

Ups and downs at Çatalhöyük 2016

Ian Hodder | Stanford University

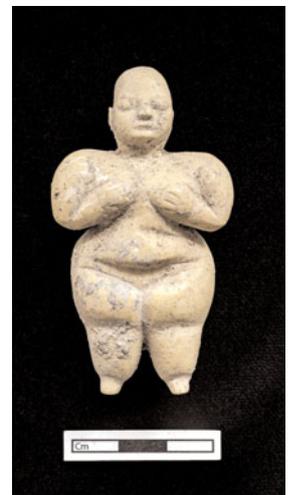
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The site of Çatalhöyük consists of two mounds near Çumra, Konya in central Anatolia. The main East Mound has over 18 levels of Neolithic occupation dated from 7100 to 5900 BC, while the West Mound has Chalcolithic levels. The site is one of the largest Neolithic sites in the Middle East and is a well-preserved example of the mega-sites that emerged in the later pre-pottery and pottery Neolithic. The site was established as being of international significance by the work of James Mellaart in the 1960s and a new team has been working there since 1993, resulting in the site being placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2012.

Since 1993 we have worked at the site for two to three months every summer, although in 1999 we excavated for six months in order to dig a deep sounding to the base of the East Mound. However, when we reached the lowest levels of occupation in 1999 we found ourselves not in houses but in areas of midden and animal pens. So we still did not know what the earliest houses at Çatalhöyük might look like. Given the new work being carried out by Douglas Baird at nearby Boncuklu (see pages 15–18), which shows the existence of oval houses in the millennia prior to Çatalhöyük, it seemed important to try again to reach the base of the mound in the hope of glimpsing the earliest phase of housing. And so for 2016 we planned a five-month season with a core team of 12 excavators and 15 lab and support staff. We started on 1 May and all was going well until the civil unrest in Turkey in mid July that led to heightened concern amongst our research partners and amongst the team. I therefore decided to end the season after only three months, with the aim of completing the planned excavation in 2017.

Despite the shortened season, we made some spectacular finds and learned much that is new about the site and its development through time. Perhaps of greatest interest to the media was the discovery of two remarkably preserved stone figurines. During July the core team had been joined by other researchers including a team from Poznan, Poland, led by Arek Marciniak. This team is now working in the TPC Area that links the South Area to the TP Area and the levels excavated by Mellaart at the top of the East Mound. These upper layers are distinctive in many ways, but one of the most intriguing is the prevalence of female figurines with the ‘three Bs’ prominent – bellies, buttocks and breasts. In 2016 two remarkable stone examples were found in Building 150 (see another headless example found in 2015 in this building and reported on in *Heritage Turkey* 2015). The first figurine was found next to the eastern wall of Building 150 and right by the northern edge of a burial. Its deposition is most likely associated with the construction of a platform. It seems to have been deliberately placed on the surface of an earlier platform and then covered by the new platform. The figurine is made of marble and was deposited with a portion of an obsidian blade. A few days later a second, smaller figurine was found deposited just to the north of the larger one; it is made of limestone and was placed inside a lump of marl. Near the head of this second figurine a piece of galena was found, shiny and reflective like a mirror, and also two blue beads. There are two perforations in the head as if the object was suspended on string.

These depositions were undoubtedly very intentional and significant. The pairing of location and the fact that both were deposited with obsidian or galena is highly unusual. In these uppermost levels of the site (Building 150 is in a level equivalent to Mellaart’s Level III), burial beneath platforms is less common than in the earlier levels and one intriguing suggestion is that these deposits replaced inhumations. What is certain is that the depositions indicate the importance of closing and rebuilding platforms.



Left: first figurine found in Building 150 by the TPC team led by Arek Marciniak. Above: second figurine found in Building 150. The figurines are shown at the same scale. All photos in this article are by Jason Quinlan

Much of the media immediately latched onto these figurines as examples of the famous Çatalhöyük 'Mother Goddess'. However, research on such figurines and their clay counterparts at the site by Lynn Meskell, Carrie Nakamura and Lindsay Der has demonstrated that the focus on the 'three Bs' at the site normally coincides with an emphasis on older, mature women, in which the three Bs are often sagging. Rather than mother goddesses, these images seem to represent older women who have gained status and prestige in the community through their lifetimes.

Next to the 'up' trenches of the TPC Area where these figurines were found, one descends 'down' to the deep excavations of the South Area. It is here that we are planning to get to the bottom of the East Mound in 2017. In preparation for that campaign, in 2016 we excavated Building 17 and its neighbour Building 160 with 161 below. I mentioned the large number of burials below Building 17 in *Heritage Turkey* 2015. In 2016 the burials just kept on coming until the whole floor began to look like a Swiss cheese. As noted last year, many of these burials seem to be cut into midden, but it is the sheer number of burials that is most impressive. It is telling that Building 17 is the base of a sequence of elaborate buildings that Mellaart called 'Shrine 10'. In the buildings above Building 17 we excavated large numbers of burials in the 1990s, as did Mellaart in 'Shrine VI.10' in the 1960s. While we now accept that such buildings are domestic, it is clear that some buildings ('history houses') are important for burial and ritual over the long term. This was always a central house for burial.

Just to its east, however, is a stack of smaller buildings in which there are never many burials. Mellaart found a pair of leopards on the western wall of the main room of this building, and we have continued to excavate the structure as Buildings 43, 160 and 161, going downwards in the stack. In the earliest level so far excavated, Building 161 has some characteristics that suggest it was paired with Building 17. In particular, both have ovens in highly unusual locations – the northeastern corner of the main room – and in both there is a curved wall separating off the northern part of the room. Also significant is that in both we found burials in which the torso had been covered with rodent scat, and in both there are burials with planks. This pairing of buildings in the early levels of occupation has been seen in the construction of Mellaart's Shrines 1 and 8 on the same raft, and in the very distinctive pairing of his Shrines 14 and 7 in Level VI. The pairing is presumably part of the larger focus on the interconnection between houses in the lower levels of occupation.

In the North Area of the site we concentrated on continuing the excavations in the large Building 132 that I described in *Heritage Turkey* last year. We also started excavating an adjacent midden area. For the first time we excavated this as if it was a Palaeolithic cave, trying to tease apart the fine layers one by one, and plotting the position of all artefacts within a

1m grid. This proved an invaluable exercise, as we were able to discern activity areas, hearths and work surfaces. This research is allowing us to understand for the first time how these open areas (a better term than 'midden') functioned.

Excavations also continued in the very burned Building 131, where many burials have been found with well-preserved organic material including wooden bowls. Next to Building 131 is the earlier Building 5. This had been excavated in the 1990s but we had not excavated the floors, wanting to leave the building on display. In 2016 we decided to see if there were any burials beneath the floors, especially as the building above, Building 1, had contained over 62 burials. And, indeed, below the northwestern platform a remarkably rich set of secondary burials was discovered. Burial F.3808 turned out to be the richest burial we have ever found at the site. In the upper part of the grave was a bundle of bones including a spinal column and a femur, all wrapped in a plant-based material. Below this bundle was a cinnabar-painted skull, placed inside a wood and basket container. Two flint daggers and a shell were also placed inside the container. Outside the container were four of the highest quality bifacially flaked obsidian points that I have ever seen, pressed into some fibrous material, and a 'macehead' of white marble, beautifully and skillfully decorated in spiral meanders.



Burial F.3808 showing skull in container with flint blades, as well as obsidian points, shell and macehead

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