

Book Reviews

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New perspective on an old enigma

I. Hodder (ed.), *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study*

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Research pertaining to the origins and growth of early complex societies is an ongoing project in the social sciences. Sadly, many attempts at addressing this fascinating conundrum constitute mere variations on previous intellectual efforts. This volume edited by Ian Hodder (Stanford, Archaeology) is a welcome, original endeavour. Hodder invited a number of specialists to comment on the results of his excavations at Çatalhöyük, the World Heritage site in Anatolia that has provided extensive evidence for humanity's transition into sedentary life. The volume promotes an unusual brand of social inquiry that cuts across disciplinary boundaries. In addition, Hodder's work is of particular interest to those researchers, like myself, who continue to be inspired by the central tenet of the 'New Archaeology' which states that Archaeology can be either History or nothing.¹

Çatalhöyük has captivated researchers ever since it was excavated half a century ago. At its peak (7th millennium B.C.) this well-preserved Neolithic town probably housed some 3 500 to 8 000 early farmers. Its architecture was puzzling. Hundreds of domestic units were densely packed together. They featured neither windows, nor doors (access was provided through holes in the roofs). The residents slept on top of the graves of their dead relatives. Walls, pillars and benches were decorated with trophies of wild cattle and other game. Sacrificial deposits were hidden in the walls and under the floors. Large, intriguing narrative paintings and clay reliefs added to the dramatic impression made by the installations on the walls. The inhabitants repeatedly covered some of the art work under layers of plaster and whitewash paint, only to uncover and reveal them at other occasions. The houses were levelled after several generations and then carefully rebuilt on exactly the same location. Selected human skulls and whole skeletons were dug up and reburied in the next level. Daily life in the town appeared to have been immersed in religion and was obviously organised and structured along strict conventions. Yet no evidence has been found of a centralising political force. There were no large public buildings, no ceremonial centres, no cemeteries or spaces of specialised production.

In the first chapter, Hodder and Lynn Meskell identify four themes which featured strongly in the symbolism of Çatalhöyük and other sites in the region. The selected themes are religious in nature and are said to have persisted over a long time. They are: phallocentrism; dangerous wild things; piercing and fleshing the body; and the house. The latter three have been identified and discussed in detail by the editor in his

1. This was first suggested by G. Wiley and P. Philips, *Method and Theory in American Archaeology* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958).

main excavation monograph.² The item “Neolithic phallocentrism” is rather surprising, given the fact that in Hodder’s previous work references to the importance of masculinity are virtually absent.

The concepts of a “house-based society” and “dominant or history houses” feature strongly in the interpretive discussions of this volume, as they did in Hodder’s previous work. The house, he proposed, was central to the material, social and spiritual life of its residents. The heavy investments in the overwhelming symbolism, we are told, evidence the centrality of the house. Combined with the continuous rebuilding of houses, the symbolism also exemplifies the inhabitants’ preoccupation with memory. Indeed, Hodder suggests, the 1 400 year long sequence of the site testifies how the people of Çatalhöyük gradually came to “invent” an historical awareness.

Of the two theological contributions to this book, the essay by LeRon Shults (Agder, Norway) is definitely the more interesting. In fact, the chapter by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (Princeton) simply rephrases the controversial “shamanic” interpretation of Çatalhöyük, proposed by our very own San rock art authority, David Lewis-Williams. Shults combines Hodder’s “entanglement hypothesis” with a pragmatic theory of religious symbolism. He offers the reader a captivating analysis that combines existentialist and phenomenological notions. The discussion does not really challenge Hodder, but it does provide some interesting “add-on” insights to the latter’s theory, exploring further (and probably defining better) its metaphysical grounding.

Religion is the main focus of yet a third chapter compiled by Whitehouse (Oxford, Anthropology), in which the author applies his “universal typology of forms of ritual and modes of religiosity” (a very extensive historical-ethnographic cross-cultural survey) to the material remains on the site (p 122). In addition, he interprets the archaeological data by means of his concept of “rites of terror”, the central theoretical issue in one of his earlier monographs on Melanesian initiation (p 127). Whitehouse’s typology accommodates and explains the houses and artefacts of Çatalhöyük perfectly well. Perhaps a little too perfectly! On closer scrutiny, material data from the site often are simply juxtaposed to Whitehouse’s key concepts.

Two chapters explore further Hodder’s house-based society. The text presented by Maurice Bloch (London School of Economics, Anthropology) is a real treat, and not just in terms of its literary qualities. Drawing from one of his classic monographs, he presents the outline of a culture theory suited to the analysis of ritual behaviour in house-based societies. The wild cattle installations and the associated remains of feasting and sacrifices on the site, Bloch suggests tentatively, could be explained in terms of the hunters’ efforts to revivify or reanimate the transcendental. Like Whitehouse, Bloch refutes old semiotics in favour of a human agency-based understanding of symbols, rituals and the transcendental.

The chapter by Peter Pels (Leiden, Social and Behavioural Science) and Hodder, in which the authors report on a detailed quantitative analysis of the physical features of the houses, is the odd one out in this volume. The discussion of this numerical data, elaborate and critical as it may be, makes for dense reading and is certainly not meant for a general readership. In another chapter, Pels offers the reader a very informative

2. I. Hodder, *The Leopard’s Tale: Revealing the Mysteries of Çatalhöyük* (Thames and Hudson, London, 2006).

synthesis of all the available evidence of social change in the archaeological record of Çatalhöyük. This captivating narrative of the *longue durée* makes for excellent reading.

The three remaining contributions relate to the tempting but also challenging task of tracing back elements of an ancient cosmology on the site. The project of Carolyn Nakamura (Stanford, Archaeology) involves an analysis of the 250 so-called cluster deposits which were found on the site. The author claims that magical practices at Çatalhöyük focused on the creation and maintenance of “foundational relationships” between humans and animals, social groups and the house, and the present and the past. A number of interesting hypotheses are put forward, all of which, in one way or another, explore and confirm the key analytical concepts and premises put forward by Hodder in *The Leopard's Tale*.

The contribution by Webb Keane (Michigan, Anthropology) constitutes the most authentic essay of the volume. It is well argued, well structured, lucid and above all unpretentious. His objective is to propose a heuristics for the study of prehistoric religion. Keane expresses a particular interest in the cultural activities of hiding and revealing which are so manifestly present at Çatalhöyük. It is suggested that marked and hidden features in the houses (e.g. wild cattle, burials and paintings) exemplify an intention to express human agency and the will and ability to act upon, or transform the world.

Finally, the contribution by Paul K. Wason (Templeton Foundation, Pennsylvania) to define a Neolithic cosmology, I believe, is symptomatic of the general lack of critical engagement with Hodder's arguments, which cripples this volume.

In the concluding chapter, the editor defines the role of religious phenomena in the origins and growth of complex societies in terms of the so-called “entanglement” of its inhabitants. Hodder speculates that the people of this early town created ever growing social, material and spiritual investments, dependencies and networks. This created a new sense of time, place, self and most importantly, of agency. From this social transformation, it is proposed, advanced forms of farming, urbanism and political hierarchy would eventually emerge, as a kind of by-product or unintended effect. Interestingly, Hodder is greatly indebted to the ideological substance of this hypothesis, to the study of eighteenth-century individualism by the historical archaeologist James Deetz.³

The one social issue that is conspicuously absent in the analytical efforts of this otherwise exciting book, is gender relations. In Hodder's understanding of the interaction between the women and men of Çatalhöyük was of a “balanced” nature, period. This is, in my opinion, contradicted by the intensity and overwhelming visual references to hunting in the houses, which could be interpreted as expressions of masculinity or male identity. Towards the final phase of the Neolithic occupation the hunting of wild cattle, together with its symbolic representation in the houses, mysteriously came to an end. Intriguingly, in the same period material references to the realm of women become more obvious. These and similar observations which seem to suggest some form of gender conflict or tension, are clearly ignored by Hodder. Despite this, the book should be a fitting addition to the library of those researchers, including South Africans, who are fascinated with narratives of the *longue durée*, who have a passion for theory and

3. J. Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (Anchor, New York, 1996).

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methodology; who believe that a meaningful understanding of modern cultural history must include the study of its roots; and who are inspired by complementary data from, and parallel developments within, sister disciplines.

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