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## Excavating the origins of urban form: Çatalhöyük

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The early Neolithic settlement site of Çatalhöyük on the Konya Plain of central Anatolia, Turkey merits greater attention from urban morphologists for the evidence it provides of a very early urban form. Originally discovered by British archaeologist James Mellaart in 1958, Çatalhöyük ('twin mound' in Turkish) was initially identified as an early urban complex. Extensively excavated during 1962-1965, it was originally estimated to date from 6500 BC (Mellaart, 1967). Recent carbon 14 dating has revealed a range of eighteen settlement levels from 7400 BC to 6200 BC (Cessford, 2001), making it among the oldest substantial urban settlement complexes yet discovered in the Near East. Excavation by British archaeologist Ian Hodder from 1993 onward has divided the site into three areas: the South Area originally excavated by Mellaart, the North Area, excavated by Hodder, and the recent West Area site, revealed to be a Chalcolithic mound, dating between 6200 and 5200 BC (Connolly, 1999; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2013).

The primary focus of the Çatalhöyük site has been the South Area, where the oldest settlement levels have been excavated, notably Level VIB, now dated to 6500 BC (Cessford, 2001) with its complex of single-cell mud-brick, square rooms (Figure 1). Hodder (2007, p. 26) has characterized Çatalhöyük as 'a dense corporate huddling of houses'. This early agglomerated urban form differs substantially from the more familiar lateral form of medieval burgages and access streets as described by Conzen (1960). Instead the Neolithic form of Çatalhöyük had a vertical succession of settlement layers, each house cell replicating the form of an earlier family kinship room (During, 2005). The mud-brick houses were built on top of each other, replicating the former footprint of the earlier cell.

As a group, the kinship house cells formed an extensive array of adjacent rooms as seen in Level

VIB, now dated at 6500 BC (Figure 1). Here there is a connected group of rooms with a series of open spaces, originally thought to be communal 'courtyards' by Mellaart (1967), but now understood by Hodder (2006) to be refuge waste areas for sewage and trash: in effect proto-fringe zones for the complex. With access to each room cell by ladder, the roof areas probably served as open work platforms for domestic activities such as pottery, food preparation and weaving, which were already established in the Neolithic period. The room cells were used for cooking with an oven. They contained a raised sleeping platform, and were also used for burial of the dead (Mellaart, 1967, p. 60). The walls were whitewashed with lime, and sometimes decorated with hunting murals in the tradition of Palaeolithic cave art (Mellaart, 1962), although this has been vigorously debated (Hodder, 2007). The rooms were kept 'scrupulously clean', as Mellaart (1964, p. 59) noted, and whitewashed to reflect the light, as there were no wall openings or windows. The only access was the ladder opening which also served as a smoke vent, as in the pueblo settlements of the south-west United States (Hodder, 2006, p. 25).

From the excavations by Mellaart and Hodder over the last half century, Çatalhöyük emerges as a proto-urban settlement of the early Neolithic period, among the largest discovered in the Near East based on domesticated agriculture and animal herding. Estimates of population size now range between 5000 and 8000 at the height of settlement, c. 6500 BC (During, 2007), certainly within the modern classification of a town, covering some 13 ha. It is this extensive area and complexity of form that has justified Çatalhöyük as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Hodder, 2013). It preserves an early urban form that exhibits the transition from a Palaeolithic cave site, with its windowless mural rooms and hunting scenes, to a Mesopotamian town layout, with its square mud-brick houses and fringe



**Figure 1. Çatalhöyük, Level VIB, 6500 BC. Drawn by Grace Huxtable and Anne-Louise Stockdale (reproduced from Mellaart, 1967, p. 59, with minor clarifications).**

waste areas. Its form bespeaks its early age, with its sequence of replicated building levels in a vertical series that transferred kinship houses from one generation to the next as a 'höyük' mound. These characteristics make Çatalhöyük a valuable indicator of the origins of modern urban form.

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