

# Section 3 – Settlement

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## Çatal Hoyuk

Elsewhere, a different and, initially at least, more successful societal model appeared. A thousand kilometres to the north and west of Jericho, near Konya in modern Turkey, is the next great example of early settlement. It is known today as Çatal Hoyuk, and it has been a far richer source of information about our early settled ancestors than Tell es-Sultan. Jericho, although abandoned for long periods, was settled throughout the Bronze Age, meaning that the earlier buildings were plundered. Çatal Hoyuk was never resettled after it was abandoned, and appears to have remained untouched until it was discovered in 1958. The British archaeologist James Mellaart led several expeditions to the site during the 1960s before becoming embroiled in a row with the Turkish government. This dispute led to the site being abandoned by archaeology until 1993, when the current investigations began, led by Ian Hodder, a former student of Mellaart.

Çatal Hoyuk sits on a tell, or mound, rising twenty metres. Some distance away from the larger settlement there is another mound that was settled at the same time. Neither has a defensive wall or fortifications. Between the two mounds, a branch of the Çarşamba River flowed. The fertile alluvial plain was well-watered and full of game. Eventually, this plain would be cultivated.

The houses were built together in such a way that they were like the cells in a honeycomb, with access via timber ladders or stairs, through hatches. They had no windows, and their roofs were effectively the roadways and public spaces. The materials were simple: sundried mud bricks and timber.

As is often the case, the settlement renewed itself by building on its ruins. Older homes were partially demolished into the space they occupied, and new ones built on top. Archaeologists have identified eighteen layers of such rebuilding.

Çatal Hoyuk was established around 7500 BCE, reached its peak five hundred years later, and was abandoned around 5700 BCE. This is a longer time than that which has elapsed since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in Europe. Throughout this period, the pace of social change appears to be progressive, with no evidence of cathartic upheaval or any sign of war. According to Hodder, the difference between the oldest and youngest layers is considerable and points to the development of settled culture as a process that began with settlement and then

moved to cultivation. The people initially continued their hunter-gatherer lifestyle while living a settled, communal life.<sup>1</sup>

The culture was simple and conservative, yet at the same time refined. Although population levels probably varied, it is estimated that Çatal Hoyuk was home to around 5000 to 8000 people.

The interiors of the homes in Çatal Hoyuk were rendered with lime plaster. Lime plaster has many advantages: it is relatively easy to make and apply and it is somewhat astringent, keeping the building healthy. The whiteness also would have brightened the windowless interiors. Because of the construction of the buildings, people, supplies and the smoke from cooking on the open hearths and in the ovens inside all had to pass through the trap in the ceiling. The open fires had no flues, so the walls and ceilings would have blackened quickly, which is probably the reason the plaster was frequently reapplied.

Mats woven of rushes covered the floors and were also used on the roofs. Inside, raised mud-brick benches served as beds and couches. The houses had storage spaces reached through low doorways, but family life appears to have been communal, with everyone sharing the same living and sleeping space. This shared space must also have been the space for sex, providing a link with the sexual practices in polyamorous matriarchal cultures and once again disproving the assertion that human sex is always private. Perhaps, in very hot weather, people moved onto the roofs to sleep, as they would later do in Uruk.

No public buildings have been found at Çatal Hoyuk and all the spaces are domestic. Some have intricate murals, but their significance remains obscure.

The flat space above the homes provided a safe place for children to play and learn. While it is unlikely that schools as we know them existed, it is almost certain that the mothers would have come together on the roofs of their houses to chat and work while their children were around them. On adjoining rooftops, people were perhaps burning limestone or lime sand to make plaster, shaping stone tools, or carving wood for furniture and farming implements. The children would have learned the skills of adulthood in this place by watching and helping.

Also on the roofs were large ovens. It is possible that the roofs were, in part, a communal dining area, perhaps protected by from the elements by light structures. Perhaps this was a regular or even daily occurrence, or perhaps it happened on special days like the solstices or other celestial festivals. The flat roof of the town may have served in exactly the same way as market-places in later towns, with the advantage of being much more economical of land.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodder, Ian. *A Journey to 9000 years ago*. Cited by Ziflioglu, Vercihan. Turkish Daily News. January 2008. (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=ajourney-to-9000-years-ago-2008-01-17>)

A feature of life at Çatal Hoyuk was the scrupulous cleanliness of the people. Archaeologists have found very little refuse or waste inside the houses, and there are middens outside the settlement filled with household refuse and large quantities of wood ash.

In Çatal Hoyuk, we are not looking at a 'primitive' culture, but a vibrant and sophisticated one. The people were house-proud and liked to make their homes beautiful, and their communal life was colourful and peaceful. It is very likely that the people extended the care they took in the appearance of their homes to their persons, and would have decorated themselves. James Mellaart commented on the obsidian beads he found, indicating that the people wore jewellery.<sup>2</sup> They may have dressed their hair. This was a thriving, successful and materially and spiritually rich society.

Early on in his investigation of Çatal Hoyuk, Mellaart discovered many female figurines. These were carved from marble, limestone, schist, calcite, basalt and alabaster as well as moulded from clay. Particularly well-known is a seated matron, flanked by two great cats, possibly lions. She is obese; her breasts are huge and pendulous, and her belly distended and sagging. Her expression is stern and impassive. Mellaart thought that these figurines indicated that the Great Mother was the principal deity of the culture.

In his book, *Catal Huyuk: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia*, Mellaart says: '...statues of a female deity far outnumber those of the male deity, who moreover, does not appear to be represented at all after Level VI.'<sup>3</sup>

Hodder also found figurines. Of one, he says:

'There are full breasts on which the hands rest, and the stomach is extended... the arms are very thin, and then on the back of the figurine one sees a depiction of either a skeleton or the bones of a very thin and depleted human. The ribs and vertebrae are clear, as are the scapulae and the main pelvic bones. The figurine can be interpreted in a number of ways – as a woman turning into an ancestor, as a woman associated with death, or as death and life conjoined. It is possible that the lines around the body represent wrapping rather than ribs... Perhaps (it) was related to some special role of the female in relation to death as much as to the roles of mother and nurture.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mellaart, James. *Catal Huyuk: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia*. Thames and Hudson. 1967.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Hodder, Ian. *New finds and new interpretations at Catalhoyuk*. Çatalhöyük 2005 Archive Report. Catalhoyuk Research Project, Institute of Archaeology. 2005.

Here, Hodder appears to be unaware that the Goddess not only represents ‘mother and nurture’, but also old age, sickness and death. She is both loving and terrifying, the bringer of death as well as of life. The depiction of the Goddess as death, especially as death and life conjoined, is exactly what we should expect to find in a Goddess culture.

Renowned archaeologist Marija Gimbutas explained,

‘Mother Goddess is a more complex image than most people think...She was giver of life...and at the same time she was the wielder of the destructive powers of nature.’<sup>5</sup>

Moving from the spiritual to the social-political, Hodder says:

‘If one’s social status was of high importance in Çatalhöyük, the body and head were separated after death. The number of female and male skulls found during the excavations is almost equal.’<sup>6</sup>

From this and other evidence, such as food remains, Hodder believes that at Çatal Hoyuk there was equality between men and women. This equality, he says, means there was no matriarchy.

This conclusion is flawed. Hodder’s definition of a matriarchy is a patriarchal one. It assumes that in a matriarchal society, there will be exact equivalents to the hierarchical structure of power that is found in patriarchies. There will be queens instead of kings, women warriors instead of male ones. Civic governance will be by formal hierarchies of women; the laws will be made by women, and the judges and enforcers will be women.

There is no evidence whatsoever that, at any time in human history, such a society has ever existed. The matriarchy is not the patriarchy inverted. The definition of a phenomenon must arise organically, from our observations and other empirical evidence. We cannot predetermine the parameters that might define a phenomenon and then, because we do not find these, claim that the phenomenon does not exist!

Peggy Reeves Sanday has written:

‘Defining matriarchy as the mirror image of patriarchy is based on two faulty assumptions. The first assumption is that women must be like men to occupy a central position in society. The second is that social prominence for either sex is founded only in

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<sup>5</sup> Gimbutas, Marija. *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*. University of California Press. (2nd Revised edition.) 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Hodder, Ian. *A Journey to 9000 years ago*.

social power as we know it, which always means power over people...Defining matriarchy either in terms of female rule or by reference solely to mother goddesses blinds us to the social complexities of women's actual and symbolic role in partnership societies... mainstream scholars looked no further and proclaimed universal male dominance. *This is a mistake.*' (our italics.)<sup>7</sup>

Hodder, in common with many others, is making the presumption that the matriarchy is exactly like the patriarchy, but with women in charge and men playing a subservient role. Were this misrepresentation true then it would indeed be hard to see why men, with their greater physical strength and tendency towards violence, would put up with the subjugation.

Within the patriarchy there is a self-reinforcing agenda which holds that the only viable structure for a developed society is the pyramidal, hierarchical, top-down, elitist patriarchal model, based on a military command structure. The patriarchy promotes this as the only natural form of human culture; not merely one possible model. But this is a deception; other models have existed and still do, even today, despite millennia of the patriarchy attempting to destroy them.

These other models exhibit no trace of the patriarchy, or restrict its influence to the society of men. To understand the social order that is operating in these cultures, we must first observe and note the common factors. Among the most significant of these are: women's complete control over their bodies and fertility; non-proprietary human bonding arrangements; the open acceptance of transgender people; the acceptance of same-sex bonding; the absence of organised military structures; the absence of monumental buildings and the absence of elevated status for either men or women. When we see these factors we can say that the patriarchy is not in control. Once we take away all that defines the patriarchy, then we are left with another, different system, and that system defines itself as the matriarchy.

From this standpoint, of observation rather than presumption, we can offer a supported definition of the matriarchy: it is a collective culture based on independent, but interdependent, often closely related mothers who organise society for the safe upbringing of their children. The matriarchy is not the patriarchy with women in place of men, but something altogether different.

Observation of wider human society reveals that, although there may be variations in the appearances of specific models, there are in fact only two cultural alternatives. One is based on violence and competition and is hierarchical, with males always having higher status. The other is based on peaceful cooperation, is firmly egalitarian, and in it women and men are of equal status. These are the patriarchy and the matriarchy.

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<sup>7</sup> Sanday, Peggy Reeves. *Matriarchal Values and World Peace: The Case of the Minangkabau*. Paper delivered to the 2nd World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, Texas, 2005.

At Çatal Hoyuk, there is no evidence of kingship, a ruling hierarchy, war or violence; there is no city wall, no defences at all. The settlement is in plain sight. There are no palaces or grand dwellings, and women and men are of equal status. This culture is not representative of the patriarchy. Therefore, we may conclude that a matriarchy was operating at Çatal Hoyuk.

When people began to settle, the two cultural groups within hunter-gatherer society, one based on mothers and gatherers and the other on male hunters, came together more permanently. Each had its internal hierarchy and neither was dominant over the other. We now know, from the findings at Çatal Hoyuk as well as discoveries in other parts of Anatolia, that the first settlers were hunter-gatherers, and continued this lifestyle for hundreds of years. They developed agriculture slowly as a result of settlement, not the other way round. Because of this, it is very likely that they maintained the social structures they had established over thousands of years of wandering. In other words, women and men were equals but they had different spheres of authority: women within the home and family and men outside.

Hodder points to another hypothesis, which is that the houses in Çatal Hoyuk were clustered according to extended family units. The people buried their dead inside their homes, and he believes that when the oldest person in the family group died, the house was ceremonially caved in on itself, locking the dead into the remains. This begs the question 'who was that oldest person?' Was it a patriarch or a matriarch?

In traditional society as it currently exists in the Philippines, parts of Africa, Southern Europe and elsewhere, we see extended families based around a matriarch. In the Philippines, one reason for the existence of this matriarchy appears to be that so many of the men work away from home.<sup>8</sup> This is a parallel to the two-group social structure we see in hunter-gatherers, adapted to settled living.

Frequently, in such Filipina homes, several members of the family may sleep in the same room, which is often the main communal living area. Three or more generations live together this way, with the head of the household being the grandmother, who is often also the owner of the property. Grouped together in one 'compound' may be several such homes, and frequently the women at the head of each family thus housed are sisters. Sometimes the compound is owned jointly by them, or it may be owned by a great-grandmother or even more senior mother, who has granted permission to her daughters to construct homes. In even older examples, there may be no distinct properties within the compound at all, just one big, rambling house, shared by

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<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the situation which has caused the matriarchy to be maintained amongst the Minangkabau of Indonesia.

everyone.<sup>9</sup> Decisions about the families, about common repairs to the properties and other communal matters, are made by the group of mothers.

In Çatal Hoyuk, there were no written codes or contracts because the people were not literate. Thus, it is likely that land tenure followed a similar model, and that this was the standard model in early settled cultures. It may be that this structure first appeared in settlements like Çatal Hoyuk and has simply persisted, overlooked or ignored by a patriarchal world-view obsessed by notions of 'legal possession'.<sup>10</sup>

When we take these factors into account, the picture of life at Çatal Hoyuk comes into better focus. In all likelihood it was little different from the domestic matriarchies we see today in much of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Hodder's suggestions about the extended family living in one sedentary locus do not in any way conflict with the notion of the matriarchy, as long as we understand what the core concept of matriarchy is – the extended family based on the oldest mother.

The above helps us to contextualise the question of whether the oldest person whose death provoked the demolition and rebuilding of homes in Çatal Hoyuk would have been a man or a woman. The answer must be that there is no good evidence to suggest that it could only have been a man. Rather, given also that women do, on average, live longer than men, the probability must be that most if not all would have been matriarchs.

The form of matriarchy present at Çatal Hoyuk would have been simply a development of how people lived in the nomadic hunter-gatherer era. The group of mothers lived and moved together with the children and formed the nucleus of the culture, while the men wandered far in search of game. The impetus for settlement came from women, who wanted a safe place in which to bear and raise their children with their families united around them. They settled first, while the men continued to travel far in search of game.

This interpretation also suggests that civic governance at Çatal Hoyuk was in the hands of women, who defined the matriarchal groups that were clustered together. Like the system of property tenure, this was probably an informal arrangement without the defined hierarchy that characterises patriarchal systems of government. There was no formal organisation, simply, as Hodder says, family groups 'doing their own thing' – and led by the matriarchs.

A number of figurines found at Çatal Hoyuk show a twinned pair of women. Each has four breasts and two heads. These may symbolise the sisterhood of women that was the basis of the

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<sup>9</sup> The basis of property tenure of Filipina homes like this may seem strange, at least to Western eyes. The reader should remember that Western property laws are based on the patriarchal system of ownership, and upon written codes.

<sup>10</sup> The patriarchal system of property ownership is one of the principal means by which the patriarchy divests the majority of wealth and concentrates it in the hands of a few.

culture, and Hodder has theorised that these figurines indicate the 'extended family'. This observation fits exactly with the others and supports the idea that the culture was composed of clans centred on women.

There are no palaces or other public buildings because these are a function of the display of status that is central to the patriarchy. In a matriarchy, they are not required since there is no hierarchy of status; the society is collective and cooperative and founded on sisterhood. It is only within the patriarchy that status is seen as a hierarchy of power, whether that is in military, political or economic terms, and the legal possession of property. In the matriarchy, it is seen in terms of motherhood and family.

The evidence of Çatal Hoyuk, far from challenging them, confirms the existence of both Goddess culture and a matriarchy.

Although Çatal Hoyuk was ultimately abandoned, the same agrarian, settled lifestyle appeared in many other areas and there it took hold.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The reasons are obscure but probably had to do with climate change or soil erosion or exhaustion caused by a combination of unsophisticated farming techniques, the systematic clearing of trees and the depredations of domestic goats.