

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-15019-4 - Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Catalhoyuk as a Case Study

Edited by Ian Hodder

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Probing religion at Çatalhöyük: An interdisciplinary experiment

Ian Hodder

The aim of this volume is to present an interdisciplinary study of the role of spirituality and religious ritual in the emergence of complex societies, involving natural scientists, archaeologists, anthropologists, philosophers and theologians in a novel, field-based context. Throughout the project, from 2006 to 2008, members convened at Çatalhöyük in central Turkey for a week each summer and also met in seminars at Stanford University. At the site they talked with the field team and spent time in the specialist laboratories discussing ways in which the data from the site could inform the main questions addressed by the project. Toward the end of the project, members undertook to write chapters for this volume, either singly or in collaboration. The volume presented here resulted from this experiment in bringing scholars from diverse backgrounds to work with archaeologists ‘at the trowel’s edge’ at Çatalhöyük. During our discussions it became clear that many participants would prefer to place the terms ‘religion’ and ‘civilization’ in the book’s title in quotation marks, as will be described later in this chapter and in Chapter 12. But whatever the difficulties with these terms and the lack of interdisciplinary agreement about their use, productive interactions took place that provided new insights into the interpretation of both Çatalhöyük and the Neolithic in Anatolia and the Middle East.

I am very grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for its support of the project on which this book is based, and to the participants in the project, who so willingly took on such an unusual task. I am also grateful to all the members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, on whose long years of research this project was able to build, and in particular to Shahina Farid. Several anonymous reviewers provided helpful advice, and I am grateful to Lynn Meskell for her advice and guidance.

Introduction to the project

For about 140,000 years before the start of the Holocene, anatomically modern humans lived in small groups of relatively mobile hunter-gatherers. Then in a relatively short time after 12,000 BC, human groups began to settle down, adopt agriculture and take many of the steps that we associate with ‘civilization’. The reasons given for this shift have predominantly been climatic change, population increase and economic and ecological factors, although social and cognitive factors have increasingly been included (Bender 1978; Hayden 1990; Renfrew 1998). The aim of the proposed study is to explore the extent to which spiritual life and religious ritual played a role in this momentous shift.

The aims of the current excavations at Çatalhöyük in central Turkey (7400–6000 BC) are to explore a site of great importance for our understanding of the first steps toward ‘civilization’ and to understand its art, symbolism and ritual. The site occurs several thousand years after the earliest domesticated plants and several thousand years before the cities and states of Mesopotamia and Egypt, to which the term ‘civilization’ is often applied. But its very large size (34 acres), its elaborate narrative art, the occurrence of burials beneath house floors and its remarkable preservation mean that it has taken its place as key to the understanding of both early settled agricultural life (Cauvin 1994; Mithen 2003) and the overall process that led from settled villages to urban agglomerations.

This foundational moment in the development of human society is usually studied by archaeologists and natural scientists working in close collaboration. In fact, this period of prehistory has been characterized by the interaction of, for example, palaeoclimatologists, pollen analysts and archaeologists. The emergence of settled life has remained the domain of scientific and anthropological discussion. Recent work has increasingly drawn attention to the importance of mind, meaning, symbol, ritual and religion (e.g., Cauvin 1994; Donald 1991; Hodder 1990; Renfrew 1998; Verhoeven 2002). But there has not been a wider discussion among anthropologists of religion, philosophers and theologians. This volume seeks to create such a dialogue, but in a concrete way, teasing apart the evidence from one particular site.

History and background of the project

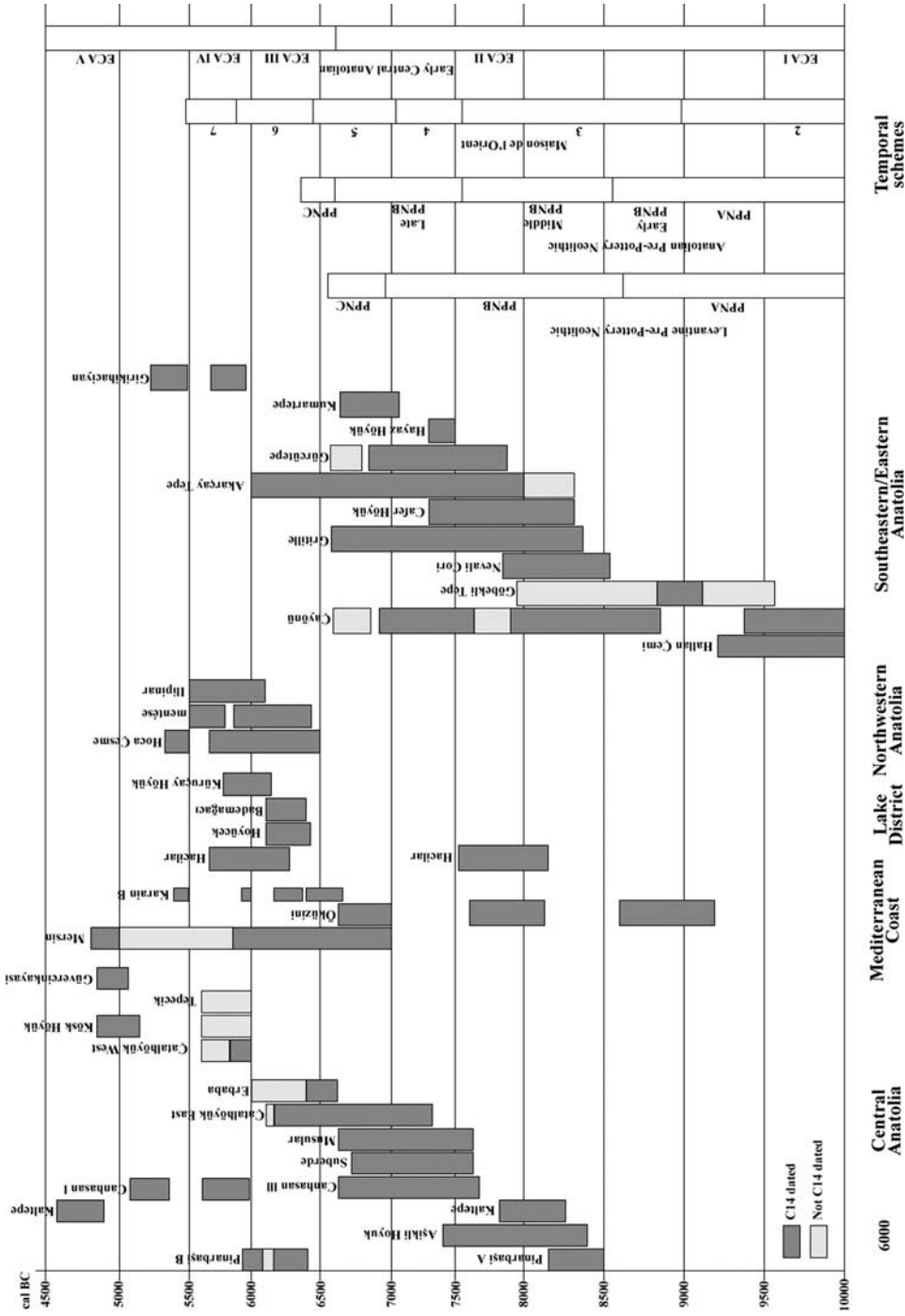
The focus of this study, Çatalhöyük East (7400–6000 BC) in central Turkey, is one of the best-known Neolithic sites in Anatolia and the

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Middle East, roughly contemporary with later Pre-Pottery and the following Pottery Neolithic in the Levant (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). It became well known because of its large size (34 acres and 3,500–8,000 people), with 18 levels inhabited over 1,400 years, and its dense concentration of ‘art’ in the form of wall paintings, wall reliefs, sculptures and installations. Within Anatolia, particularly central Anatolia, recent research has shown that there are local sequences that lead up to and prefigure Çatalhöyük (Baird 2007, 2008; Gérard and Thissen 2002; Özdoğan 2002). In south-east Turkey, the earlier villages of Çayönü (Özdoğan and Özdoğan 1998) and Göbekli Tepe (Schmidt 2001) already show substantial agglomeration and elaborate symbolism. In central Anatolia, Aşıklı Höyük (Esin and Harmankaya 1999) has densely 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 (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 (e.g., 1967) in the 1960s (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% 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). So far, 166 houses have been excavated by Mellaart in 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 roofs of houses. None of the sampling shows evidence of large public buildings, ceremonial centers, specialized areas of production or cemeteries. The population of the settlement at any one time (between 3,500 and 8,000) has been conservatively estimated (Cessford 2005) using a variety of techniques and making a variety of assumptions about how many houses were inhabited at any one time.



1.1. The dating of Çatalhöyük in relation to other sites in Anatolia and the Middle East. *Source:* Craig Cessford and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

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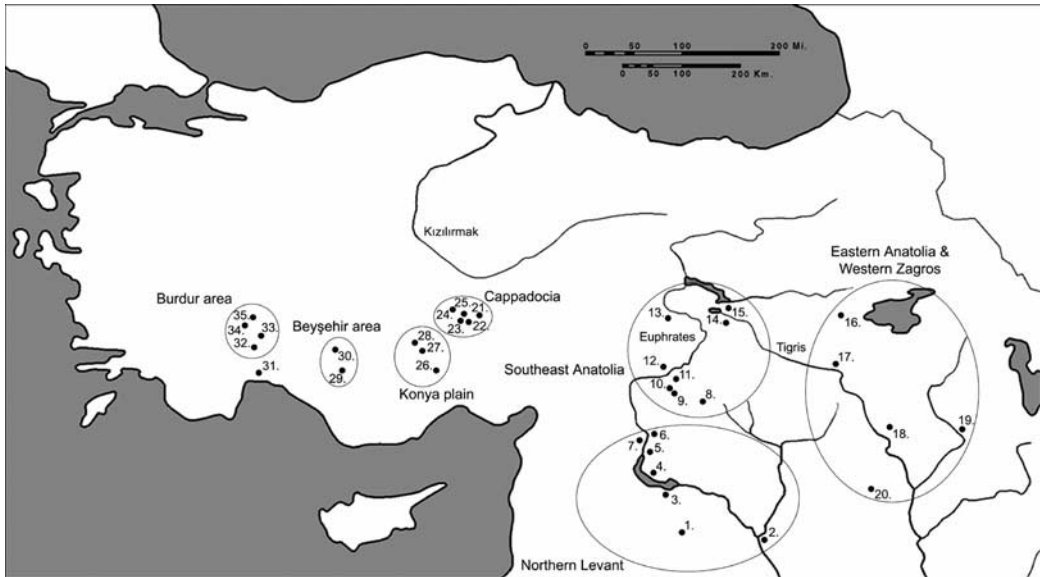
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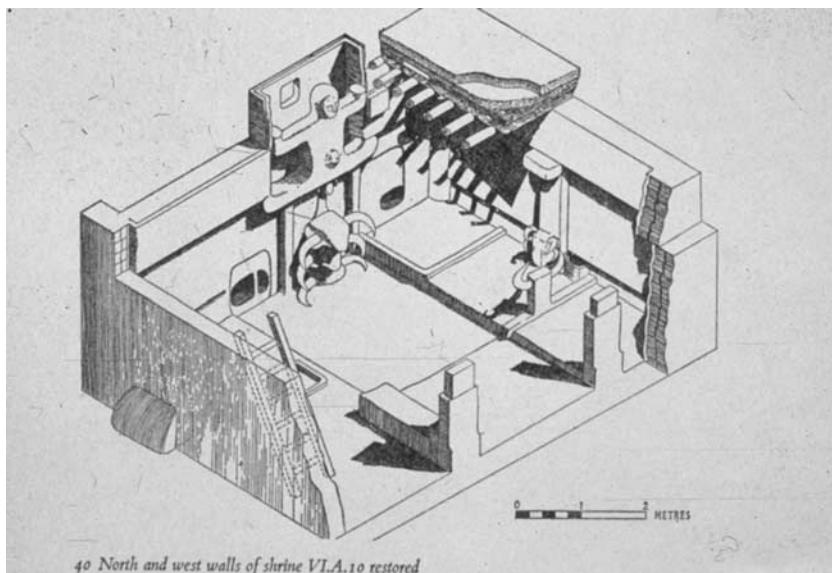
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1.2. Map of Neolithic sites in Anatolia and adjacent regions. *Source:* Eleni Asouti. Map showing some of the main Neolithic and Epipalaeolithic sites in the main known regions in Anatolia and the Middle East. 1. El Kowm, 2. Bouqras, 3. Abu Hureyra, 4. Mureybet, 5. Jerf el Ahmar, 6. Dja'de, 7. Haloula, 8. Göbekli Tepe, 9. Biris Mezarlığı, 10. Söğüt Tarlası, 11. Nevali Çori, 12. Gritille, 13. Cafer Höyük, 14. Çayönü, 15. Boytepe, 16. Hallan Çemi, 17. Demirci, 18. Nemrik, 19. Zawi Chemi Shanidar (Palaeolithic-Epipalaeolithic), 20. Qermez Dere, 21. Gedikpaşa, 22. Aşıklı Höyük, 23. Musular, 24. Yelibelen Tepesi, 25. Kaletepe, 26. Can Hasan, 27. Pınarbaşı A & B, 28. Çatalhöyük, 29. Erbaba, 30. Suberde, 31. Öküzini (Epipalaeolithic), 32. Bademağacı, 33. Höyücek, 34. Hacılar, 35. Kuruçay (From Asouti 2005).

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





1.4. Reconstruction of 'Shrine' 10 from Level VIB, excavated by Mellaart. *Source:* James Mellaart and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

Although 166 houses have been excavated at Çatalhöyük, only 18 buildings have been fully excavated in the present project using modern scientific techniques (Figure 1.5). Many other buildings have been partly excavated, 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% 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 (1993–5), we concentrated on regional survey and on planning and studying the surface of the mounds, conducting surface pickup, drawing eroded profiles of the 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).

During the second phase of fieldwork and publication (1996–2002), the research aim focused on individual buildings. We excavated two main areas on the East Mound (Figure 1.6). In the northern area of the East Mound, we concentrated on excavating buildings (Buildings 1 and 5 and

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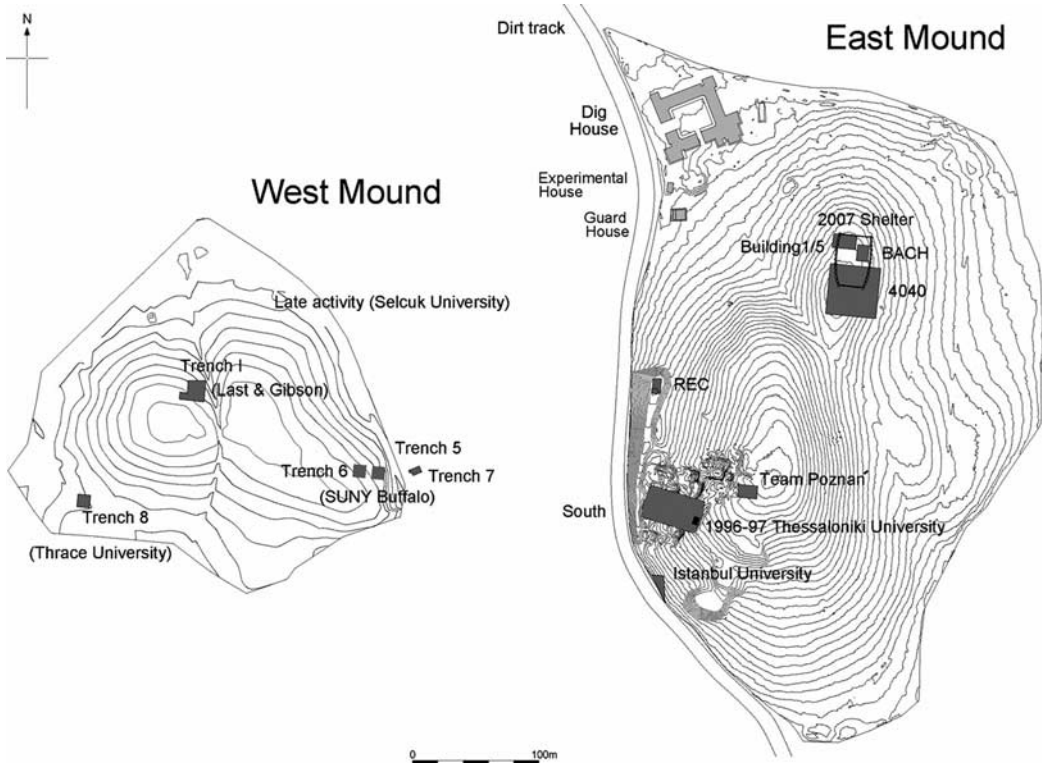
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1.5. Excavation in Building 5 by the current project. *Source:* Jason Quinlan and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

Building 3 in the BACH Area) in great detail in order to discern depositional processes and 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. Simultaneously, palaeoenvironmental work was conducted (Roberts et al. 1999), regional survey continued (Baird 2002) and excavations were undertaken on the later Chalcolithic mound at Çatalhöyük West (Figure 1.6). 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 (2003–12) 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 the 4040 Area in the northern part of the mound (Figure 1.7), and in 2008 a shelter was



1.6. Excavation areas at Çatalhöyük. *Source:* Shahina Farid and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

erected over part of this area (Figure 1.8). Excavation also continued in the South shelter (Figure 1.9) 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 of the University of Gdansk in Poland, and by the IST team led by Mihriban Özbaşaran of 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 Erdoğan, 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 6th 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

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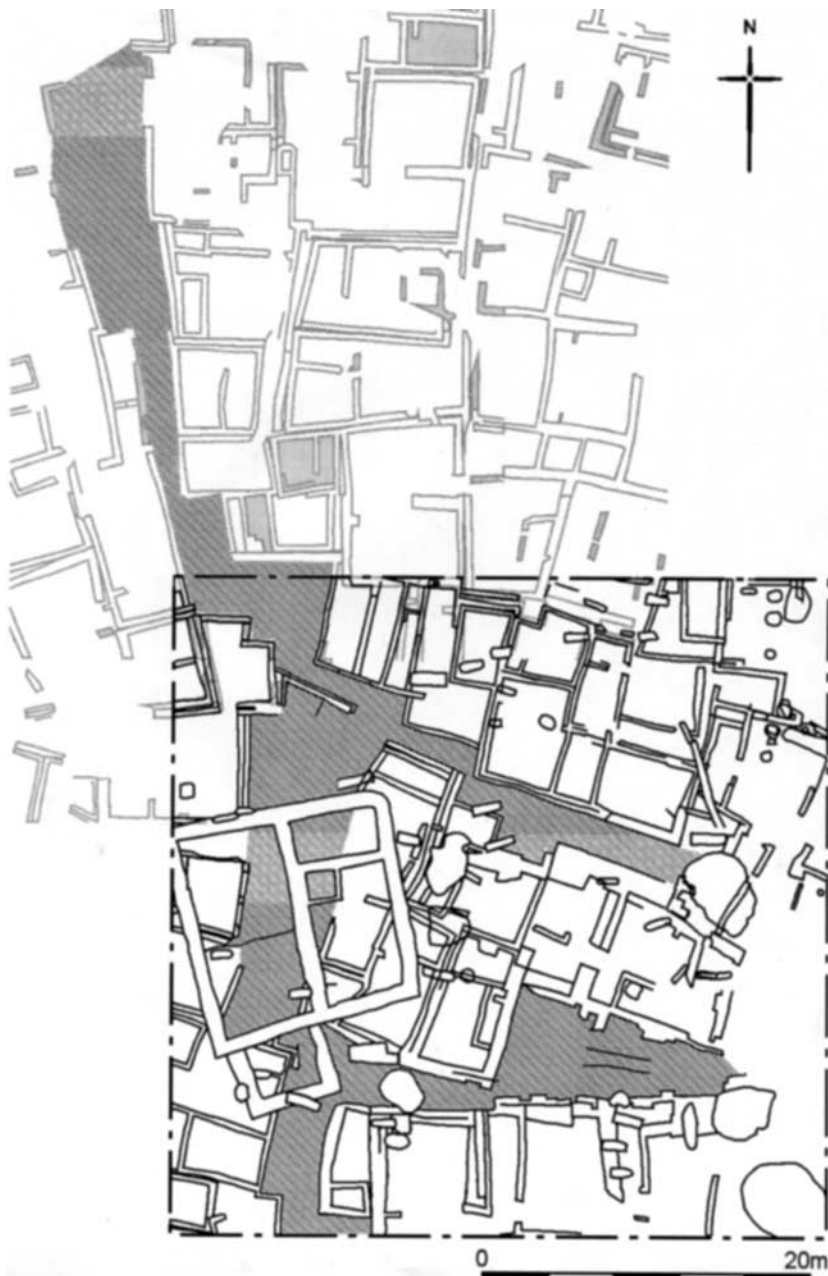
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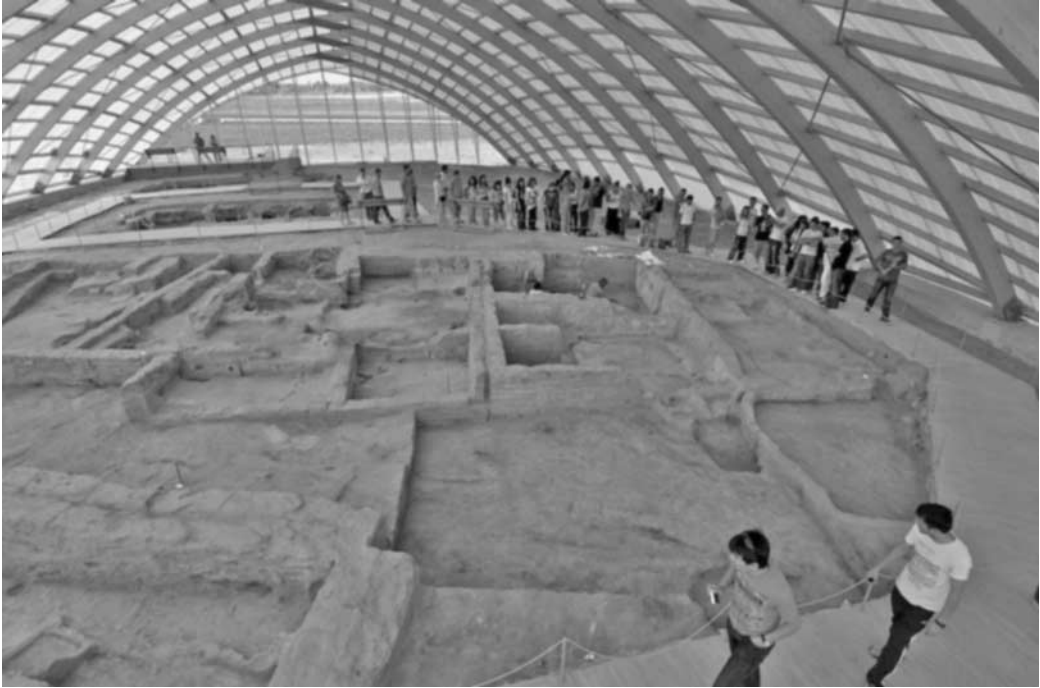
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1.7. Buildings in the 4040 Area. *Source:* Jason Quinlan and Çatalhöyük Research Project.



1.8. Shelter over the 4040 Area. *Source:* Jason Quinlan and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

makeup of the mound. In particular we now have clear evidence for the grouping of houses into small clusters that probably share ancestral burial houses, as well as larger-scale groupings into sectors of clustered houses bounded by midden areas and/or alleyways (as shown in Figure 1.7). 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 (known as the Building 10 sequence) stacked one on top of the other over time has provided much clear evidence for strong micro-traditions and repetitive practices that almost certainly indicate long-term occupancy by the same group. The recirculation of human body parts is certainly part of this occupancy (as discussed later in the chapter).

Conducting the dialogues on religion and spirituality

Çatalhöyük is perhaps best known for its elaborate symbolism (e.g., Figure 2.1), which has often been interpreted in cultic, religious or spiritual terms (Cauvin 1994; Hodder 1990; Mellaart 1967). During the third