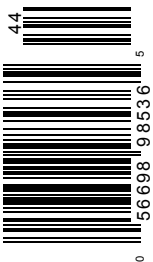


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## NEOLITHIC JOY: AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN HODDER

CHRISTOPHER TURNER

How did celebratory practices emerge in the first human settlements? What qualified as an act of celebration? And how did the complex relationship between ritual and celebration manifest itself in early social formations? The answers to such questions must be teased out of the relatively scant material remains of the Neolithic period. Since 1993, Ian Hodder—Dunlevie Family Professor in the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at Stanford University—has been excavating and conserving Çatalhöyük, an important Neolithic site in modern Turkey that was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012. The subject of Hodder’s book *The Leopard’s Tale: Revealing the Mysteries of Çatalhöyük* (Thames & Hudson, 2006), the nine-thousand-year-old site—considered crucial to understanding the early development of agriculture and civilization—has an unusually rich artistic record, much of it related to the population’s colorful rituals surrounding death and the killing and eating of animals, both domestic and wild. Christopher Turner spoke to Hodder by phone.

We’re doing an issue on celebration, one definition of which might be rituals or festivals that gather communities, and I thought that by looking at Çatalhöyük, we might learn more about the early formations of celebratory practices. Could you describe this Neolithic settlement and give us some understanding of its significance?

Çatalhöyük is on the Anatolian Plateau, in what is now central Turkey, and it was occupied from about 7400 BC to 5500 BC. We think that at most about 3,500 to 8,000 people lived there, although it shifted quite a lot in size and structure through time. Archaeologists consider it important in terms of the origin of agriculture and of settled life, because it’s very large and very well preserved and is rich in art and symbolism, which gives a real insight into the lives of people in this important time period. Archaeologists have dug many Neolithic tell sites, but most of them contain evidence of houses, tools, ovens, hearths, and so on without so much evidence of the more cultural, symbolic world in which

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Installation of bull horns in Building 77. Buildings in Çatalhöyük contained animal skulls, horns, teeth, and tusks, set into walls and placed on pillars. All photos Jason Quinlan. Copyright Çatalhöyük Research Project.

people thought and lived. The whole range of paintings, figurines, and other artifacts at Çatalhöyük gives us a much better insight into their world.

**The inhabitants seem to have had peculiar rituals surrounding the dead; they often lived above the graves of their family members, whose bodies they sometimes covered in scat or buried next to lambs. They also exhumed the heads of some of these corpses. Can you describe such rites and the conclusions you've drawn from them?**

Çatalhöyük is unusual in a number of ways. The houses were very tightly packed and there were no streets; people moved around on the roofs of houses and entered by a ladder that effectively went down the chimney. The ladder was positioned over the oven, so people would go down through the smoke into the house, which was relatively dark. And in that lower space, there was a lot of very elaborate symbolism. For example, bulls' heads and horns were placed on walls or on pedestals, or they would make paintings on the walls of pairs of leopards, large bears with their arms and legs lifted up, or vultures removing the heads of human corpses. The insides of these houses were very rich in a wide range of symbolism, and a lot of that symbolism seems related to the dead.

As you say, people buried their dead in the floors of their houses; some of the houses contain few or no bodies, while others have dozens buried beneath them—it seems that people were preferentially buried in certain “ancestral houses.” And although all this might seem very strange to us, there are ethnographic accounts of similar sorts of practices, for example in Polynesia. These sorts of things tend to occur in societies where family and lineage are crucial—where membership in a social group depends on your lineage relationships with founding ancestors, and looking after ancestors and being close to them is very important. At Çatalhöyük, we know that when people died, they were carefully tied up into a sort of bundle and put into these small graves below the floors of the houses. And they would either be left there, or people would later dig up their heads and circulate them within the family clan; sometimes they would also use plaster to model facial features back onto the skull. They would look after them and keep them in their houses for quite some time before burying them again, always in a new location. It all seems very strange to us, but it makes sense in a society of that type.

**What does this tell us about the ritual practices of these people as opposed to their daily lives? Is there a**

**distinction between ritual and daily life if so much of their rituals centered around their homes?**

We don't have any evidence of separate ritual spaces. There are no ceremonial centers or public plazas or religious shrines or such, and many rituals took place inside the house. And there are two types of ritual. One of them has to do with what I just described regarding the dead, with paintings of vultures taking the flesh off corpses, and so on; ancestors are a key part of these rituals. The second involves wild animals, and a whole set of ideas and beliefs that they can be efficacious in various ways—in protecting people, protecting the dead, and so on. The drawing or painting of wild animals, the sacrificing of wild animals, and feasting on their meat were all also very much a part of life at Çatalhöyük.

**What kind of celebrations did they have at Çatalhöyük?**

We think they had celebrations on a lot of different scales, but most of them were fairly small. It seems that there were a lot of daily celebrations in which, for example, clay figurines were very quickly made and discarded. So you might have a meal, and then make



A grave in Building 42 contains a skeleton holding a second person's skull. The skull had been coated in several layers of plaster, each of which was painted red.

a quick figurine as part of thanking the wild animals or whatever it was that you thought produced the meal, and then you threw the figurine away. I think there were a lot of daily thank-yous and celebrations that occurred. At a slightly higher level, the killing of small animals, particularly domestic sheep and goats, was accompanied by important celebrations. The daily diet was usually plants, fish, and other small things, and the killing of a sheep or a goat was an important event. We found evidence on the site of small feasts of that sort, which probably happened fairly regularly.

When a wild bull was killed—and we know that they preferred to feast on wild bulls rather than cows—this was a major event. The animals were teased and baited by a large group—not the whole community of several thousand people, but perhaps a clan, and this would happen relatively rarely, perhaps once a year. The animal was then divided up and feasted on in separate, smaller groups; this household would be given the forelimbs, that household would be given the back limbs, and some of the body parts would be installed in their houses. So the catching and killing of the bull was a large-scale celebration, but the consumption occurred at a smaller scale.

Another type of celebration had to do with the dead, and the fairly elaborate process we've discussed of preparing someone and digging the grave and putting them in, and sometimes later digging up their heads. These were later redeposited, always in special places such as the foundations of new houses. The whole process—burial, mourning, digging up the head, and then reburying it—took at least a year or so. These celebrations seemed to be smallish in scale, so that there would be maybe four or five different households that would come together around a common ancestor.

To be more specific about some of the activities associated with celebration at Çatalhöyük: their paintings show rows of people dancing in lines with their hands raised, and maybe even whirling—like whirling dervishes—but certainly dancing in some way or another. And we have found two sorts of bone pipes—one is just a long tube that you blow across, and the other has holes so you can change the note. And there seem to be rattles and drums in the paintings, where people are depicted shaking or banging something. So there is some sort of orchestral ability that goes along with the dancing.

**Can these kinds of celebrations teach us anything about later celebrations—of seasons, military victories, and so on—that we know from the first great civilizations?**

The larger celebrations at Çatalhöyük that involved a whole clan were about life and death and their relationship with animals. We have no evidence of celebrations of the changing seasons, or of individuals. Neither do we have any evidence of their celebrating victories; that type of thing just didn't exist in a society that was not based on armies and warring. In fact, there is very little evidence of violence, or interpersonal violence, of any sort at Çatalhöyük.

**How were rituals and symbols used to reinforce social controls in these new kinds of settlements?**

What we're talking about is large numbers of people, who had originally been wandering around in very small groups, coming together in relatively large communities. So the problem is how to manage that and set up a system of beliefs or rules when you don't have any pre-existing central authority to impose them. I think the very complex religious system was the thing that provided the beliefs, rules, and norms that regulated such dense concentration of early humans. Having powerful experiences in ritual was extremely important. These involved very intense, high-energy, memorable events, like the capturing and killing of a wild bull—these were huge, frightening animals, much larger than what we see in our fields today, and to kill and feast on one of these, and to precede that by teasing and baiting it, would have been a very intense ritual that reinforced the social message. There were a number of other things like that, such as the intensity of digging down and taking off someone's head, of handling the decaying parts of human bodies. These are all very arousing and intense events at which messages could be reinforced and society reformed.

What I found in my ethnographic work in Africa was that people were endlessly manipulating or transforming or subverting symbols in their own interest. So the way I've tried to understand Çatalhöyük is in terms of how different houses were manipulating and transforming the past and the symbolism that I've just been describing in ways that benefited them. There wasn't a symbolic code that everybody followed; there was a battle of symbols, and some people were better at it than others. Some were very good at organizing and structuring these very intense events, and some people were not so good at it. And the ones who were good at it, their houses went on and they established long-term lineages, whereas others didn't.

**I wonder if we could talk a little bit about the hierarchical arrangements of this early, domesticated**



Reconstruction of a Catalhöyük wall painting depicting a group of figures engaged in either baiting or hunting a large bull.

**environment. It's age, you argue, not gender, that was the key division in that society. There weren't hierarchies when it came to the sizes of houses; it was knowledge that was a form of power. How did hierarchy work in Çatalhöyük?**

Çatalhöyük, we think, is what we would call an egalitarian society, in the sense that there are no chiefly residents or special buildings. Every building is about the same size and there is about the same amount of stuff in each one. I mean, there is nothing to suggest that some houses or individuals controlled production, distribution, or consumption. So we see it as a very, I would say fiercely, egalitarian society—one that didn't allow people to show social difference or to accumulate goods that would show that they are differentiated.

However, all societies have hierarchy, of course, and in Çatalhöyük it seems to have been based on age, in the sense that we find older people have different, better diets than younger people, and we have evidence that they had more beads and ornaments than other people in burial. It's not a very marked difference, but there is clearly some difference. And so I imagine that in Çatalhöyük there were older people who obtained a quasi-religious authority or standing, and that these people had more influence when it came to decisions about social structure and what should happen in the community as a whole. My own view is that these patterns generally hold true for the Neolithic of the Middle East. A hierarchy doesn't really emerge until much later, until we get into Mesopotamia and the emergence of really complex urban society.

**How do you observe the growing importance of materiality in the Neolithic world?**

Essentially, it's just that there's more stuff. And people start having polished stone axes, ceramics, stone grinders, stone tools, and so on. So if you look at the density of man-made artifacts in archaeological deposits, you see a very big, if gradual, increase in the number of such objects. People always lived in a material world, but it was mostly a natural material world; it wasn't something that had been transformed by humans very much.

**It's interesting that you've spent so much of your life inhabiting this place. In speaking of it, it almost sounds as if you might like to have lived there.**

I do think that all of us have some nostalgia for a less complex, less dangerous world. I also imagine that it

could have been a very intolerant environment, with all these very elaborate, complex myths, ideas, and rituals. It was an egalitarian society but very, very conformist. We have found one body that was not buried in a house but with the garbage. Very, very unusual. When we were studying the body, we saw that it was very contorted—the person was severely deformed throughout his life. So he had been kept alive, or managed to stay alive, but the fact that he had been buried outside the house—and he was the only really deformed person we found—suggests that if you weren't normal, you weren't dealt with in the same way. Çatalhöyük might have had this really unpleasant other side.

So I wonder what happened if you didn't fit in, or wanted to get out. I guess people did get out. In fact, one theory is that, indeed, if people didn't like their community, they left, and that's what caused the spread of farming through Europe that we see in the period.

**And what happened to Çatalhöyük? How did it become extinct?**

Well, it didn't really. What I've been talking to you about is Çatalhöyük East. What happened was that it grew and grew, and then around 6000 BC, in what archaeologists call the Chalcolithic period, it moved to the other side of the river and became what we call Çatalhöyük West. Around this time, there were a large number of other societies that emerged in the Konya plain. There was a huge expansion in the population, so I think what happened is that Çatalhöyük East expanded into a large society, one where other people from elsewhere could come as well. It grew out of itself into this very successful Chalcolithic society along with others in the Konya plain. And at the same time, people were spreading out from Çatalhöyük East and West, into northwest Anatolia as well as Europe, to which they brought the practice of agriculture. And this migration also may have spread what became the Indo-European languages into continental Europe. So this is really a success story, of a community that expands and becomes too big for its original settlement.