

## Discussions about Catal Höyük with the Goddess community

There are many communities with an interest in Çatalhöyük. These include those seeking the origins of kilims, or those that wish to emphasise links between Anatolia and Europe. One of the most active groups is formed by those who believe the site is important in the emergence of the Goddess. The following is a discussion (via e-mail) between Anita Louise and Ian Hodder (Project director) about some of the questions raised by the Goddess movement.

We have decided to retain this discussion as a tribute to Anita Louise who died from cancer in April 2001. We on the project owe an enormous debt to her interest in our work and in her willingness to talk in a spirit of openness and constructive dialogue. We have lost a dear friend who has helped us to look at Çatalhöyük in new ways.

On 10 Jan 1998,  
Anita Louise wrote:

Dear Ian -

It seems to me that a statement by you explaining why a link to the Goddess community is relevant to the Catal project would be the perfect way to begin. I believe such a statement will really grab the reader's attention - the idea certainly grabs my attention, and I'm eager to read your statement.

I think it would be best for me to send my questions after I've read your statement so that there is a nice continuity. Nevertheless, I'm listing below a couple of things I've been thinking about. If they are too far afield, they can wait until a later, more appropriate time.

(1) Mellart identified three different types of peoples living at Catal Hoyuk. Is there any evidence that the different peoples varied at all in the way they utilized their dwellings, or in their use of decoration or symbols? Or is there apparently only one unified culture?

(2) When I read in a report on the Catal website that the micromorphological work as well as the fully studied ceramic materials indicated a lack of distinction between "shrine" and non-"shrine," I remembered a Native American teacher whose workshop I attended several years ago. One of the participants asked him, "How can we integrate our spiritual selves with our everyday selves?"

His response was, "You can't integrate them, they are one self." He told us we were asking the wrong question. The question we should be asking, he explained, is 'how can we make ourselves whole again?'

Do you think that we are seeing at Catal a culture that did not separate ritual and domestic functions, that did not separate the spiritual from the secular. Is "was this space a shrine?" the wrong question, and if so, what questions should we be asking?

Thank you for such a wonderful opportunity; I'm so happy to be doing this. I will be eagerly awaiting your response, as will a great many of my friends around the southwest U.S.

Sincerely, Anita

On 19 Jan, 1998,  
Ian Hodder wrote

Dear Anita, I think your message and questions provide an excellent start to a dialogue and so I have kept them above. Here is my response.

My feeling that there is a need for the Catal Archaeological Project to be in dialogue with the Goddess community stems largely from my interaction with the Goddess tours that have come to the site over the past 4 years. The groups that come are extremely varied. Some are very religious, others are very interested in the scientific work we are doing, some are all-women, some are feminist, and so on. But there has been an underlying theme in all - that they DO wish to talk to us and find out what we are doing. Even those that primarily come to pray, sing or dance at the site, do have questions about what we have found. I think it is important that we fulfil that need. The question is 'how?'

At one level it is simply a matter of providing information about our results. For example, we produce our scholarly volumes, we have a Newsletter, and there is a CD Rom. We can make all these available to the Goddess community, as to any other community interested in the site, such as those seeking the origins of kilims. We are building a small museum at the site, and we are reconstructing one of the Catal houses. All this will make for a better information flow, and this may satisfy many Goddess groups.

But it certainly has not satisfied some of the Goddess groups that have visited the site. Some have said 'but we are not interested in YOUR interpretations; they are already biased; we want to make our own interpretations'. This is an important challenge to archaeologists. WE cannot assume that the provision of 'raw data' is enough. This is because the data are never 'raw'. The data are immediately interpreted by the archaeologist. And it is quite possible that someone from the Goddess community would interpret the 'primary, raw data' differently.

We therefore need to include people from the Goddess community in the whole process of understanding the site. They, you, may have very different perspectives regarding all aspects of data collection. And these different perspectives may add a lot to the understanding of the site. Archaeologists tend to look at the data from a fairly narrow perspective, based on ethnographic or other archaeological research. The Goddess community will often have a very different point of view from which archaeologists can learn. Your point 2 is an example, and I will come back to that.

Of course, it is important that alternative interpretations are well grounded in the data from the site. There is a need for archaeologists to contribute to a scholarly dialogue with the Goddess community. Because of the need for this debate we have started to provide as much data about the site on the Web. I know you have looked at our Web site, and we plan to add a lot more data to that. Obviously it is impracticable to expect everyone in the Goddess community who is interested in the site to come and develop their ideas at the site itself. So we want to make the site data as accessible as possible on the Web, and to make the data easily understandable and useable. We hope it will be possible for people to add their own comments and interpretations at the Web site.

We are still some way from doing all this, but I hope what I have said answers your questions about my overall aim. I do think there would be benefits to archaeologists from a dialogue, and I hope the same would be true for the Goddess community. Your point 2 is an example. You have put your finger on a very interesting issue. Mellaart had originally thought that the 'Shrines' were separated

from domestic houses. But when we used modern scientific techniques to look at the floors in the buildings, we found that all of them, including the 'Shrines' had traces of daily activities on them. Also, we found that in all buildings there was a division of space between a 'clean' area, in which the floors were swept clean but under which burials sometimes occurred, and a 'dirty area' which did not have burials but had hearth and oven, food storage and preparation, and caches (hoards) of obsidian (such as projectile points). The 'art' and 'religious' symbolism tend to concentrate in the 'clean' areas of the houses.

What this suggests is that, as you say, there was a close connection between ritual and daily functions. There was a division within the house, but the house made a ritual/domestic whole. I certainly think that life was much more 'holistic' than we understand it today. I do not think that there was a separate religious elite. I think the religion was an integral part of daily life. It may be wrong to think of the Catal art as religious or symbolic at all. It may be more that people thought that they had to paint, or make relief sculptures, in order to achieve certain practical ends (such as make the crops grow, or prevent children from dying). I believe the symbolism was a central part of practical life.

As regards your first question, we no longer believe that there were different 'people' at Catalhoyuk. The techniques used to identify races at this period are now largely discredited. We will have to wait for DNA analysis of the ancient bones from the site before we can begin to answer such questions. We are starting a DNA programme but have not got any analyses back yet.

I hope all this helps. I imagine you may have questions about the role of women at Catalhoyuk, but I am sure we will come to that later. Let me know if you feel that this initial statement is helpful - I will try and be more brief in future!

Best wishes, Ian

On 1 Feb 1998,

Anita Louise wrote:

Dear Ian -

I believe you have taken a courageous position - both in acknowledging the value of the perspectives of the Goddess community, and in accepting the responsibility of the archaeologist to make the data available and to enter into a discourse and exchange of ideas. The ancient world is of interest to me primarily because I believe we can learn much about how to live more fully, more peacefully, and more creatively from ancient cultures. I realize that this belief can lead me to misinterpretations - I may see what I want to see, rather than what is actually before me. Of course, as you say, the data are never "raw," - everyone looking at the data will to some degree see what they want to see. That is why the process of dialoguing is so valuable, and I believe that many others will see the value, and will join in and participate in this process.

Here are my questions:

(1) I am very interested in any information that has come to light about women's roles and lives at Catalhoyuk.

(2) In Newsletter 2: 1995, under „Excavations: the north area,“ it is noted that "the plaster 'box' beneath a relief, the thin- but high-walled oven in room 70, and the subroom within 71 are all different from the buildings excavated by Mellaart. Since other such features (such as the Building 1 type of oven) were found elsewhere in the scraping of the northern eminence, it may be the case that different architectural practices occurred in different parts of Catalhoyuk East." Are these

different architectural practices occurring during the same time period? If so, how significant are the differences?

(3) Also from Newsletter 2, under „Ethnoarchaeology and social anthropology”, I am intrigued by this statement: "Nearly all our workmen come from the village and the impact of our presence is considerable. The types of knowledge about the site which circulate in the village are very different from our own." I am very curious about what the local people think about the site.

On 7 Feb, 1998

Ian Hodder wrote

(with interjections from Anita Louise dated 01 March)

Anita, here is my response to your questions. I wish I had more time to answer them; there is so much that could be said.

First, the question about women's roles at Catalhoyuk. This remains a very difficult question and one about which different members of the project would have especially divergent views. The member of the team most closely involved with 'gender archaeology' is Naomi Hamilton, whose email address is nhamilton@hsy1.ssc.ed.ac.uk.

My own view starts with the need to separate the role of women in mythology and symbolism from the roles of women in daily life. For the moment we can still say a lot more about the former. It is difficult to argue against the importance of women in the symbolism. Especially in the later levels at the site, the image of the enthroned or seated woman is powerful. There do not seem to be equivalent images of men, although as Naomi would be quick to point out, most of our representations of humans are 'sexless' - there is nothing on most figurines and clay models of humans to tell us whether they are men or women. The number of clear men and women figurines is not large. What is more, when we find these clay figures, they do not occur in special places. They seem to occur most frequently in 'midden' (refuse) contexts. They do not occur in burials or in locations which would suggest special importance. The famous seated 'Mother Goddess' was found in a grain bin - perhaps this has something to do with fertility, but we have no suggestion that grain bins were symbolically important. Most of the figurines are very small. Some have detachable heads.

It is quite likely that the figurines and statuettes had a range of different functions. But for most of them it is difficult to argue for any special symbolic significance.

*Anita Louise*

*The importance of the grain bins may be of a strictly practical nature, but even so, the grain comes from the earth in the same way that life and nourishment come from the woman. The Catal Hoyuk Mother Goddess descends from the primordial mother of the Paleolithic who was Mistress of the Animals, and the giver and nourisher of all life. Flanked by two leopards, her hands resting on their heads, the Catal Hoyuk Mother Goddess is also shown as the mother of all - even the wild animals - a theme that is repeated down through the centuries in every culture - Innana with her lions, Artemis and her hounds, Athena and the owl, Demeter as the pure Mother Bee, the Snake Goddess of Crete, Rhiannon and her birds, White Buffalo Calf Woman, Spider Grandmother, Pele and her white dog, Ixchel and her rabbit, and so many more. The Catal Hoyuk Mother Goddess is the ancestress of Cybele who was also a Mistress of the Animals, and was depicted flanked by lions. Adele Getty, in her book, "Goddess, Mother of Living Nature" suggests that she might initially have been a clan*

*mother who actually suckled the young leopards, as the Ainu of Japan are known to suckle and raise bear cubs, and as the Australian Tiwi people are known to bring orphaned young animals into camp and suckle them. If the Catal Mother Goddess was deliberately placed in the grain bin, it could be an expression of gratitude to she who suckles the young, whose breasts give forth the milk as the earth gives forth the grain.*

Ian Hodder

Apart from the figurines, the other main representation of women is supposed to be the splayed relief figures on the walls. These are the figures with arms and feet pointing upwards and (in one case at least) with a swollen belly. Perhaps the swelling suggests pregnancy, but my own view is that, since these figures do not have breasts there is very little evidence to suggest they are women. Neither is there any clear depiction of these or any other figures at Catal giving birth.

*Anita Louise*

*Not even the enthroned 'Mother Goddess' flanked by lions?*

Ian Hodder

One important new piece of evidence about these relief sculptures comes from recently excavated sites in eastern Turkey. Here there are images of splayed figures with arms and feet pointing upwards, very similar to the Catal ones. But, these examples have tails and 'serpent-like' teeth. Looking back at the Catal examples, there are no tails, but many have short stumpy arms and legs and they look more animal than human. I do not deny that they may represent some linking of women and serpents, snakes or lizards. Part of the problem at Catal is that these figures clearly did have an important symbolic role - so much so that they were nearly always destroyed by destroying the head, hands or feet. This makes identifying them as human, animal, etc very difficult.

So I do believe that the statuette of the enthroned woman suggests a powerful symbolic role for women. But beyond this we need a lot more research. You may say that I am ignoring the view that other images, including the bulls heads, are actually images of women and the goddess. I recognise that this is possible, but for the moment we have no evidence for it.

As regards the daily, real-life role of women, there is little that can be said so far. We do need to excavate a lot more burials and to look at the differences between the male and female skeletons. From this we will be able to say how much work of different kinds men and women were doing, whether their diets were different, and so on. For the moment we have found evidence of very high child mortality. This suggests a tough life for women in their child-bearing years.

In the one building we have excavated completely so far, the evidence so far would suggest the importance of the male line. I say this because in building 1, it seems that the last burial under the main, central, eastern platform was a male. Indeed this may have been the last burial in the house (the last of about 64!). This mature individual may have had some ritual importance - he had with him a small bone worn perhaps as an amulet. It was the deformed penis bone of a small weasel-like animal. This man's special standing is also suggested by the fact that his head was missing. The removal of the head is symbolically important because we see vultures picking the flesh of headless corpses in the wall art. Perhaps his head was removed to be taken to found the new house of the family after his

death? Whatever the specific interpretation, after his death the house was abandoned and the major relief sculpture in the building was destroyed or removed. The age of this man may correspond approximately to the number of years in which the house was lived in. When he died the house was abandoned. All this suggests to me an extended family centred on this male, who may have had ritual significance or powers.

*Anita Louise*

*Gimbutas wrote about the female buried with three boar jawbones laid in a radiating pattern around her head. Can you tell us more about that burial?*

Ian Hodder

We have an exciting idea about how we could work out the real-life social importance of men and women at Catal. This is to use DNA analysis of the ancient bones found beneath the house floors. The houses are built on top of each other in a long sequence and we assume that the same family inhabited the same house as it was rebuilt over many centuries. If the society is matrifocal we would expect the DNA to show that daughters of daughters of daughters were buried in a house sequence. If the society is patrilocal we would expect the sons of sons of sons to be buried there, with women marrying in from other families. This would be an exciting piece of research but it is one of the areas in which we are badly in need of extra funding.

I hope all this helps - I guess my main point is that we have a long way to go on resolving the issue of the role of women at Catal. Ideas that you or others might have from the Goddess community on how we could go about this would be helpful as we develop our research designs.

*Anita Louise*

*I think we must constantly remind ourselves that we are looking at a cultural paradigm that is probably drastically different from the one we live in. Just as we tend to separate the aspects of body, mind and soul, we also tend to separate the male and female in order to place a value on each. The Neolithic culture may not have valued one more than the other. In fact, the artifacts often seem to interweave the two sexes. Many of the Goddess figurines have a phallic shape, and the images of bulls and rams may symbolize both female and male energies.*

Ian Hodder

Your second question was about variation in different parts of the site. I am not so clear about this as I was before. The North and Mellaart areas do have layers at the same time, but the differences are not very obvious at the moment. I think it will take a bit more work to see if the differences in oven types and so on really exist. There is so much individual variation from house to house that getting an overall pattern is difficult.

Your third point was about the way in which the local people view our work. David Shankland has written about this in the first project volume (edited by me in 1996 and called 'On the surface', published by the McDonald Institute in Cambridge and the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara). Work is also being done by Ayfer Bartu. It seems that the local tradition about the mounds or huyuks

is that they are where the spirits live. On some nights lights can be seen as they move from mound to mound. But, contradictorily, the mounds are also where people get much building material from. The clay from the mounds is ideal for making mud brick and plaster, and if you look closely at the walls of the houses in the nearby villages they are full of artifacts from different mounds.

The issue of how the local people see the past is a long and complex one, as is their response to us. Some see the project as an opportunity to make money from tourism. Others see it and the influx of Goddess visitors as disturbing. Some have very little knowledge of history beyond the division pre-Islamic/Islamic.

I am very concerned that we do what we can to mediate and negotiate between the different local, national and international interests in the site. We are asking the local community to produce their own exhibit in our on-site museum, and it may be that members of the Goddess community would like to do the same. My concern is that we all remain sensitive to the different currents of interest and recognise that they can conflict with each other. Ultimately and most importantly the site belongs to the Turkish state, and our efforts have to correspond to their decisions and policies.

<http://catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/catal/goddess.html>

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