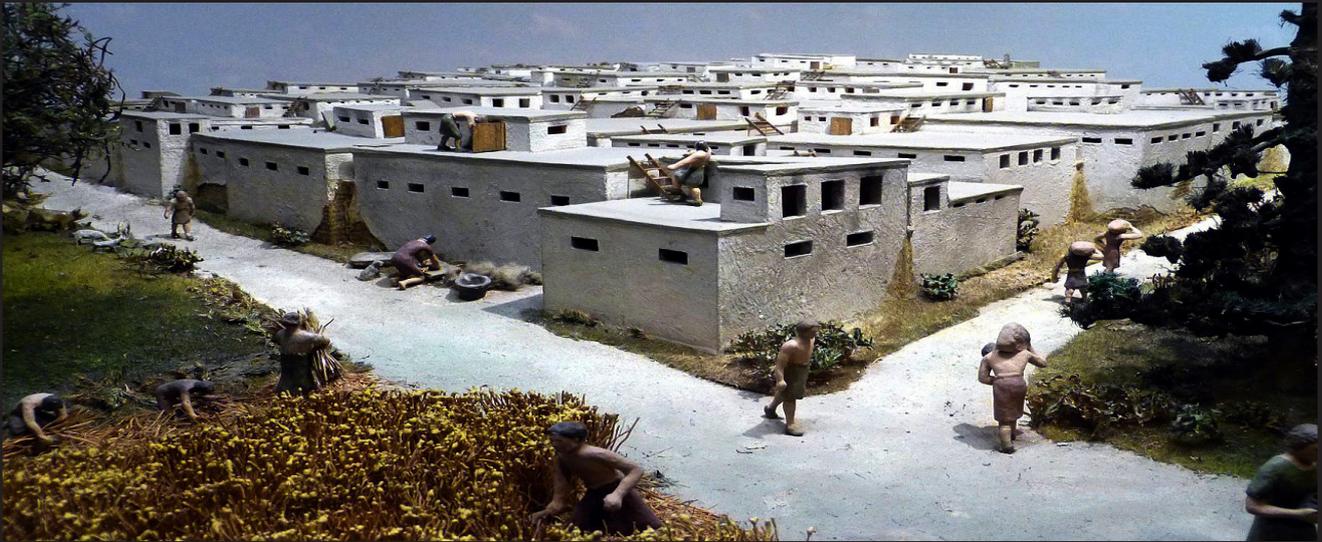


Catal Höyük

Neolithic Proto-City





The Near East is full of archaeological surprises and important early developments in history which happen here for the first time. And Catal Hoeyuek is one of these extraordinary early sites. This unique Neolithic settlement lies southeast of the city of Konya close to the town of Alemdra. It is situated at an altitude of 900 meters above sea level on a small mound with two peaks. The eastern mound is only twenty meters high. The later smaller chalcolithic settlement lies next to it on the western mound.

Landscape

The flat landscape around the site offers wide views and is scattered with multiple small Neolithic settlement mounds. In the area north east of it experts found fifteen smaller settlements in a square of ten to twelve kilometers. But Catal Hoeyuek is the highest Neolithic tell not only in the area but also worldwide. This is proof of a busy Neolithic human activity in this previously fertile area. Experts assume that various paleolithic hunter gatherer clans roamed the region for a long time. For various reasons their seasonal camps became more permanent. This led to the first successful proto-city being erected here over time. Now let's look more at the astonishing details how nomads became the first settlers in this area.

History

The site which today is called Catal Hoeyuek was occupied 9,000 years ago for about 1,400 years which represents about forty generations. Thereafter it was given up for yet unknown reasons with little visible remains left on the surface. One theory assumes that last houses were pulled down partly and filled up with the rubble intentionally. This is a huge ar-

chaeological advantage, because later settlements did not destroy traces of the original first Neolithic township.

Excavations

First excavations on the eastern mound started in 1958 and taken up again from 1961 for four seasons. That gave archaeologists already a good idea how important Catal Hoeyuek and their findings were. Little happened thereafter until 1993 when annual diggings started again for twenty-five seasons. The western chalcolithic mound was only excavated from 1997. But still this extraordinary Neolithic site is only partly excavated so far despite its uniqueness and global significance being named a UNESCO world heritage site in 2012.

Proto-City

Imagine between five to eight thousand people lived here. Experts therefore call Catal Hoeyuek the first proto-city with an extension of thirteen hectares. Other researchers deny to call it a city and prefer the term proto urbane great settlement. To give you a better idea. Its extension is assumed to have measured about 450 by 275 meters possibly larger and in an oval form. And still this was an enormous number and needed an organized structure and striving economy to survive.

Excavations revealed eighteen different settlement layers, because from time to time the aging unfired mud brick houses were pulled down. On the rubble a new house was erected, so the mound grew in heights with time. And archaeologists established that the settlement was never attacked or conquered. Were those times surprisingly peaceful? Imagine no arms and weapons were found either. And excavat-

ed skeletons did not show any injuries.

Similar Sites

In the list of similar and nearly contemporary sites belong for example Asikli Hoeyuek, Jericho, Mureybet, Beidha, Alikosh, Tepe Guran, Tell es-Sawwan, Eridu, Hacilar, Siyalk and Byblos. Asikli Hoeyuek is about 7,000 years old and its houses were built attached with flat roof and entrances on top, same as Catal Hoeyuek. But no pottery was used nor domesticated farming. Some of the other sites also led the development of animal domestication and first organized agriculture like Catal Hoeyuek. For Beidha near Petra in Jordan please see the article First Neolithic Settlement on this website.

Regular Rebuilding

One of the most interesting surprises for archaeologists was the fact that houses were regularly pulled down after a few years and rebuilt close to identical. But experts have no answer as yet why some houses were burnt down deliberately and rebuilt. How did they manage that these fires did not burn down the whole settlement?

This raises many more questions. Was the burning a special cleaning ritual? Could it possibly be a form of house and soul burial? Traces indicate that after the ritual burning possibly ceremonial meals took place in situ. And experts found that burnt houses were only rebuilt after some time. Or could this mean a new clan took over a building spot

when one clan died out? Did house ownership exist already, or was it a common ownership?

Only Domestic Houses

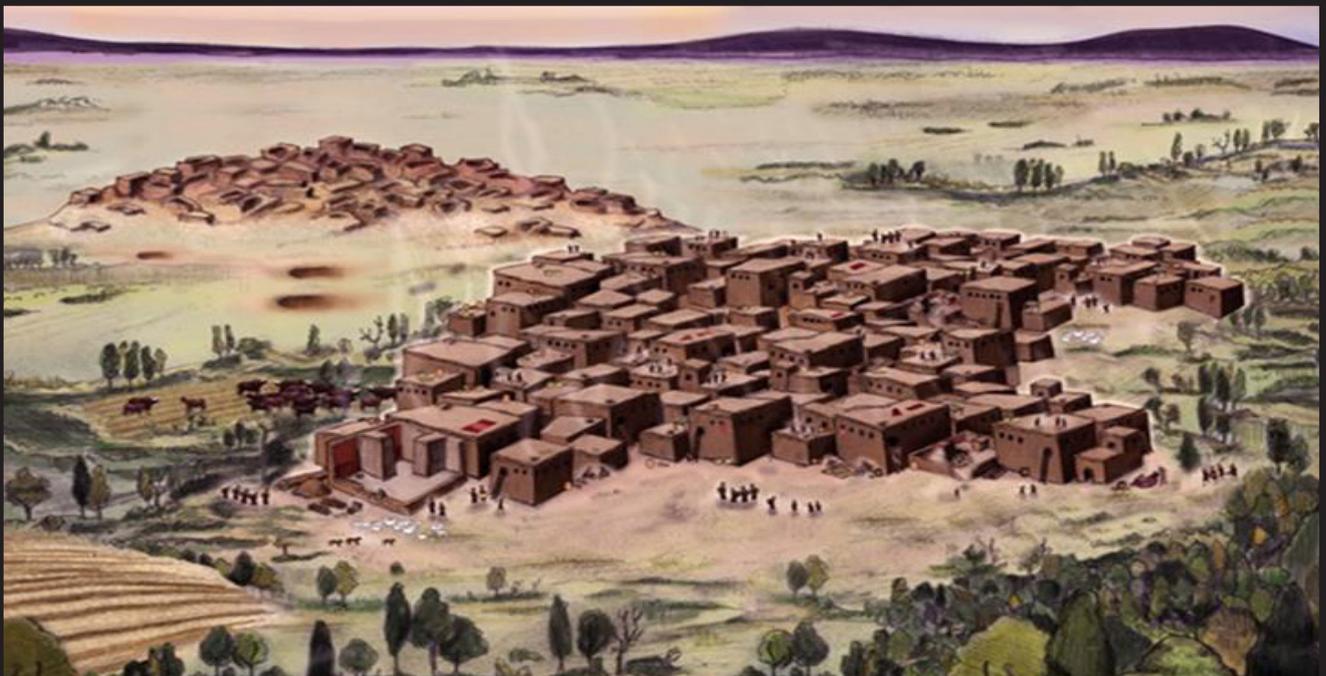
Catal Hoeyuek consists of two mounds with the small Carsamba river in between which later changed its riverbed. The eastern mound is of Neolithic origin and the western built up later during the Chalcolithic period. The western mound also featured for the first-time double store buildings and proof of pottery production. It is interesting that only domestic houses were found with no proof of any public or administrative buildings such as temples or kind of palaces for leaders.

“History Houses”

But there was one difference though. Some houses were more elaborate in their internal architecture and installations. They also had more burials under their floors and benches. The average number of burials in houses was between five to ten, other normal houses had none. But the so-called history houses had a maximum of sixty others up to thirty and more burials.

House Size

Each house consisted of one rectangular room measuring about four by six meters with maximum thirty square meters plus one small store room. Floors were often covered with reed mats. An “L” shaped raised mud brick bench was running along the north and east walls and used for sitting and sleeping. But often it was the preferred place to bury ancestors. In this





way they seemed to have kept in close contact with their deceased family members and elders.

Extended Houses

An interesting discovery were so-called crawl holes which allowed inhabitants to move from one house to the adjacent home. Was this used by extended families? One house even had eight rooms but could not be identified as a palace. Later two houses were built on top what shows a constant move in occupancy.

Thousand Houses?

On the eastern mound slope over two hundred houses were excavated. Certainly, there are still many more to be excavated as these two hundred houses did not serve the enormous number of up to eight thousand inhabitants. It is assumed that minimum four hundred if not even one thousand houses still wait to be excavated in future.

House Shrines

So far twenty percent of houses featured shrines inside the main room. These shrines were small and must have served just for family use. It is interesting that no altars for sacrifices were found in any building. The houses with own shrines were also scattered over town. But what does this tell us? What kind of social structure and religious beliefs did the people of Catal Hoeyuek have?

Rapid City Growth

Excavators also discovered how the city grew rapidly. At first closed open places existed between groups of houses. These were used as pens for animal keeping and as middens for refuse. Rapidly they were over built with new houses. So, excavators knew when they hit a midden they were at

the bottom of the first settlement layer. These middens were a rich source of artefacts which will be described and illustrated more in detail later on.

No Streets?

All houses were built with unfired mud brick and wooden supporting poles or mud brick pillars. What is really unique all houses were built attached to each other on all sides with no streets or walkways separating them. So, it is no surprise that roof tops served instead as communal streets. Did all social life happened really here, because community gathering places did not exist?

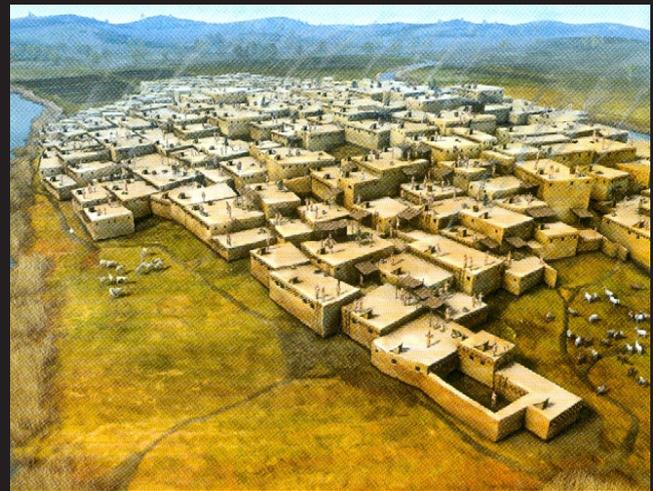
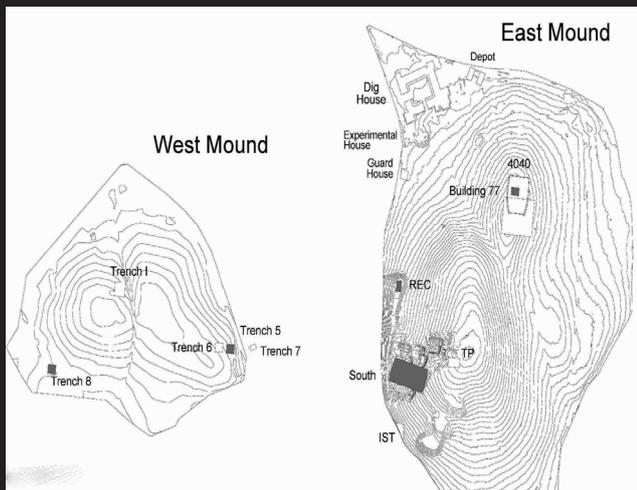
Community Gathering

Fully detached walls made doors and windows impossible. Only few ventilation slits did exist. Access to houses happened via a single roof opening with wooden ladders. Ovens were places beneath on the south side wall. This seemed to have been one of the layout rules. Later communal ovens were built on roof tops supporting the community gathering theory on top of houses. Possibly it was also a security precaution to prevent fires.

Social Structure

The unique building structure of this proto-city and their fully attached houses with no streets





and places at all, tell us a lot about the inherent social structure and culture of the Neolithic community which erected Catal Hoeyuek. It does not look like a defense against attacking tribes, but possibly against wild animals such as leopards, which we can see in some of their wall paintings.

Egalitarian System

With no temples and palaces found experts assume they lived here in an egalitarian social system. This is typical for paleolithic hunter gatherer clans and early Neolithic communities. Men and women had equal rights and there was no preference in food supply. This was possible the same for children and a common upbringing and care by all clan member might have been the norm as well.

Common Ownership

In Catal Hoeyuek certain tools were used by all and communal ovens on house tops are another indication. One expert explained it like this, no palace, no leader, no streets, no privacy, this is typically for an egalitarian social structure. And by the huge size of settlement this must have worked well. What else did keep this community together? Unfortunately, experts have after so many years of research no answers to these questions.

Unique Culture

Results from renewed excavations some years ago shed new light on the fascinating egalitarian Catal Hoeyuek Culture. This points into the direction that much closer trade and social ties did exist to Levant Neolithic cultures. As money did not yet exist it was barter trade or gold and silver. Marine shells from the Mediterranean Coast found are proof of that trade. Same is true for the

cloth linen pieces made from flax coming from the Levant area. In short sufficient wealth must have kept it running smooth.

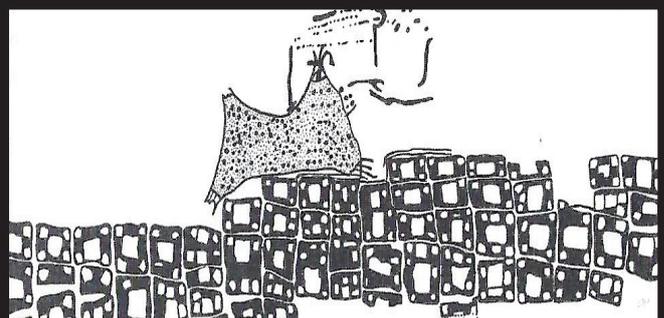
Economy

To be able to erect such a sophisticated and large city it needed a strong economic base with sufficient wealth. The success of Catal Hoeyuek as an important trading center might result from its mining and production of sought-after obsidian tools such as super sharp double sided daggers. A rich local occurrence of volcanic glass was found close by at the slopes of volcano Hasan Dagi.

In addition, first farming produced wheat, barley, peas, almonds, pistachios and fruits. This allowed a steady grows in population. Later first mining and smelting of lead and trading thereof increased wealth further. First domestication of sheep and later cattle was started in this area as well.

Changed Life Style

The community has now fully turned from a hunter gatherer to a pastoral shepherd life style. But animals depicted on their wall paintings belonged still to their occasional hunting list such as aurochs, bear, red deer, wild sheep, wild ass, gazelle and possibly leopard. Now let's look at these already twice mentioned wall paintings.



Wall Decorations

Next to the unique city layout without streets the rich and sophisticated wall decorations inside the domestic homes are amazing for this early period. The principal colors used are red and black on a white surface. Walls were repainted many times. Possibly this was done annually. Inhabitants seemed to have loved clean and perfectly looking wall paintings. The attached pictures give a very good impression on the varied wall paintings and styles.

Annual Repainting

Experts already found out that regular repainting took place. But they wanted to establish without damaging the paintings if new ornaments were the same as previous. Using latest technology, they scanned ten millimeters deep to see which kind of sub surface paintings were lying beneath. No surprise the annual repainting activities were just freshening up the old designs. But every four to five years walls were even replastered. But some houses over painted and plastered over hundred times archaeologists established.

Painting Details

Some paintings show textile patterns. But the painted hunting scenes with red and black bulls, as well as deer hunted by human stick figures and males skipping around wild deer in white loin cloths and leopard skins are the most fascinating. The painted men with erected phallus possibly have a fertility importance. Another interesting burial theory explained later on is based on painted images of vultures gliding over headless human bodies.

Erupting Volcano

Experts are especially intrigued by the painted depiction of an erupting volcano and chess board outlined town beneath. This could be showing Catal Hoeyuek and the volcano is certainly the double peak Hasan Dagi situated at hundred forty kilometer distance.

Colors and Plaster

Red pigments were produced from iron ochre and cinnabar. Wall plaster was finished off with a pure white coat in a Softline style. The plaster was produced from sun bleached shells, which came from the nearby river and were eaten. Same as the imported shell from the Levant area. These were crushed to powder and mixed into the plaster.



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Plaster Reliefs

Despite large mural paintings inside their homes elaborated plaster reliefs were another form of decoration. The most prominent were adorned bull skulls with horns some of which were true bull and sheep horns. These always have a strong religious connotation. Very beautiful are the two leopards facing each other as well as the bear figures. These are shown with upraised arms and have a clear religious meaning as the typical adoring god pose.

Later Developments

Towards the end of occupation there were signs of change in economy, social and ritual life. Larger houses with various rooms and thicker walls were erected. Burials below the floors stopped and paintings covered all four walls and not only the northern and eastern walls close to previous burials.

Female Figurines

Next to the fully detached houses and the elaborate wall paintings the numerous discovered figurines make Catal Hoeyuek so important in Neolithic history. The female figurines are the most important for this early culture as you can see from the pictures. They are carefully made and well-formed measuring on average thirty centimeters. Two beautiful figurines were excavated lately in one house made of marble and limestone.

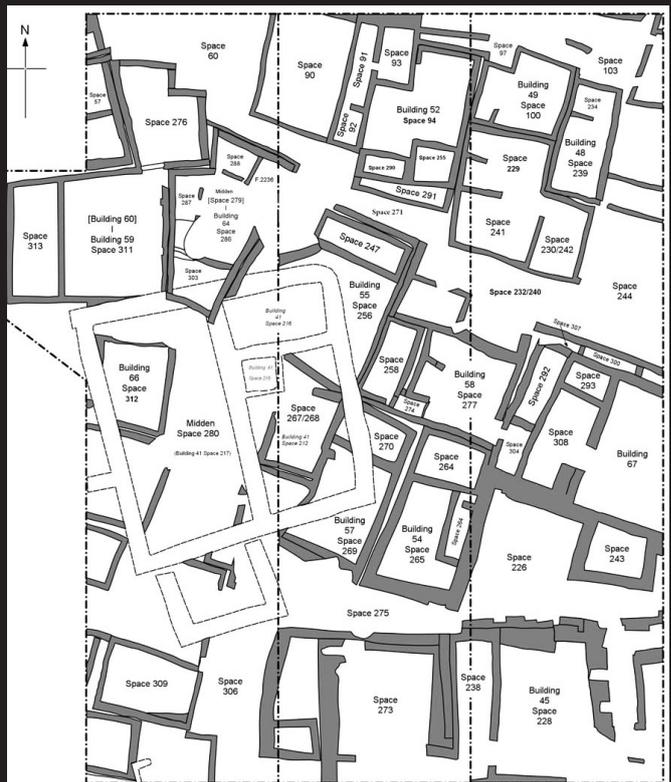
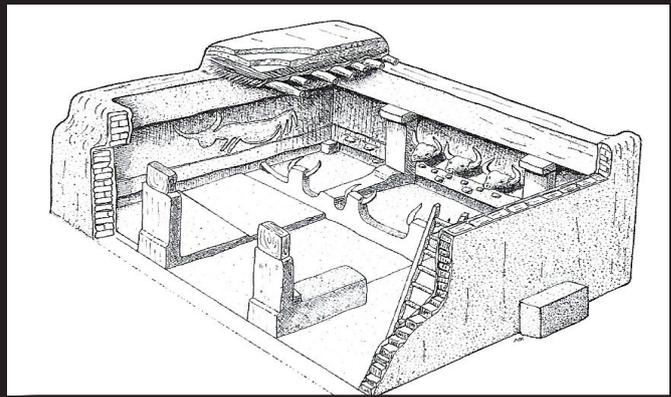
Figurines of naked women are typically a fertility symbol as are women sitting on chairs possibly giving birth. Another important figurine shows a presumed fat mother goddess possibly giving birth sitting on chair flanked by two leopards or lions. But latest conclusions do not support the mother goddess theory.

Interesting Theory

But there is another interesting theory about this famous figurine based on new findings of recent research. When looking at the back of this figure one makes out a different image showing more a skeleton like figure. Was this perhaps a double purpose figurine representing both life and death? Was this not a mythical mother goddess figure, but used for a specific ancestral cult?

Numerous Figurines

About two hundred human and animal clay





and stone figurines were found in early excavations. But further digs unearthed many more, so that the number rose to over 2,000. Most figurines are animals, but only five percent are women. Male figurines are rare. Various stone figurines were made of brown and blue limestone, schist, calcite, basalt, alabaster and marble.

Burial Practices

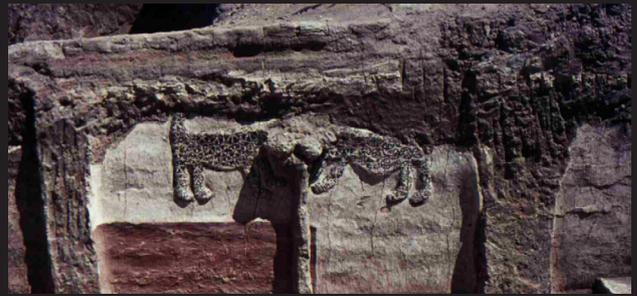
The burial practices found here were rather specific to Catal Hoeyuek. Excavators found many human burials in baskets and reed mats under house floors and sleeping benches. Some houses had a huge number of burials others less and some even none. Men were later buried with stone axes and women with spinning whorls. This was the introduction of a new ritual including burial gifts.

Burial Gifts

Various very special burial items were discovered in excavations. The first was an extraordinary elongated flint dagger with carved bone handle in snake form. Another is an anklet made of animal teeth which represents an interesting piece of jewelry for this early period. Further jewelry pieces such as a necklace made of over one hundred animal bone beads and shells show the development of early artisan skills.

Skull Removal

Another curious burial ritual was the removal and preparation of the deceased skulls. This was done for ancestral practices. The skulls were plastered with clay and painted



with ochre to recreate the faces of their ancestors and possibly they were placed for rituals inside their homes.

Sky Burials

A found wall painting explains an interesting part of a very rare burial practice the so-called sky burial. This wall painting shows vultures flying over headless corpses. These were placed on rocks for vultures to clean the dead bodies of all flesh and the remaining bones of ancestors were collected and buried in houses. It is interesting that sky burials were possibly also practiced in not too far away Göbekli Tepe about 2,500 years earlier. In the recent past sky burials were still practiced in Tibet, parts of China, Mongolia, Bhutan and Sikkim. This was either done for Buddhist beliefs or missing trees and frozen grounds in high altitude making cremations and burials impossible.

Special Finds

The list of excavation items found is long and typical for highly developed Neolithic sites, but some pieces surprised experts. A special discovery was a hand palm large cut piece of obsidian serving perfectly as a mirror. A small hoard of sharp obsidian points and a white marble mace head belong also to the list of amazing finds. As well as a specific ceramic vase with double human face and incised with bull heads on sides round up other remarkable discoveries. Also particular are various engraved stone plaques. One shows an embracing female couple with common body but two heads. This looks very similar to some of the Ain Ghazal statuettes. Another plaque features four dancing figures. And this is not the end of it.

Other Items

The Catal Hoeyuek economy and trading activities dictate the list of unearthed items such as turquoise pieces and beads, flint daggers and many obsidian spearheads, copper items and bone tools, pottery and baskets, wooden bowls, plates and cups, rectangular boxes and textiles. For trading activities stamp seals are normal, but a special piece featured a standing bear with raised paws. Much can be interpreted into this rare symbol of provenance or ownership. Some experts even think it is the symbol of Catal Hoeyuek.

Demise

New research results indicate that the settlement was given up due to changing climatic

conditions. It became too dry and inhabitants faced problems to feed their animals over winter. Possibly the eastern mound was given up and they moved to the western mound. This assumption is based on findings that this smaller mound was occupied about eight hundred years longer. But it was also given up without being attacked.

Summary

Catal Hoeyuek is certainly a unique Neolithic site. Especially the layout of this early proto-city without any streets is fascinating. But it has to be seen in wider context of the Neolithic Revolution in the Fertile Crescent further south as well as earlier religious sites such as Goebekli Tepe. In addition, it belonged to an early long distance trade network and its obsidian trading items created the necessary wealth to be able to build this unique early city. Today the excavation site is covered by a huge hall construction to protect the ancient mud brick houses from the elements. We hope that a planned new museum on site will be finished soon and many discovered items and beautiful wall paintings can be seen here. First replica rooms have been erected to give visitors an impression of Neolithic life 10,000 years ago.

