

REMIXING ÇATALHÖYÜK

“As I tread over its soil, I feel a tingling in my feet, knowing that buried beneath me are the abundant remains of a town inhabited from 9,400 until 8,000 years ago.”

Ian Hodder

Director, Çatalhöyük Research Project

“My favorite tool, when I’m working on excavation is the trowel. And I think most people would say the same thing. They are quite small and fit into the hand quite easily. But mostly you can control the stroke of the trowel, and clean the surface of these deposits. What everyone else thinks is just mud is to us like a book telling us a story.”

Shahina Farid

Site Director, Çatalhöyük Research Project

“Archaeology is a “sensual” field practice, employing the senses of sight, touch, and hearing – sometimes smell and taste – to bear on the problem at hand, be it excavation, survey or lab research.”

Michael Ashley

Media Documentation

Berkeley Archaeologists at Çatalhöyük

“The public are going to engage in archaeology only when we share with them the process of what we do and how we think, recognize the diversity of their voices, and allow them to make a contribution to the interpretive process.”

Ruth Tringham

Director, Berkeley Archaeologists at Çatalhöyük

About Berkeley Archaeologists at Çatalhöyük (BACH)

Çatalhöyük is a settlement mound made up of the remains of a Neolithic farming community that lived in central Turkey more than 9,000 years ago. First excavated in the 1960s by British archaeologist James Mellaart, Çatalhöyük became famous worldwide for the dense arrangement of its buildings and its spectacular wall paintings.

After Mellaart’s initial work at the site (1961-1965), Çatalhöyük remained abandoned until archaeologist Ian Hodder (then at Cambridge University; currently at Stanford) began a new series of excavations in the 1990s. From 1997 until 2003, archaeology and media specialists from the University of California at Berkeley (aka the Berkeley Archaeologists at Çatalhöyük, or “BACH” team) worked alongside scholars from around the world at Çatalhöyük. Where Mellaart’s original work exposed more than 150 houses in the settlement, the BACH team took a different approach, excavating in minute detail the remains of a single house known as Building 3. The data and discoveries from that excavation have been made available to the public through the resources in this and other websites.

About Life and Work at Çatalhöyük 9,000 Years Ago

In Turkish, the word Çatalhöyük (say “cha-tal-HU-yuk”) means “forked mound,” referring to a footpath that once split between the east and west mounds that make up the 70-foot-high remains of the settlement today. In Neolithic times, the two mounds straddled a river, long gone today, which could provide fresh water and food for the village, including fish and the eggs of water fowl. At the time, the environment was a semiarid plain, dominated by low-growing grasses, sedges, and small bushes. In the spring, the area would have been surrounded by wetlands, offering mud and reeds as building materials.

The Neolithic was a time when people were beginning to settle down, living in collected family groups and staying in one location throughout the year, rather than travelling from place to place depending upon the season. This new way of life—sometimes called the

“Neolithic revolution”—drew on the most sophisticated skills and abilities of the people of the time. People began to find new uses for all of the materials their environment had to offer. Perhaps most important, they began to work together, forging long-term relationships that intensified as each generation added to the skills, knowledge, and abilities of the group. In the environment of a settled village, these increasingly complex interactions began to require new types of organization and structure, ultimately laying the foundation for our modern way of life.

During the Neolithic, people learned to weave baskets from plant materials, and to make cloth from a variety of sources, including plant fibers and animal hair. They used animal furs and hides, as well as vegetable fibers such as flax, for clothing and bedding. They used wood, stone, shell, bone, and animal horn to make tools, weapons, and household implements. At Çatalhöyük, the local clays were used to make building bricks and plaster for construction, to create decorative items (such as the tiny beads found in an infant’s grave at Building 3), and to make sculptures. In fact, though we can only speculate about spiritual belief during the Neolithic, clay sculptures of corpulent female nudes found throughout the settlement have been the source some people’s beliefs that an “earth mother” cult once thrived there.

At Çatalhöyük, people had begun to experiment with making pottery by firing objects such as figurines, clay balls, and even containers; and while they were still relying on many wild food sources, they were beginning to domesticate both plants and animals. In Building 3, the remains of boars (wild pigs) and aurochs (wild cattle, now extinct) have been found alongside the remains of domesticated sheep and goats. Cultivated foods such as wheat, barley, peas, and lentils have also been found inside the houses, but these were not grown in the marshy areas around the houses. Çatalhöyük was a farming settlement, but evidence has shown that some of the crops they tended were located well away from their homes.

The buildings at Çatalhöyük were built side by side and one on top of another for more than a thousand years, starting around 9,000 years ago. Houses were built right up against each other, interlocking like the cells of a honeycomb, with few spaces in between for pathways or roads. In fact, there were few exterior door openings in the maze of buildings at Çatalhöyük. Instead, most houses were entered through openings in the roof. Archaeologists have found evidence that people climbed up and down steep stairs or ladders to enter and exit most buildings. As a result, the roofs of the houses served as the “streets” of the village, offering additional work and living space. In some places, piles of refuse and rotting organic material filled the spaces between the buildings—conditions that may have contributed to the rooftop habits of the inhabitants.

Inside each mud-brick house were one, two, or three multi-purpose rooms that would have been shared by a family of five to ten people. Some parts of the house were used for storage and work spaces; other areas were used for food preparation, sitting, sleeping, and perhaps telling stories. Clay ovens provided warmth, light, and fires for cooking, but there is evidence of open hearths in other areas of the houses as well. Floors and walls were plastered with layers of thick white lime mud, and then regularly replastered to protect the structure beneath.

Vividly colored designs and murals were found painted on many of the house’s interior walls. Some walls were painted bright red all over; others were decorated with leopard motifs or complex patterns that may have mirrored the designs in woven wool or flax. One painting shows vultures flying over headless human bodies; another seems to show the houses of Çatalhöyük with an erupting volcano in the background.

Against the perimeter walls of the houses, rectangular areas of the floor were built up into raised platforms that may have been used for seating and sleeping. When people died, they were most frequently buried beneath selected platforms inside the house, and sometimes under other areas of the floor.

When a house was no longer usable, it was cleaned out, filled with dirt, refuse, and rubble, and a new house would be built, sometimes right on top of the original house walls below it. In this way, the remains of hundreds of years of occupation were preserved, offering views of the past, layer by layer. In some places, 18 consecutive house layers have been excavated. These layers create the mound we see today.

About Life and Work at Çatalhöyük Today

It takes more than 24 hours of travel time to get from California to Turkey, and then more than an hour to drive from the nearest urban area to Çatalhöyük. Visitors are welcomed at the Visitor Center, but must be escorted throughout their tour of the site. Few people get to work at the mound itself. Archaeologists, however experienced, cannot work there without official permission from the Turkish government. A fence surrounds the mound and a guardhouse protects it.

In the relative isolation of Çatalhöyük, which is today surrounded by intensively cultivated agricultural fields, the BACH team (along with the rest of the Çatalhöyük project team) lived in their own modern version of a working village. A typical day would find them excavating at the site and working at the research labs in the compound nearby. At night, they slept in the compound's dorm rooms. Meals were served in the dining room. Bathroom areas were shared, and hot water came from solar-power collectors on the roof. Away from modern lights and life, their focus was on interpreting the past, while also participating in the intensive social whirl of life on a big archaeological project.

During their time at Çatalhöyük, the BACH team excavated one of the settlement's houses through five phases of occupation, and studied it in detail, paying particular attention to interpreting the "life histories" of the people, places, and things they found there.

About Building 3

Building 3, a 400-square-foot mud-brick structure, was probably home to several generations of a Neolithic family. Excavations revealed painted walls, a flint dagger with a carved bone handle, the remains of a collapsed roof and the residue of woven baskets, a domed clay oven, and burials of both children and adults beneath the floor.

To really understand what life might have been like in the Neolithic, the Çatalhöyük team built a Replica House based on their finds at Building 3. They climbed in and out through the roof opening. They lit fires in its clay oven to find out how well food cooked in it, how smoky the building might have been, how warm or cold it was inside, and how dark it might have become at different times of day or night. (With the white walls and daylight streaming in through the opening in the ceiling, it was brighter inside than expected.) In essence, they created experiences that would give them clues they could not have found in their excavations.

The team also kept regular, detailed records of their finds—notes, drawings, photos, and videos—and consulted with specialists who could look most closely at their discoveries. All of these records were digitized and entered into the database that served the entire Çatalhöyük archaeological project. When they used microscopic analysis to study the soil where the imprint of a basket was found, for instance, they discovered that the material was from a plant that came from the Levant, hundreds of miles away. Other materials at the site came from outside the local village area as well, including obsidian, the glassy black rock used to make sharp-edged tools and points, which came from another area of Turkey. These finds support evidence from throughout the site showing that, in addition to establishing and maintaining complex activities and interrelationships within the settlement, the people of Çatalhöyük were also engaging in long-distance exchanges of materials, and probably of ideas and people as well.

Little by little, the BACH team interpreted the clues and created their own stories, once again bringing to life the people, places, and things of Çatalhöyük.

Links

Çatalhöyük: Excavations of a Neolithic Anatolian Höyük

<http://www.catalhoyuk.com/>

The website for the Çatalhöyük Research Project.

Mysteries of Çatalhöyük

<http://www.smm.org/catal/>

An online exhibition and standalone website developed by the Science Museum of Minnesota.

Open 3D Visualization Toolkit

<http://lrc.smm.org/visualize/resources/games/catal>

An online resource from the Science Museum of Minnesota for sharing 3D models and visualizations, this site features lots of great Çatalhöyük content.

“This Old House”

[http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/master.html?http://](http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/master.html?http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/0606/0606_feature.html)

www.naturalhistorymag.com/0606/0606_feature.html

Excellent introductory article by Çatalhöyük project director Ian Hodder for Natural History Magazine, June 2006.

The Goddess & The Bull—Çatalhöyük: An Archaeological Journey to the Dawn of Civilization

<http://www.michaelbalter.com/aboutbook.php>

In this book, Science Magazine reporter Michael Balter provides readers with an insider’s view of archaeological excavations at Çatalhöyük. Available in hardcover (Free Press: 2004) and softcover (Left Coast Press: 2006).

The Leopard's Tale: Revealing the Mysteries of Çatalhöyük

<http://www.amazon.com/Leopards-Tale-Revealing-Mysteries-Catalhoyuk/dp/0500051410>

This book (Thames & Hudson: 2006), by project director Ian Hodder, provides a firsthand account of the activities and discoveries at Çatalhöyük.

Archaeological Illustration at Çatalhöyük

<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/jghsillustration/>

Illustrations and sketches for the Çatalhöyük Research Project by artist John Swogger.

Remediated Places Project

<http://chimeraspider.wordpress.com/>

This project aims to share multi-sensorial experiences and memories of cultural heritage sites. It also includes information about Çatalhöyük video-walks.

Okapi Island

<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Okapi/128/128/0>

A reconstruction of the East Mound at Çatalhöyük in the 3D multi-user virtual environment of Second Life. (Note that access is available to members only; membership to Second Life is free.)

We encourage you to explore this website, and share, download, remix, and republish the materials offered here.

Remixing Çatalhöyük - <http://okapi.dreamhosters.com/remixing/mainpage.html>

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