

Ending 25 years of fieldwork at Çatalhöyük

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This year, our last excavating at Çatalhöyük, the main aim was to reach the base of the mound in the South Area. We had reached the base in 1999 but found only extensive areas of midden. So we had still, after 25 years of work, not seen the earliest buildings at the site, those contemporary with the early midden. In order to find them, I thought we should excavate closer to the centre of the mound and we had a chance to do that below Building 17 (an early building in James Mellaart's Shrine 10 sequence) and below Building 43 next to it. So excavations began at the start of May and continued to 1 July (followed by two months of post-excavation work).

The results were interesting but somewhat disappointing. Beneath Building 17 we did not find an earlier building, but graves dug into the top of penning deposits and midden. The different buildings in the Shrine 10 sequence always had a lot of burials; this column of buildings is made up of what we can call 'history houses' – long-lived houses with many rebuilds and burials. So it is fascinating that an area of midden was used for burial before the Shrine 10 sequence was started.

Building 17 had been built directly on the penning and midden, and these same deposits went under the walls and beneath adjacent Building 162, above which we had excavated Buildings 161 and 160, all beneath Building 43. So this sequence of buildings (162-161-160-43) was again built on midden. Buildings 162 and 17 are the earliest buildings we have excavated, and it is of great interest that they seem to be the 'wrong' way round. In most dwellings at the site, the oven and hearth with associated 'dirty' floors are to the south with burial platforms to the north. In Building 162 and Building 17 ovens were found to the north and the 'clean' floors to the south. This latter arrangement is also what is found at the earlier site of Boncuklu (see pages 25–26).

Interesting as all this is, it was clear that we still had not found the earliest houses at the site; we had again just found metres of midden and dump at the base of the mound. All this suggests that the earliest buildings in the South Area might be in quite a small area or dispersed. We halted the excavations of the early midden as we had dug the same midden extensively in 1999. This change of plan allowed us to concentrate on excavations in the North Area that proved very productive. Interestingly, we found a similar pattern to that in Building 17 in the excavation of the deposits below Building 77. The building (Building 132) prior to Building 77 had collapsed and been abandoned with some midden deposition within its decaying walls. The area was used as a cemetery before Building 77 was built, and the burial area in Building 77 was placed exactly over the earlier cemetery. So once again it seems that an important house was built over earlier graves. It is almost as if the primary purpose of the house is for the dead rather than for the living!



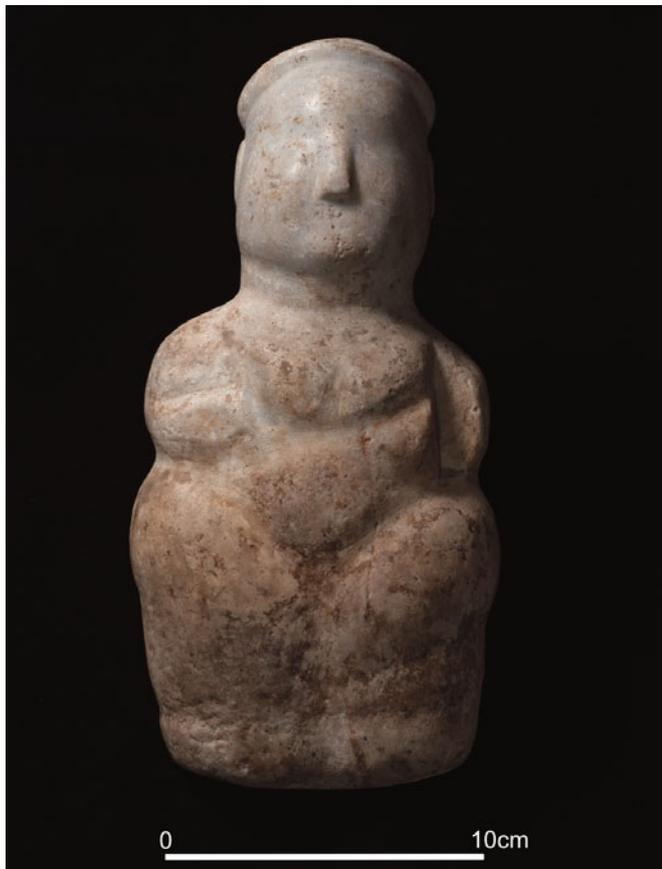
In the foreground, the midden deposits below Building 17 and Building 162 are being excavated.

Below Building 77 we excavated Building 132 which was very large and solid but which had suffered from extensive wall collapse. As is often the case in these early buildings (also seen in Buildings 17 and 162), the platform and floor segments are less well-defined than in later buildings. Building 132 was no exception, and several burials were discovered and an extensive 'dirty' area near the hearths and ovens (this time the 'right' way round). Beneath Building 132 we came across an open area made of a smooth clay surface over layers of midden. There was evidence of informal structures in these open areas, and much the same was found in a neighbouring set of middens (beneath Space 85). In the latter case, many firespots and a small structure or windbreak indicated extensive use, even though many of the midden layers were quite fresh and must have been quickly covered. Indeed, the overall cycle of use of open spaces seems to have involved throwing out small lenses of refuse including organic material and then covering this with ash and clay to create work surfaces. The term 'open space' may in the end be more appropriate than 'midden', although these open spaces were less frequently used than is implied by Mellaart's term 'courtyard'.

Immediately to the north of Building 77, we excavated the very large and extensively burned Building 131. This had a number of extremely well-preserved burials including wooden bowls, brain tissue and other organic remains, which were preserved by being baked beneath the floor as the building burned. In one of the burials we discovered an obsidian mirror with white plaster backing. These finds are very rare. It is thus fascinating that the building directly above Building 131 also had mirrors placed in burials, and in exactly the same location within the house. This is a clear example of memory- or history-making, of which there are many examples at Çatalhöyük. Perhaps related was a very large and exceptional cache of unused obsidian points, dug into the burned fill of the western side room.

Beneath Building 131 we started the excavation of Building 139 with the aim of placing it on display after the end of the project. We got down to the floor of the building and found at the base of the fill several plaster features that have the shape of bucrania, in one case with traces of painting. Evidence of painting proves to be much more widespread than we had earlier thought, and in 2017 we also found evidence for geometric designs on the walls of Building 17.

Given the change in strategy in the South Area we were also able to return to the excavation of Building 52 in the North Area. We have excavated this long sequence of building activities over many years and it was important to finish the excavation of the building, understand its sequence of builds and rebuilds, and briefly explore the two buildings beneath it.



Stone figurine found in a late building in the TPC Area.

The later levels of the site were again excavated in the TPC Area by a team led by Arek Marciniak. Links were made between these late levels and the top of the sequence in the South Area so that we now have a stratigraphic sequence from the bottom to the top of the mound in the South Area. Once linked with the new dating programme, being spearheaded by Alex Bayliss, we will soon have unprecedented chronological control of the overall sequence. A number of buildings were excavated by the Polish team, and in one there was a remarkable deposit of special objects including a large stone figurine (see photo above).



Reconstructed painting and bull horns in Building 80.

This is the fourth stone figurine found in this building and the collection also illustrates the point that these well-formed representations of females are largely confined to the later levels of occupation at the site.

An important addition to the visitor facilities at the site has been the construction and furnishing of four new experimental houses, one based on the ‘Vulture Shrine’, another on the ‘Hunting Shrine’, one on Building 77 and a composite building showing bucrania, horned bench, pairs of leopard reliefs and a bear relief (see photo above).

It was in many ways a tough season at Çatalhöyük, with all the extra work of packing up at the end of 25 years, all the goodbyes and memories, and all the pressure of getting work finished at the end of a long season. I am deeply grateful to the team who have come together as a summer ‘family’ every year and produced such wonderful work. In particular, this year I wish to thank Bilge Küçükdoğan and Levent Özer for their management and commitment, and Marek Baranski, Burcu Tung, James Taylor and Arek Klimowicz for their on-site and project direction. Enver Akgün acted as a stimulating *temsilci*, and I am as ever grateful to our main funders and sponsors including the John Templeton Foundation, Yapı Kredi, Boeing, Koçtaş and Shell. I am particularly grateful to the staff of the British Institute at Ankara for their long-term support of our work.



The last excavation team at Çatalhöyük.