

Çatalhöyük is added to UNESCO World Heritage List

Ian Hodder | Stanford University

On 1 July 2012 the 21-member World Heritage Committee of UNESCO voted in St Petersburg to place Çatalhöyük on the World Heritage List. This was a major achievement resulting from years of work by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism at all levels from the Minister (Ertuğrul Günay) and Director-General (Murat Suslu) down to the Konya Museum (Yusuf Benli) and local officials. The impact of the inscription rather dominated our excavation season. In particular, we had a major press day when the Minister and local dignitaries visited and toured the site and there was a considerable amount of press coverage.

Çatalhöyük is the only Neolithic tell site on the UNESCO List in the whole of the Middle East, and indeed there are few Neolithic or early prehistoric sites on the List worldwide. The site was placed on the List because it was deemed to have outstanding universal value in that it provides a unique example of the way of life in early agricultural settlements and of the organisation and changes that took place in those villages. The authenticity, integrity and management of the site were also considered of high quality.



The Minister of Culture and Tourism visits Çatalhöyük after the UNESCO inscription. All photos Jason Quinlan

Çatalhöyük is indeed an important and distinctive Neolithic site with good preservation. It is located near Çumra, Konya, in central Turkey. 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 excavated 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 1960s excavations were undertaken by James Mellaart and it was with great sadness that the project heard of his death in London this summer. On an evening in July the team gathered together at the top of the East Mound, remembered Jimmy and held a minute of silence. He made the site famous and we have increasingly understood what a good field archaeologist he was. His 1960s ideas and interpretations about the site have withstood the test of time and of our renewed analyses for the most part. He had visited the new work over the years with his wife Arlette, and he and his kindness to the new project will be sorely missed.

One hundred and sixty people came to Çatalhöyük this summer from Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Canada, Serbia, Australia, Poland, Italy – in fact 23 different countries. All came to join Turkish colleagues working at the site. 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. In particular we are trying to work out how the organisation of the site developed in the earliest levels.

In order to pursue this latter aim we focused in 2012 on excavating buildings in the lower levels in the South Area, so that ultimately we can get to the base of the mound in a larger area than was achieved in 1999. We got to the underlying clay marls then, but in the lowest levels we found only refuse or midden areas. Now we are hoping to find out what the earliest houses looked like, especially since Doug Baird has found oval houses at the nearby earlier site of Boncuklu (see pages 16–18).

So in the South Area we have been excavating a series of buildings, such as Buildings 43, 89, 96 and 97. These have proved very interesting in their own right. In Building 89 a new plastered skull was found. This is only the second example found at the site and emphasises again that human skulls were kept, passed down generations and sometimes plastered. The skull was associated with the abandonment



Excavation beneath the south shelter at Çatalhöyük

and closure of the building, which in this case was unusual for other reasons also. The house was in the process of being renovated. A western room had been dismantled and earth collected in a pile in order to rebuild it. But, in the midst of this renovation project, the work was abandoned and the house was closed and filled in so that another house (Building 76) could be constructed on top. We had always thought that houses were rebuilt when they reached the end of their ‘use-lives’. But clearly that was not always the case.

In the North Area our main achievement was to gain a fuller plan of all the buildings beneath the shelter. Ultimately we hope that the UNESCO heritage site will provide an opportunity for visitors to see how a 9,000-year-old town was organised. In previous years we had excavated individual buildings in the north part of the shelter, but in 2012 we made good progress on filling in the gaps between them. The plan now shows a certain amount of ordering along a linear north-south axis, suggesting a degree of community control of or collaboration in the layout.

In order to start excavating these buildings in the North Area we had to excavate a good number of historic (Byzantine) and later Neolithic burials, the latter probably from houses that have been eroded off the top of the mound over the last 8,000 years. Two clusters of Neolithic burials were discovered. One of these produced two beautifully made and complete obsidian mirrors. Although other examples are known from the 1960s excavations, we had only found fragments in our excavations since 1993. The mirrors are made by exhaustively polishing the obsidian surface with progressively finer abrasives. The end result is a surface that you can still see a face in. While the mirrors may have been used for the application of facial cosmetics, it is also possible they were used in divination or had some other function.

Once these later burials had been removed, we were able to start excavating the new buildings that were discovered beneath the north shelter. Some of these were of particular interest. Space 87 is a very small and unusually shaped building that was initially excavated as part of the BACH project in the 1990s and early 2000s, when a large number of burials was found. In 2012 we started excavating the fill in the remainder of the building. We found large amounts of disarticulated animal bones – and one very intriguing human body. We nearly always find human bodies in crouched positions in graves beneath the floors of houses. In this case the body was sprawled out within the fill of the building – as if in mid stride! All the smallest bones were in good articulation suggesting that the body had been thrown in with flesh on. But at some later date the head was removed. Again we have evidence of the special attention paid to human heads at Çatalhöyük.

Of course, it is inadequate to reconstruct the organisation of Çatalhöyük from the two excavation areas between the south and north shelters. In 2012 we also started a new excavation area termed TPC just to the east of the south shelter. And we continue to have teams working on the later West Mound. We



An obsidian mirror found in a burial in the North Area

also had two teams – one from Italy and the other from Southampton – conducting geophysical survey over large swathes of the East Mound. Although we had done similar work in the 1990s, the techniques have developed since then to such a degree that it seemed worthwhile to conduct a new survey to see if there was any aspect of spatial organisation that we had missed in the earlier work. In fact, what we were able to see using ground-penetrating radar has only fortified our view that the mound consists only of closely-packed houses and areas of midden. There is, however, evidence of linear divisions such as that running to the north of the mound.

Another very important part of our work, related to the UNESCO inscription, is the conservation and presentation of Çatalhöyük to a wide audience and the engagement of different stakeholder communities in its care. We have a number of teams working on this aspect of the project, for example dealing with conservation, site presentation and the use of multimedia and 3D visualisation (see page 35). We trust that this work will ultimately provide a heritage site worthy of its new UNESCO designation.

Acknowledgements

An international team now based in the University of London (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.

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