

Early Places With Metals:

Çatal Höyük

Advanced

Çatal Höyük is the modern Turkish name for a fascinating archaeological site in the hills of central Anatolia. This Neolithic *city* contained twelve successive levels of buildings and was populated from 7500 BC to 5700 BC (English Wikipedia) or from 7400 / 7100 BC to about 6200 BC (German Wikipedia).

It is among the earliest *cities* known to mankind. I emphasize the word "city" because that's what it was supposed to be: a huge - for that time - assembly of up to 10 000 people at its peak (5000 to 8000 on average) that lived together in a collection of closely connected houses (English Wikipedia). However, newer insights put the number at only about 2500 inhabitants (German Wikipedia). Whatever - compare that to other neolithic settlements like [Cayönü Tepesi](#), where a best a few hundred people lived together, and you see why one should call Çatal Höyük a *city*.

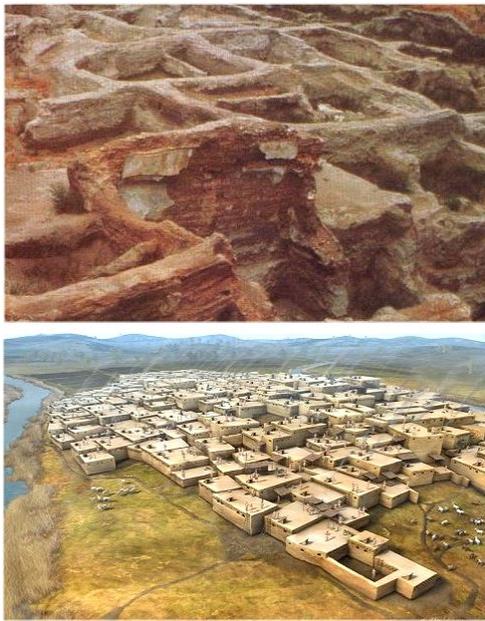
● Or should one? Does a sufficiently large number of inhabitants a city make? Wouldn't that also require some special buildings besides living quarters: temples, "city halls" or large rooms / places / buildings ("agoras") for assembling and doing some rituals, like having a council meeting or sacrificing virgins? Shouldn't there be bars for sharing a beer with the guys, or brothels. Moreover, shouldn't a city be the economical and cultural center for all those yokels living out there in the pits, and the place where specialists live and do their thing (like working copper) that normal people couldn't do?

None of that seems to apply to Çatal Höyük. There are only houses of about equal size. That's a bit strange because smaller (and somewhat older) places in Anatolia have featured *only* "temples" (e.g. [Göbekli Tepe](#)) or temples / agoras plus living quarters (e.g. [Cayönü Tepesi](#)). So maybe the Çatal Höyükians were early communists with no hierarchy, and all men, possibly even the women, being equal? That has been suggested more than once, of course.

● [Once more](#) I did my best to confuse you. It's intentional. Because that does justice to the ongoing discussion about Çatal Höyük, while all those articles that leave nothing open project just some particular point of view. In the case of Çatal Höyük the first guy who did major excavations, one **James Mellaart**, set the stage [for some of the confusion](#) that ensued later because he not only chose the site to test his (controversial) theory of "post-processual archaeology" (look it up yourself) but never published his findings in detail. He was eventually kicked out of Turkey in 1965 because the Turkish government was reasonably sure that he was involved in some shady dealings with respect to a lost (100 Mio \$) ancient gold treasure (look up "Dorak affair").

● There is already some "mythology" around Çatal Höyük. In the words of Eleni Asouti, reporting from the 1995-99 digging season: "In the 1960s it was the absence of a measure of comparison that raised Çatalhöyük to a class of its own. During the 1970s and 1980s increased archaeological work and the realization of the fundamental theoretical faults of earlier approaches led largely to a 'demystification' of the site, with the emphasis shifting away from Mellaart's 'shrines' and the ubiquitous 'mother goddess' to more tangible (and empirically demonstrable) realities as for example settlement economy and the perceived importance of the site in regional exchange networks. The more unsettling, and for that reason more difficult to entertain, aspects of the site (when not marred by controversy) were largely confined to the margins of the academically acceptable discourse. ...During the 1990s Çatalhöyük became once more 'marginalized', in a way also 'exoticized', by virtue of its perceived isolation from the wider research agendas of the regional Neolithic archaeology." So let's wait and see.

● Anyway, Çatal Höyük is an amazing site. It consisted of rectangular mud-brick buildings with a flat roof, either close together or touching each other. The only entrance was through the roof, and the (connected) roof areas might have been a kind of public place. In [Asikli Höyük](#) and [Can Hasan](#) building techniques are similar - but not in [Cayönü Tepesi](#). Here is what it looks like now and what it might have looked like (8 000 - 9 000) years ago



Actual remains and model of Çatal Höyük

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net. I don't know who I should give credit to.

▀ The people in Çatal Höyük liked to live in style. They had flagstoned floors and plastered their walls. On occasion they had murals on the walls or other adornments like Aurochs' heads. This is what it looked like:



Actual remains and a model of the inside of a Çatal Höyük house

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net. I don't know who I should give credit to.

- The murals are amazing, too. The artists used natural pigments of course, but including the reds and browns and yellows of (imported?) [ochre](#) as well as the greens and blues of the [copper minerals](#) malachite and azurite and red [cinnabar](#), a mercury mineral. Here are two examples:



Murals found in Çatal Höyük (Reconstructions)

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net. Mostly, it seems, from people who photographed the stuff in-situ or in museums. Trying to get in touch usually didn't work. .

- Those pictures are, of course, reconstructions of the real findings - it is just not always mentioned. What one of the stags up there really looks like *now* is shown below:



Mural found in Çatal Höyük

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net. Mostly, it seems, from people who photographed the stuff in-situ or in museums. Trying to get in touch usually didn't work. .

There is, however, also some scandal about some findings of James Mellaart that only exist as drawings without proper documentation of the actual finds.

- Then there is the famous "Mother Goddess" who caused a lot of uproar in matriarchal and other circles. The figure continues, perhaps, the long chain of far older "[Venus](#)" figurines. What the obese lady signifies is, as in the case of the Cayönü Tepesi [Double Goddess](#), anybody's guess. Don't let me know your theory.



Mommy?

The head is not original.

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net. Mostly, it seems, from people who photographed the stuff in-situ or in museums. Trying to get in touch usually didn't work. .

People in Çatal Höyük f...ed and recorded that in figurines. They also made very complex flintstone knives and buried their dead under the floors of their houses, occasionally together with grave goods like necklaces made from bone beads, and sometimes without the heads, suggestive of practices in (earlier) [Cayönü Tepesi](#).



Knife with flintstone blades and bone hilts. The lovers are actually from nearby neolithic Hacilar; also unearthed by Mellaart.

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net and so on. The picture of the figurine of the busy couple, however, is from a (Turkish) blog (<http://pb-archaeology.blogspot.de/>).



Under-floor burials and complicated bone-bead necklace from a female burial

Source: Çatal Höyük pictures are all over the Net and so on. The necklace, however, is from the (open access) article: *Shahina Farid*, "Çatalhöyük comes Home", *Archaeology International* (2011), 3:36-43, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ai.1313>.

As far as "technology" is concerned, there are highly complex and beautiful flintstone and obsidian spear points, arrow heads, knives, polished mirrors, and so on. The [obsidian bracelet](#) from Asikli Höyük beats all that, however. The obviously large importance of this city may have been based on its obsidian "industry". Çatal Höyük lies "near" (about 150 km as the crow flies) to the only known source of obsidian for hundreds of miles around, the twin-coned Hasan Dag volcano.

More important, Çatal Höyük is also the place of some of the earliest [pottery](#). This is extremely important for the history of metals. I won't go into that here, however, because I could find very little on what, exactly, was going on in Çatal Höyük with respect to pottery.

There is much, much more - and all of it is amazing.

But how about metals?

It's amazing, too. *No* mention of metals in Çatal Höyük was made in almost *all* of the many, many site I looked at in the Net. The prominent exception is the English Wikipedia site - [getting it wrong](#). The (generally better) German Wikipedia site does not mention metals at all.

All these years I somehow associated Çatal Höyük with "first metals". And then nothing? Well - not quite. To make a long story short, three points need to be addressed:

- Lead had *not* been made into 13 beads strung on a necklace, as claimed by early excavators. As it turned out in 1990, those beads were *not* made from lead (Pb) but from galena or lead sulfide (PbS). It takes a long time, however, before that is noticed by all and sundry. More to that [here](#).
- Slag, thought to indicate copper smelting, has also been found. However, it just as well, it seems, could have resulted from something else (e.g. copper melting). I guess one should just discard that, too ¹. Or, not to put too fine a point to it, nobody quite believes in old Mellaart any more.
- Some copper artifacts have indeed been found, dating to the later 6th millennium. It appears, however, that there is nothing that surpasses the older Copper artifacts from in [Cayönü Tepesi](#) with respect to technology.

- All things considered it looks like the earlier excavators were so excited about what they found that they just wanted to enlarge the list of "firsts" attached to Çatal Höyük: First lead, first smelting, first... Only in the last 20 years or so, careful analysis of some of those artifacts has been started, and the final words are not yet in. I use the plural intentionally, because the final word, I'm sure, will never be in. We just cannot reconstruct *exactly* what was going on 10 000 year ago based on the few surviving things occasionally unearthed.

▮ From today's point of view, Çatal Höyük is still an extremely important find, but meanwhile no longer unique. In the words of [Shahina Farid](#):

"We know that there are many earlier settled sites, both in eastern and central Anatolia and in the Levant, which compare in size and complexity. We also know that the domestication of plants and animals was well underway in these areas thousands of years before Çatalhöyük. There are local sequences, which lead up to and predate Çatalhöyük, such as nearby Boncuklu Höyük and Pinarbas. In south-east Turkey, the earlier sites of Çayönü and Göbekli Tepe already show substantial agglomeration and elaborate symbolism, whilst, in central Anatolia, Asikli Höyük has densely packed housing through the millennium before Çatalhöyük. There are many other sites contemporary, or partly contemporary, with Çatalhöyük that are known in central Anatolia and the adjacent Burdur-Lakes region, yet Çatalhöyük retains a special significance because of the concentration of aspects of all of these sites in the one place."

¹⁾ As it turns out, I guessed right. A 2017 publication (see below) states: *We re-interpret the sample identified earlier as metallurgical slag as incidentally fired green pigment, which was originally deposited in a burial and later affected by a destructive fire that also charred the bones of the interred body. We also re-confirm the contemporary metal beads as made from native metal* ". So there!

Repealing the Çatalhöyük extractive metallurgy: The green, the fire and the 'slag' Author links open overlay panelMiljanaRadivojevicaThiloRehrenbcShahinaFaridbErnstPernickadDuyguCamurcuoglu