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The Vitalities of Çatalhöyük

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This book describes new work on the role of religion at the nine-thousand-year-old site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey. It follows on from a volume entitled *Religion and the Origin of Complex Societies: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study* (Hodder 2010) that resulted from a seminar funded by the Templeton Foundation. The new volume results from a larger and more ambitious Templeton seminar that took place at Çatalhöyük over three years (2009–2011). All the contributors to this volume participated in the seminar, spending a week at the site each year, talking to the excavators and laboratory researchers, developing their own chapters in dialogue with archaeologists. Each chapter in this volume thus results from in-depth engagement with the archaeological data from the site as well as from intense discussions with other contributors.

The contributors were charged with writing about the role of religion at Çatalhöyük from the point of view of their own experience but engaging with the detailed data from the site. The contributors come from philosophy and religious studies, anthropology and sociology, and from archaeological contexts in different parts of the world. The interactions between the various scholars and with the archaeologists at the site were fruitful, and the group as a whole moved toward an understanding of religion at Çatalhöyük in terms of "vital matter," that is, in terms of the ways in which materials and substances that were seen to have a vital force played active roles in forming and transforming societies. Bodies and bones, flesh and horns, surfaces and interfaces all in their various ways became marked as constitutive of social life. Such matters had vitality but were also vital in producing and reproducing social life. They constituted the religious by drawing numinous forces into the interstices of daily life.

General Introduction

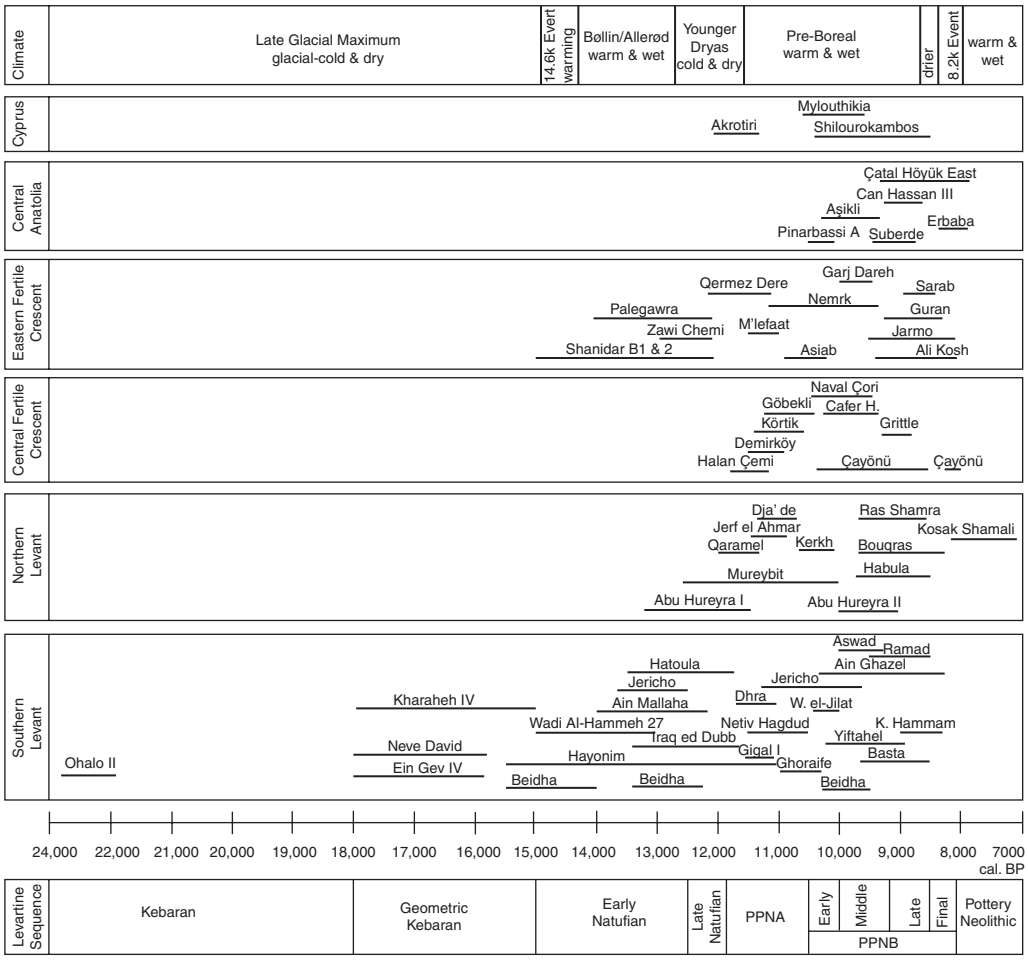
Undoubtedly the most significant aspect of the culmination of the recent three years of Templeton work at the site has been the realization that religion should not be viewed solely in instrumentalist terms. We had started the recent project with the title "Religion as the Basis for Power and Property in the First Civilizations." In other words, we had assumed that religion came into play to allow the accumulation of power and property. As will be discussed later, many commentators on the origins of settled agricultural life in the Middle East have followed in the footsteps of Gordon Childe, and indeed of authors such as Rousseau, Marx, and Engels, in arguing that the accumulation of surplus made possible by agriculture allowed the emergence of property and social differentiation. Religion played an ideological role in creating community and justifying power, and various forms of these ideas have continued in much recent work (see later and Bender 1978; Kuijt 2000, 2008).

However, as will be described, the data amassed from Çatalhöyük and discussed in the Templeton seminar did not find evidence for clear relationships among power, property, and religion. And the same can be said of many other earlier sites in the Middle East, as will be argued later. The data and our discussions suggested that religion is not something that appears because it is useful in the organization of power, property, and society. Rather, the need for the transcendent can be argued to be an integral part of the human process, as central and ever-present as the need for food and the social. This is one aspect of the term "vital" – that religion is a vital aspect of being human. It can be manipulated, as can food and social relations, in order to obtain power, but it is not something that is produced through these instrumental processes, and it is not something humans can do without. Of course, much depends on how religion is defined. In the earlier volume, religion was described in terms of that which is marked and transcendent, relating to ultimate boundaries and the beyond. In this volume various definitions are used, but to some degree the term "religion" refers to any notion that there is vitality in matter – that there is an agentful 'beyondness' to the world. Such a definition is at the same time hopelessly vague (since it includes a scientific belief in physical forces that shape the universe) but also usefully inclusive, since the commonalities

among science, religion, and spirituality perhaps do need exploring. "Vital matter" is thus a term that can draw attention to the ways in which we as humans try to make sense of the world. We see agency in the world, often in our own image, as Guthrie's discussion of anthropomorphism in Chapter 4 makes clear. So a second meaning of the term "vital" refers to the ways in which humans attribute causal powers to things.

Humans at Çatalhöyük lived religion in all parts of their lives as part of a seamless world. In everything they did there was an understanding that the world had vitality and power. The world was replete with substances that flowed and transformed and with surfaces that could be passed through. According to this view, religion was an ever-present component of the life process. For example, both ancestors and wild bulls were necessary for daily life, and they protected each other in the context of the home. Many substances were seen as vitally productive, whether they be collections of obsidian or natural crystals placed beneath floors, the symmetrical designs on walls, the plaster surfaces of houses, or the death of a woman during childbirth (as seen in Chapter 9, written by the religious scholar Kimberley Patton and the archaeologist Lori Hager; see also Rollefson 1984).

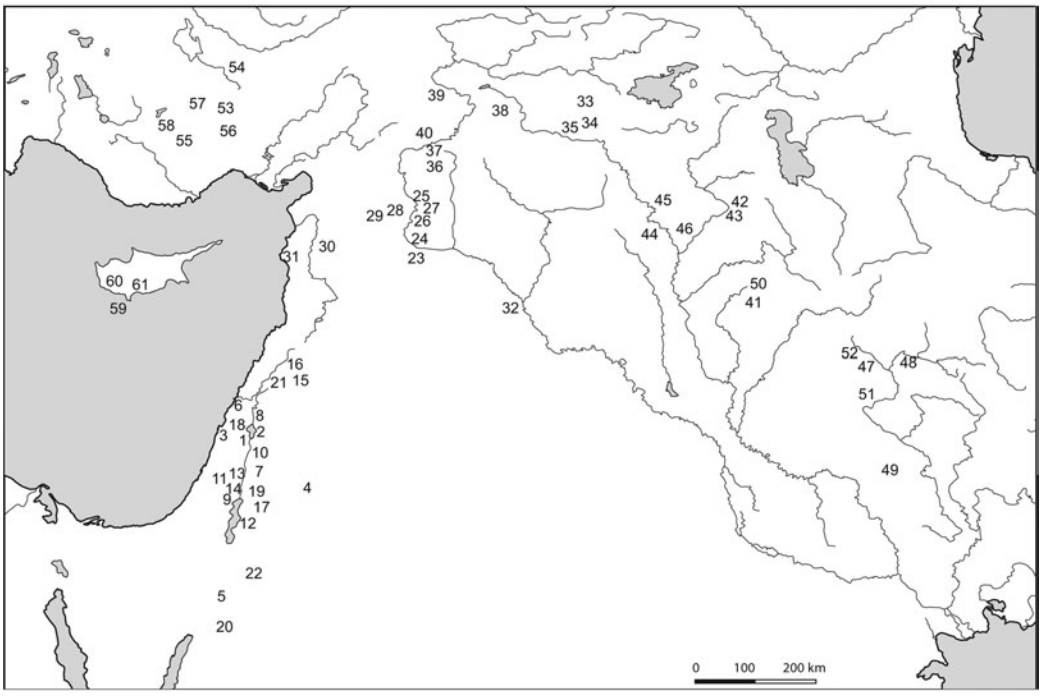
As an integral part of life, religion played varying roles in instigating and producing change. In the early part of the sequence at Çatalhöyük from 7400 to 6500 BC, the vital forces at play were productive of transformative change. Religion was central to a complex world in which the community was constituted by sodalities akin to mystery cults, dominated by symbols such as the leopard and the bear. But in particular, the ancestors and the wild bull were the foci around which social groups formed and developed relations with each other. But around 6500 BC, this system became restrictive and constraining, preventing change. The social focus on wild bulls and ancestors worked well for a long time. It allowed resilience and flexibility in a society based on a diversity of resources. But around 6500 BC, as society became more dependent on the more intensive herding of sheep and domestic cattle, the older system broke down. Religion now became part of a new way of life in which separate productive entities were linked by common religious doctrines and by the circulation of religious tokens and beliefs. These claims will be explored in detail later and in the chapters that follow.



1.1. The chronological relationships between sites in the Middle East and Turkey. *Source*: Zeder 2011.

History and Background to the Project

The focus of this project, Çatalhöyük East (7400–6000 BC) in central Turkey, is one of the best known Neolithic sites in Anatolia and the Middle East, roughly contemporary with later Pre-Pottery and the following Pottery Neolithic in the Levant (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). It became well known because of its large size (thirty-four acres and thirty-five hundred to eight thousand people), with eighteen levels inhabited over fourteen hundred years and dense concentrations of "art" in the form of wall paintings, wall reliefs, sculptures, and installations. Within Anatolia, and particularly within central Anatolia, recent research has



1.2. Distribution of main Late Epipaleolithic and Neolithic sites in the Near East. 1, Ohalo II; 2, Ein Gev IV; 3, Neve David; 4, Kharaheh IV; 5, Beidha; 6, Hayonim; 7, Wadi al-Hammeh 27; 8, 'Ain Mallaha; 9, Jericho; 10, Iraq ed Dubb; 11, Hatoula; 12, Dhra'; 13, Netiv Hagdud; 14, Gigal I; 15, Aswad; 16, Ghoraife; 17, Wadi el-Jilat 7; 18, Yiftah'el; 19, 'Ain Ghazal; 20, Basta; 21, Ramad; 22, Khirbet Hammam; 23, Abu Hureyra; 24, Mureybit; 25, Dja'de; 26, Jerf el Ahmar; 27, Kosak Shamali; 28, Halula; 29, Qaramel; 30, Tel el Kerkh; 31, Ras Shamra; 32, Bouqras; 33, Hallan Çemi; 34, Demirköy; 35, Körtik; 36, Göbekli Tepe; 37, Nevalı Çori; 38, Çayönü; 39, Cafer Höyük; 40, Gritille; 41, Palegawra; 42, Shanidar cave; 43, Zawi Chemi Shanidar; 44, Qermez Dere; 45, Nemrik; 46, M'lefaat; 47, Asiab; 48, Ganj Dareh; 49, Ali Kosh; 50, Jarmo; 51, Guran; 52, Sarab; 53, Pınarbaşı A; 54, Aşıklı Höyük; 55, Suberde; 56, Can Hasan III; 57, Çatalhöyük; 58, Erbaba; 59, Aetokremnos; 60, Mylouthikia; 61, Shillourokambos.
Source: Zeder 2011.

shown that there are local sequences that lead up to and prefigure Çatalhöyük (Baird 2007, 2008; Gérard and Thissen 2002; Özdoğan 2002). In southeast Turkey, the earlier sites of Çayönü (Özdoğan and Özdoğan 1998) and Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2001, 2006) already show substantial agglomeration and elaborate symbolism. In central Anatolia, Aşıklı Höyük (Esin and Harmankaya 1999) has dense packed housing through the millennium prior to Çatalhöyük. There are many other sites contemporary, or partly contemporary, with Çatalhöyük that are known in central Anatolia and the adjacent Burdur-Lakes region (Duru 1999; Gérard and Thissen 2002). Yet Çatalhöyük retains a special significance because of the complex narrative nature of its art, and many syntheses

1.3. View of the Çatalhöyük excavations undertaken by James Mellaart in the 1960s. *Source*: Ian Todd and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

(e.g., by Cauvin 1994 or Mithen 2003) give it a special place. Much of the symbolism of the earlier Neolithic and later (into historic times) periods of the Middle East can be "read" in terms of the evidence from Çatalhöyük, and the rich evidence from the site enables interpretation of the evidence from other sites.

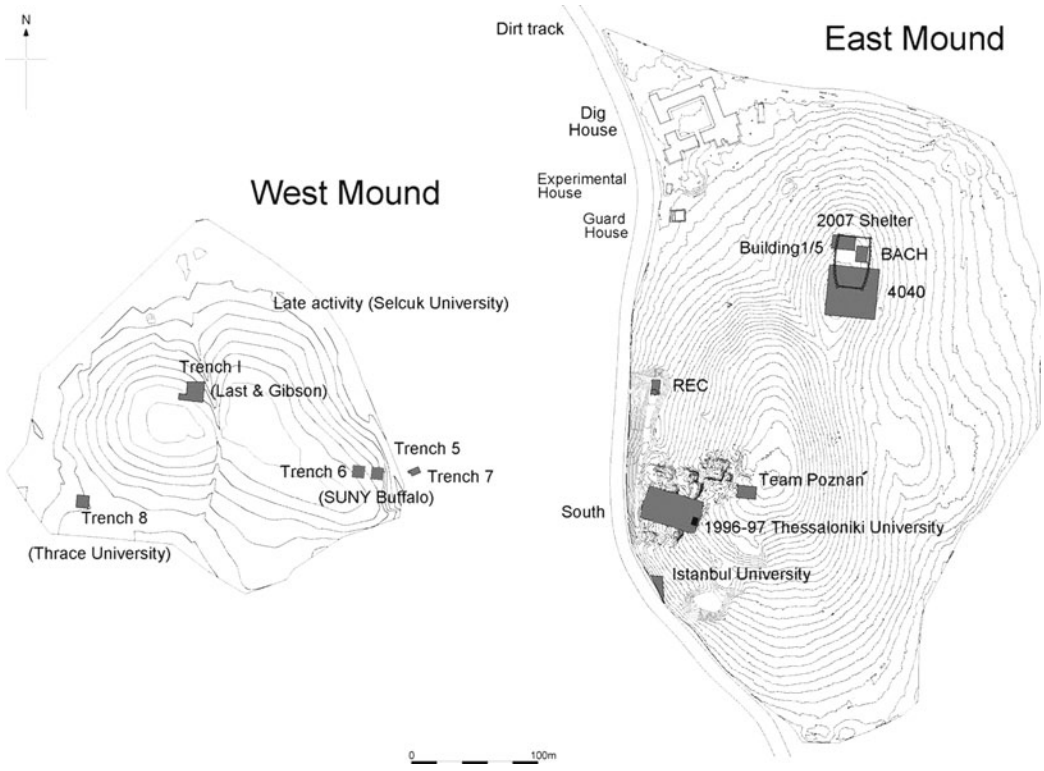
The site was first excavated by James Mellaart in the 1960s (e.g., 1967) (Figures 1.3 and 1.4). After 1965 it was abandoned until a new project began in 1993 (Hodder 1996, 2000, 2005a, b, c, 2006, 2007). Through both projects, only 5 percent of the mound has been excavated, but the whole mound has been sampled using surface survey, surface pickup, geophysical prospection, and surface scraping (see reports in Hodder 1996). More than two hundred houses have so far been excavated by Mellaart and the current project. The main architectural components of the site are densely clustered houses, with areas of refuse or midden between them. The art and symbolism and burial all occur within houses. There is evidence of productive activities in all houses, in midden areas, and on partial second stories. None of the sampling has found evidence of large public buildings, ceremonial centers, specialized

1.4. Building with leopard relief, excavated by James Mellaart.

areas of production, or cemeteries. The population of the settlement at any one time (between thirty-five hundred and eight thousand) has been conservatively estimated (Cessford 2005b) by using a variety of techniques, and making a variety of assumptions about how many houses were inhabited at any one time.

Although more than two hundred houses have been excavated at Çatalhöyük, a relatively small number have been fully excavated by the present project using modern scientific techniques. Many other buildings have been partly excavated by the present project, but the buildings have been put on public display and so have not been completely excavated. All of the extensive excavation in the 1960s took place without screening, and with limited recording and no scientific analysis (except radiocarbon dating). It remains the case that only 5 percent of the mound has been excavated, and a very small proportion of that excavation using modern scientific techniques resulted in fully excavated houses.

In the earliest phase of the current project (1993–1995), we concentrated on regional survey and on planning and studying the surface of the mounds, conducting surface pickup, drawing eroded profiles of the



1.5. Excavation areas at Çatalhöyük.
Source: Camilla Mazzucato and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

earlier excavation trenches, and using geophysical prospection. We also undertook a reevaluation of the material in museums that had been excavated by Mellaart (Hodder 1996).

In the second phase of fieldwork and publication (1996–2002) the research aim focused on individual buildings. We excavated in two main areas on the East Mound (Figure 1.5). In the northern area of the East Mound we concentrated on excavating buildings (Buildings 1 and 5 and Building 3 in the BACH Area) in great detail in order to discern depositional processes and in order to understand how individual houses functioned. In the South Area we continued the trenches that had been started by Mellaart in order to understand the overall sequence of the site and to see how individual houses were rebuilt and reused over time. At the same time paleoenvironmental work was conducted, regional survey continued (Baird 2002) and excavations were undertaken on the later Chalcolithic mound at Çatalhöyük West (Figure 1.5). Publication

of the monographs for this second phase of work was completed in 2007 (Hodder 2005a, b, c, 2006, 2007). The methods used by the project were published in an earlier volume (Hodder 2000).

The research aims for the third phase of the project (2003–2012) turned from individual houses to the social geography of the settlement as a whole and larger community structure. Excavation took place from 2003 to 2008, with postexcavation from 2009 to 2012. Extensive excavation took place in a new area of the site, specifically in the 4040 Area in the northern part of the mound (Figure 1.6), and in 2008 a shelter was erected over part of this area (Figure 1.7). Excavation also continued in the South shelter (Figure 1.8) so that we could explore the organization of architecture in the upper levels of the site and link our results to the work done by Mellaart in this area of the site. Excavations by other teams, especially the TP Team led by Arek Marciniak of Poznan University and Lech Czerniak from the University of Gdansk in Poland, and by the IST Team led by Mihriban Özbaşaran from Istanbul University, allowed further exploration of the upper levels. And on the following Chalcolithic West Mound, excavation by three teams (University of Thrace at Edirne led by Burçin Erdoğu, Selcuk University at Konya led by Ahmet Tırpan and Asuman Baldıran, and Berlin University and SUNY Buffalo led by Peter Biehl and Eva Rosenstock) allowed an increased understanding of the developments in the sixth millennium BC.

In the 4040 Area the focus has been on understanding the variation among contemporary buildings. The new buildings and midden areas excavated here have allowed increased understanding of the social makeup of the mound. In particular, we have now clear evidence for the grouping of houses into small clusters that probably share ancestral burial houses termed "history houses" (discussed later), as well as larger-scale groupings into sectors of clustered houses bounded by midden areas and/or alleyways. In the South Area of the site our focus has been on a sequence of buildings in one "column" of houses (from the base of the column these are Buildings 65, 56, 44, and 10). This sequence of houses stacked one on top of the other over time has provided much clear evidence for strong microtraditions and repetitive practices that almost certainly indicate long-term occupancy of a "history house" by the same group. The recirculation of human body parts is certainly part of this occupancy (see later discussion). For the chronological relationships among different parts of the site see Table 1.1.

1.6. Map of buildings excavated in the North or 4040 Area of Çatalhöyük.
Source: Camilla Mazzucato and Çatalhöyük Research Project.