumed must be the result of secondary deposition after the bodies had been left out for vultures, as apparently depicted in some of the wall art. This excarnation hypothesis was abandoned by the team in the 1990s as it became clear that the jumble of bodies was the result of repeated cutting down from the plaster floors, which were then renewed. It was argued that, in fact, because of the articulation of body parts, that the bodies had been placed in the graves fully fleshed.

A new bioarchaeology team led by Clark Larsen from the 2000s onwards, with Chris Knüsel joining in 2012, challenged this interpretation. Careful consideration of the state of the bodies in the graves and in particular their very tight flexion and the evidence of wrapping has suggested the presence of delayed burial (work in particular conducted by Scott Haddow). In other words, the bodies were indeed treated in some way, such as by drying or smoking, before burial. There has even been some return to Mellaart's vulture hypothesis: new work on the behaviour of vultures has suggested to Marin Pilloud and Clark Larsen that the skeletal evidence from Çatalhöyük could have involved some excarnation.

The notion of delayed burial is further supported by work on the burning of burials. The bodies buried beneath the floors of houses were sometimes baked or scorched by fires that were set above them in abandoned houses. We have often noticed that this burning or baking through the floors of the houses led to the preservation of brain tissue and other organic components (stomach, skin, cloth, wooden bowls, etc). We initially thought this meant closure of the house soon after burial (resulting in the preservation of organic material), but the recognition of delayed burial undermines this suggestion. It turns out that there was no or minimal flesh on the bones at the time of the house burns, suggesting again a prolonged interval between death and the fires. Cassie Skipper and other members of the human remains team obtained this evidence by recording variations in bone colour as an indicator of burning conditions. However, the preservation of organic components (such as wooden bowls) in some buildings does indicate more immediate closure and burning after artefacts had been placed in graves. There was some variability of practice.

Mellaart tended to emphasise the society at Çatalhöyük as relatively stable, and commentators often talk of the site as a whole. One very clear conclusion from the last 25 years of research is that the site was in a continual state of flux. Each period of occupation shows innovation and transformation. We have divided the long period of occupation into Early, Middle, Late and Final. In many ways, the Middle period is what many understand as ‘Classic’ Çatalhöyük, with its focus on bucrania and other installations (such as leopard and bear reliefs) in houses and large numbers of burials beneath floors. However, the Late period is also distinctive as this is the time of the narrative wall paintings involving the teasing and baiting of wild animals. In many ways, the shift from Middle to Late around 6500 cal. BC is the most significant era. The Middle period sees the highest density and extent of occupation on the East Mound. There are also more installations and more burials in houses. Skeletal evidence suggests this is the time of highest fertility but also the time of greatest stress. These stresses seem relieved in the Late period as indicated by population decline and there is human skeletal evidence of greater mobility. Animal isotope data can be interpreted as either indicating greater mobility of herds or increased dryness in the landscape, the latter confirmed by a number of proxies. Houses seem increasingly large and independent with greater storage capacity. This process continues as changes again occur in the Final phase.

Another way of describing this overall change between the earlier and later levels is a shift from a focus on community and ancestors (as described above) towards a greater symbolic emphasis on production and commensalism, as well as greater economic and social fragmentation and dispersal. The impressive sculptures and figurines of women occur mainly in these later phases. The shift from houses as ancestral nodes to houses as centres of production is seen most elegantly in the changing location of paintings in houses, as demonstrated by Gesualdo Busacca. In the Middle phases wall paintings concentrate around burial platforms; in the Late phase they concentrate around areas with hearths and ovens.

So the more we have worked at Çatalhöyük, the more difficult it has been to answer our questions. The more we know the more we realise that there was much spatio-temporal diversity, much nuance and variability. That old adage that ‘the more we know the less we know’ seems apt. Indeed, perhaps the main value of detailed long-term excavation at sites like Çatalhöyük is to show that simple answers are difficult to give to questions about site size, social organisation, population density, economy, social and ritual structures, and so on. The work at Çatalhöyük demonstrates that any answers to such questions need to be equivocal – it all depends on time and place, and thus on being able to analyse large amounts of data. Brief encounters with these complex sites are bound to lead to misleading conclusions. For example, researchers often assume that social hierarchy can be seen in the size of houses.

The large amounts of data available at Çatalhöyük show that house size is not an indicator of status. There has been much debate about the role of ancestors, but at least at Çatalhöyük these were often not biological kin. There are numerous examples that upset our assumptions. The ‘curious case of Çatalhöyük’ (<https://curiouscaseofcatalhoyuk.ku.edu.tr/>) provides a cautionary tale.

#### *Bibliographic note*

The research summarised above is published in the following four volumes:

Hodder, I. (ed.) 2021: *Peopling the Landscape of Çatalhöyük: Reports from the 2009–2017 Seasons*. London, BIAA

Hodder, I. (ed.) 2021: *The Matter of Çatalhöyük: Reports from the 2009–2017 Seasons*. London, BIAA

Hodder, I., Tsoraki, C. (eds) 2021: *Communities at Work: The Making of Çatalhöyük*. London, BIAA

Hodder, I. (ed.) 2022: *Çatalhöyük Excavations: The 2009–2017 Seasons*. London, BIAA



Figurine, probably of a woman, found in the upper layers of occupation by a team led by Arek Marciniak (photograph by Jason Quinlan).