

Have we discovered a new type of building at Çatalhöyük?

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Those who attended the excavations at Çatalhöyük in the summer of 2014 might have been forgiven for thinking they had come to the wrong site! The excavation methods used at the site have long been known to be slow and painstaking, the main tools being dental picks and small brushes. Some of the field staff did use such tools this year, but others found themselves amid mattocks, shovels, wheelbarrows and clouds of dust, returning to the dig house at the end of each day caked in sweat and grime. As the overall Çatalhöyük Research Project approaches its last years of excavation, the pace has quickened and the push is on to reach deeper levels and complete the digging of buildings.

One impact of the larger scale and faster pace of work was that the size of the team increased in 2014 and for several weeks there were 140 researchers and students living and working in the dig house. Team members came again from over 22 different countries, funded by a diversity of sources, including the British Institute at Ankara, and managed by Yıldız Dirmit, based in the Stanford Archaeology Center.

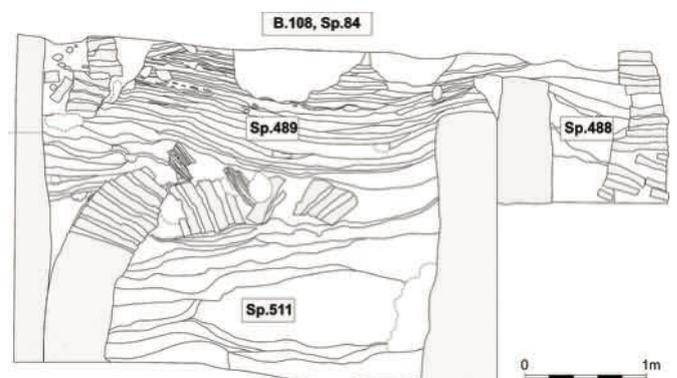
To add to the crowding and complexity of the season, two conferences were held at the site, running back-to-back in the seminar room in the dig house. Both international in scope, the first dealt with ‘Religion, history and place in the origin of settled life’ and was funded by the Templeton Foundation; the second focused on ‘Social and economic changes in the second half of the seventh millennium in the Near East’ and was funded by the Polish Research Council. In addition, in mid September, the Çatalhöyük team organised a session at the annual conference of the European Association of Archaeologists in Istanbul. The whole-day session, on the topic of the ways in which as a team we ‘assemble’ arguments from many strands of data, was well received and attracted much interest. Also at the conference venue in Istanbul Technical University, a team from one of our main sponsors, Yapı Kredi, put on a wonderful exhibit about the project, its results and the communities it works with. The exhibit attracted a good amount of interest and press coverage.

Çatalhöyük is located near Çumra, Konya, in central Turkey. The East Mound was inhabited between 7100 BCE and 6000 BCE 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 enhanced speed and scale of excavation certainly paid off in terms of our understanding the nature of buildings and building sequences at this 9,000-year-old tell site in central Turkey. We had always thought, and previous excavations have always found, that later buildings were built directly on top of earlier buildings. The focus on continuity of houses over many rebuilds and generations was very important at the site. But in digging beneath Building 77 we found something startlingly new. Instead of a precursor the same size and shape as Building 77, we found a massive, double-sized building with unprecedented thick walls. This Building 132 is seen in the foreground in the photo below. The current plan of the Neolithic buildings in the northern part of the site makes it clear that the walls of Building 132 were unusually thick. And the building was so large that it was replaced by two buildings – the elaborate Building 77 and Building 108 to the south. The figure below shows a section through the deposits of Building 108, down into the underlying Space 511 that is the southern room of Building 132. The section shows that the southern wall of Building 132 (Space 511) collapsed into the partially-filled room, before the area was used as a midden (perhaps for Building 77) and was then built over by Building 108. The section again shows the remarkably thick walls in comparison to Building 108. We look forward to



View of the North Area showing Building 132 emerging in the foreground. Photo by Jason Quinlan.



Section through the deposits in Building 108 and Building 132 (Space 511). Source: Arkadiusz Klimowicz.

finishing the excavation of Building 132 in 2015 to see whether its large size is an indicator of special functions or status. Hundreds of buildings have so far been excavated. All are constrained in size and have thin walls (except in the upper levels where the architecture changes). At the time of Building 132 it stood out as very different from the rest. Is this the first indication of some type of building at the site that had some special function?

Immediately to the south of Building 132, we continued excavating Building 52, including its Space 90. We are gradually starting to understand the very complex life-history of this building – or rather complex of buildings. The sequence shows a clear example of aggrandising. Originally two smaller buildings, walls were knocked through and the floors of the main room expanded to produce one very large building. Other rooms were added on until there were eight rooms or spaces. This size of building, with so many rooms, is unusual, although the walls are of the normal width, unlike Building 132 to the north. Another instance of aggrandising in this building is that a small platform edge into which wild sheep horns had been set was later increased in size to a large bench set with wild bull horns. In the later phase of occupation, a large bull's head and horns were set into the wall and 11 bull horns stacked above them. All this suggests a social unit intent on expanding in size and symbolism. But the functions in Building 52 were the same as in other buildings. Again, the question of whether Building 132 is different in this respect remains to be answered.

Nearby Building 77 we found Building 119. This has a very typical plan, one very similar to other buildings around it including Buildings 1 and 3. We now realise that most if not all buildings at Çatalhöyük had some form of paintings on their walls at some time during their occupation. Often these paintings were only visible for a short period of time before being covered over again in white plaster. Building 119 turned out to have paintings of an unusual sort in the northeastern corner. We have found incised and impressed decoration on walls before, instead of the usual paintings on flat plaster. This was the first time we had found a hybrid technique in which both painting and impression into the plaster were used. But as usual the two to four layers of painting were only brief episodes in the longer-term life of the house.

Many other buildings were excavated in the North Area of the site, several containing thick deposits of clean fill, necessitating hard labour in the often extreme heat. We are now beginning to get a good overall plan of this part of the site in the middle layers of occupation and it is clear that there are groupings and sectors of housing and midden with different characteristics. Finally resolving the changing plan of the North Area will depend on detailed stratigraphic and radiocarbon research.

We also excavated in the South Area, shown in the photo opposite. Here a large number of buildings were excavated, leading to new discoveries of wall paintings. In particular we



Wall painting discovered in the northeastern corner of Building 119. Photo by Jason Quinlan.

worked hard and pushed through Building 43 in order to uncover the footprint of the underlying building (as yet unnumbered). In these earlier levels we began to see a pattern that had not been clear before – that many of the buildings were linked by crawl-holes or by niches that cut into neighbouring buildings. There seems to have been more connectivity between buildings early on, and this is allowing us to get a better handle on the complex stratigraphies of the buildings in this part of the site.

On a final note, we expanded our experiment with paperless planning, using tablets, to over ten excavation teams (termed ‘pods’). The excavators soon got used to the very sensitive touch-screens, and many asserted that use of the tablets saved time and was more efficient than traditional methods. Using the tablets in the trenches also allows more information to be made available to excavators as they dig.

Acknowledgements

The main sponsors of the project in 2014 are Yapı Kredi, Boeing and Koçtaş. Other sponsors are Shell and Çumra Şeker Fabrikası. Funding was also received from the Templeton Foundation, the British Institute at Ankara, the Kaplan Fund, Imitatio (Thiel Foundation), the Turkish Cultural Foundation, the Polish Academy of Sciences, SUNY Buffalo, Stanford University and Archaeology Center.



View of 2014 excavations in the South Area at Çatalhöyük. Photo by Jason Quinlan.