
The Re-Urbanization of Catalhoyuk

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Çatalhöyük is the site of an ancient Turkish city that stands as a timeless reminder of social equality. I visited Çatalhöyük in September 2013, intent on exploring the city and its enduring legacy. What I found was an awe-inspiring Neolithic site that showed no signs of division of labor, specialization, or related social classes. There was also gender equality in Çatalhöyük and, perhaps even more compelling, an almost complete absence of violence during the roughly 1800 years that the city was inhabited.

Çatalhöyük was first inhabited around 7500 BC and was occupied by up to 10,000 people. To put this into perspective, the next known city, Uruk in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), was built around 4000 BC. Therefore, Çatalhöyük and its population are about 3,500 years older than the urban antiquity of Mesopotamia.

Today's urban scholars, however, contest Çatalhöyük's city-status, and assert it to have been instead a rather large town, due to the absence of certain characteristics. For example, monuments and temples, which are often factors used to classify settlements as cities, were both absent in Çatalhöyük. Streets were also absent; families accessed their homes through a hole in the roof that likewise served as the stove's chimney. In addition, Çatalhöyük's deceased were buried underneath their family's floor, perhaps serving as both ancestral monument and connection to the spiritual. Some homes have twenty layers beneath them, with most, if not all, harboring ancestors.

But equality is the factor that really compromises Çatalhöyük's city-status. Urban scholars and archeologists alike use labor specialization as a key characteristic of cities, and yet there was no division of labor in Çatalhöyük. This is evidenced by the unique design and construction of each house, signifying that families built their own homes. In fact, each household seems to have been self-contained, the inhabitants building, hunting, gathering, and producing what they needed.

Whether city or town, Çatalhöyük is an example of a society in which social status was not attached to one's job or gender. In this sense, Çatalhöyük provides a profound opportunity to reflect on how we value human beings and our various contributions to society.

Not only was there no class distinction in Çatalhöyük, but there was no gender distinction either. Although women surely did have different jobs than men at some times, for example during pregnancy, their status in society and their potential for filling leadership roles was not inhibited as a result. Literally symbolizing heads of households, the bodies of leaders would be exhumed after death and their heads cut off and displayed in the home. A relatively equal number of female and male heads have been found throughout excavations.

Alongside equality, archeologists note what appears to be a complete absence of violence in Çatalhöyük, as evidenced in the many bodies that have been excavated, none of which show markings of violence or human-induced trauma. There are also no visual descriptions of violent or aggressive acts against humans in the many paintings that have been uncovered at the site.

Çatalhöyük thus implores us to consider the relationship between violence and equality. So much of our world, from the history we tell about it to justifications for our contemporary actions, is supported by a usually implicit belief that violence is inherent to human nature. Yet there was no violence at Çatalhöyük, and one has to wonder how this absence is related to the presence of social equality.

But perhaps the most provocative question encouraged by Çatalhöyük is a reconsideration of why the nature of one's contribution to society should be respected or valued more than another's. This echoes the voices of Western women who work in the home and assert that they do not need to become a CEO to be equal to men. Feasibly, Çatalhöyük is most profoundly an example of what a society founded on principles of equal value would look like.

I was pondering these questions as I left Çatalhöyük and drove back towards the airport in Konya. The closest city to the site, Konya is the seventh most populous in Turkey with a population of around 1.1 million in the metropolitan area. Konya's airport is a little over an hour from Çatalhöyük, but that transition is through both time and space. I captured this photo essay during the drive, as I was struck by how the area around Çatalhöyük has "re-urbanized" in the last 9,500 years, as the land has transformed from agricultural plain to bustling city-space.

Driving towards the modern city of Konya felt like a study in opposites. While Çatalhöyük was characterized by having no division of labor, the road from the site into Konya is like viewing an animated film about specialization. The fields around Çatalhöyük slowly give way to larger and grander homes as you approach Konya, which itself opens up to reveal a modern tapestry of various industries and social classes.

In Konya, a local told me that the city is the most religious in Turkey and in the several days that I was there, most if not all of the Turkish women that I encountered were shrouded in hijab, setting them apart from the men. I wondered if the hijab is Konya's "CEO question." Can women here occupy leadership roles in hijab? While so obviously different from their male counterparts, are they valued equally by society?

Almost 10,000 years after it was first inhabited, Çatalhöyük remains as a whisper from the past of a way of life in which many people lived together, and did so without social classes, gender ascriptions, or violence. ■



The entrance to Çatalhöyük



View of the North Site



The shepherd inspiring the movement



A woman feeds geese by the community water tower



Signs mark the way to Konya, as fewer fields and more houses appear



The shift from agricultural to urban space is gradual



The next sign of urbanization is more modern and elaborate homes



But there are still signs of rural living



Busses and multi-family apartment buildings signify city-space



Konya in motion with mixed-use development



Konya from the sky