

New painting found at Çatalhöyük

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A new 9,000 year-old painting has been found at Çatalhöyük (Konya) this summer. A Turkish and international team has been excavating again in this early town. In one of the houses (Building 80) in the town the walls still stood 2.5m high. The walls had been plastered in a white clay. In the middle of the east wall in the house there was a red-painted niche in which we found a cache of obsidian points.



General view of white plastered wall in Building 80 at Çatalhöyük (all photos Jason Quinlan)

On a wall panel below this niche we gradually removed layers of white plaster. At Çatalhöyük people replastered their walls every month or so, in order to stop the walls being covered in soot and smoke from the hearth and oven in the house. So we have been taking off these micro-layers of plaster one-by-one. In the panel below the niche we discovered that the wall had been painted and that the red paint was still very fresh.



Uncovering the painting



Detail of design in painting showing 'brick' motif

The design is very interesting – but also very difficult to interpret! Is it just a geometric design or is it a picture of something? As a geometric design it has regular vertical divisions. But it is tempting to see the design as representing bricks. The whole of Çatalhöyük is made of unfired mud-bricks and the painting could be showing these; is it possible to interpret the painting as brick walls or brick pathways across the roofs of the town? Paintings at Çatalhöyük are often difficult to interpret but this one is particularly intriguing.

Çatalhöyük is an important Neolithic site near Çumra, Konya. The East Mound was inhabited between 7400 BC and 6000 BC by up to 8,000 people who lived in a large Neolithic 'town'. There were no streets and people moved around on the roof tops and entered their houses through holes in the roofs. Inside their houses people made wonderful art – paintings, reliefs and sculptures – which have survived across the millennia. The art was first found by James Mellaart in the 1960s. New work at the site started in 1993 and is planned to continue to 2018, under the auspices of the British Institute at Ankara and with permission from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The new excavations use modern scientific techniques to reconstruct the ways that people lived at Çatalhöyük. The aim is to place the art of Çatalhöyük into its full environmental, economic and social context. In the current phase of the project we are attempting to understand the overall social geography of the site, how it was organised ritually, socially and economically. Equally important, we aim to conserve and present Çatalhöyük to a wide audience and to engage different stakeholder communities in its care. Çatalhöyük is on the UNESCO World Heritage Site Tentative List and it has recently been put forward by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism for inscription on the full list. We are working with the Ministry to try to ensure that the application to UNESCO is successful.

One hundred and sixty people came to Çatalhöyük this summer from Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Canada, Serbia, Australia, Poland, Italy – in fact 22 different countries. All these people came to join Turkish colleagues working at the site. The new Assistant Director is Serap Özdol from Ege University.

The team members were all very excited by the new painting in Building 80 and the various possible interpretations. In fact, Mellaart had found a similar painting in his excavations in the 1960s, in what he called Shrine VIA.50. This occurred at about the same time as the new Building 80 painting, and there are a number of remarkable similarities, not confined to the use of a diagonal 'brick' design. For example, the VIA.50 painting is again in the middle section of the east wall, and it has a bench to the south with a single pair of bull horns as in Building 80. In addition, the Mellaart painting has frequent vertical lines with triangular lobes. The paintings are indeed so similar that they could have been done by the same painter; at the very least the artists must have been aware of the other painting. Building 80 and Mellaart's 'Shrine' 50 are not close to each other; they are about 35m apart and in separate clusters of buildings. So the new painting helps us to understand the social geography of Çatalhöyük, reinforcing the impression gained from other data that there were widespread social and ritual networks across the community, binding it tightly together.

A further aspect of the painting confronts our assumption that it was to be looked at as 'art'. As the team gradually peeled back the layers of plaster they found that the painting was not all on one plaster surface. Part of the painting would be found on one level, but another part would be found one layer down. And in one case the layers of painting were separated by over 20 layers of unpainted plaster. Wherever we found layers of painting separated by unpainted layers, the lower and upper painting always followed much the same design and position. Somehow the artist had 'remembered' the earlier painting as it was renewed in later months and years. It seems as if the painting was not a static thing at all. From time to time people covered over parts of the painting, but not all of it, and then later (sometimes much later) repeated the same design, or renewed it. It seems as if the painting was more a process than a static thing to be looked at as 'art'. Whatever the meanings of the painting, they were embroiled in the practices of covering and renewing.

Another exciting find this year has been a young calf's head with horns attached that had been painted red and installed in another house (Building 77) over a niche surrounded in red paint. In this case, the animal head was set in the wall above a platform under which we found over nine burials. The people of Çatalhöyük always buried their dead beneath the house floors, but there was a particular concentration of burials beneath the painted calf's head. There were other paintings around this platform, including a row of red hands. We often seem to find paintings surrounding the areas of the house in which people were buried. Perhaps the paintings allowed communication with the dead in some way. We had previously found paintings associated with burial platforms in Buildings 1, 3 and 49, and now in Building 77. We have not yet excavated through the platform in Building 80, but the central eastern platform is often the one that



Painted calf's head above niche and platform in Building 77

contains burials at Çatalhöyük. And it was above this platform in Building 80 that we found the 'brick' painting. So it is possible that the Building 80 painting was again associated with burial in some way.

Acknowledgements

An international team now based in London University (UK) and Stanford University (USA) has undertaken archaeological research at Çatalhöyük since 1993, with a permit granted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and under the auspices of the British Institute at Ankara. We are especially grateful to the General Director of Monuments and Museums. The main sponsors of the project are Yapı Kredi and Boeing. Another sponsor is Shell. Funding for the project in 2011 has also been received from the British Institute at Ankara, Templeton Foundation, Stanford University, University College London, State University of New York at Buffalo, the University of Poznan and the Polish Heritage Council.



Row of painted hands in Building 77