

Burials and identities at historic period Çatalhöyük

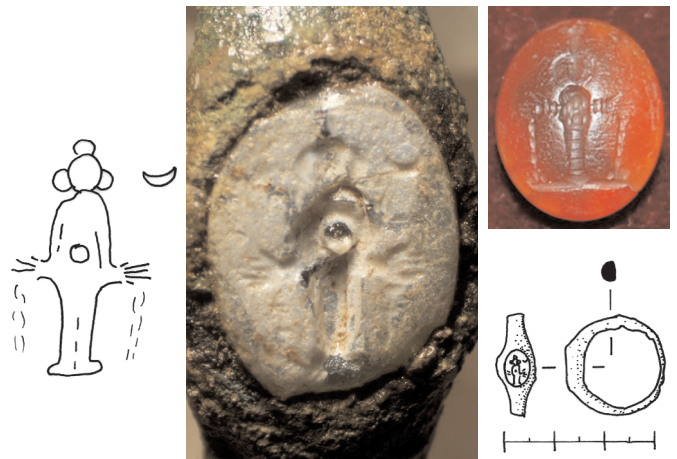
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We know so much about prehistoric Çatalhöyük – famous as the earliest Neolithic city and for its stunning art and incredible state of preservation – as a result of the current programme of excavation at this UNESCO World Heritage Site which began in 1993 and is scheduled to continue until 2018. Perhaps less well known is the presence of a first- and second-millennium AD cemetery which covers the surfaces of both the mounds which constitute the site. Historic period graves were present in every excavated area on site, 300 of which have been excavated. It is this cemetery, sporadically in use between the first century and the 17th century AD, which has been the focus of my one-year post-doctoral fellowship at the British Institute at Ankara.

Many practical challenges present themselves when dealing with a large multi-phase cemetery excavated by a variety of teams over many years, and without the prior establishment of a firm chronology. We do have some dates for the graves from a programme of radiocarbon dating undertaken by Team Poznan, in particular Monika Kwiatkowska, and it is this programme of dating that provides the broad-brush chronology we started with (Kwiatkowska 2009: 133). At first glance the graves themselves seem reasonably homogenous and, broadly speaking, ‘medieval’, as they are all more or less east–west aligned and contain extended supine burials in relatively plain earth graves; as we drill down into the data though, there are enough significant differences to categorise the material further.

In the summer of 2011, Mark Jackson and I began to work on the graves from a single area of the site known as 4040 (now part of the North Area), creating a typology of graves which suggested three major phases of the cemetery (Moore, Jackson 2013). The results of my work this year have refined this typology, proposing a fourth category of grave. In addition to the previously identified Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman burials, there is also a group of graves with a very distinctive morphology. The funerary architecture of these graves comprises a primary pit cut east–west and a secondary pit cut into the side of the initial pit to create a very tight lateral niche into which the body was placed in an extended supine position with the head turned to the right. The secondary niche was then capped with mudbrick without being filled. It is as yet unclear whether or not the primary pit was backfilled or left open. The closest direct parallel to these graves within Anatolia is from Pınarbaşı (Moore forthcoming), where a coin and bell suggest a date in the Seljuk period. Positive identification of these burials as Seljuk and Islamic could significantly refine our categorisation of 11th- to 13th-century graves on the Konya plain and would allow us to explore answers to interesting questions about identity and migration.

Each of the four phases of graves on the site presents specific challenges, but one of the most enjoyable from this year’s work came in the form of three intaglios from three of the first- to fourth-century graves. These tiny graven objects include a glass-paste gem with a Nike figure, a carnelian showing two fish and an anchor (with significant implications for early Christianity in the area) and an image of Artemis of Ephesus (shown below next to a contemporary object from the collection of the British Museum also identified as representing Artemis). The Artemis figure is inscribed into a serpentine stone which is set into a copper alloy ring. The figure is identifiable as Artemis by the stylised nimbus, the posture of the hands and feet, the twined yarn falling from her hands and the crescent moon to her left. It is possible that the circular flaw at the centre of the stone was the reason it was chosen, and represents one of the many ‘breasts’ or ‘eggs’ which usually adorn the figure.



Artemis intaglio from Çatalhöyük, centre (© Jason Quinlan; drawings by author), with contemporary comparison, top right (© Trustees of the British Museum).

Discussing identity is not trivial on a site such as this one, where multiple complex phases of cemetery have cut into prehistoric material. Future work must rely on a more complete programme of radiocarbon dating. The potential of the excavated material from Çatalhöyük is enormous, and future work could elucidate all manner of aspects of identity, life and death on the Konya plain in the historic period.

References

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