

---

## note

Archaeological Dialogues 14 (1) 91–111 © 2007 Cambridge University Press  
doi:10.1017/S1380203807002206 Printed in the United Kingdom

---

### **On beasts in breasts. Another reading of women, wildness and danger at Çatalhöyük** *Diane Gifford-Gonzalez*

#### **Abstract**

Since its discovery, Çatalhöyük's iconography has provoked interpretative comment. In a series of writings, Hodder critiqued earlier interpretations of the Çatalhöyük corpus, arguing for asymmetrical gender relations of an enduring and particular type in the European past. While recent research at Çatalhöyük appears to have tempered some of Hodder's interpretative oppositions and scope, it is worthwhile to propose an alternate contextual approach to his original oppositions. This begins with the multiple examples of small carnivores' heads encysted in what may be clay effigies of human breasts and reads the same corpus as involving gender not solely with danger or death, but also with food and fleshly transformation. In this interpretation, the roles and essences of wild and domestic animals, women and men, food and death, are more complex, interpenetrating and mutable. Building on recent work at the site, it is possible to propose the existence of zones of transformation within households.

#### **Keywords**

Çatalhöyük; iconography; symbols; gender; human reproduction

#### **Introduction**

In *The domestication of Europe* (1990), Hodder centrally featured the stunning iconography of Çatalhöyük as recovered and described by James Mellaart (1963; 1966; 1967), with its representations of women, men, wild beasts, hunting and enigmatic post-mortem scenes. From these, Hodder built an ambitious narrative of enduring and asymmetrical gender relations in Neolithic Europe. Hodder's 'archaeology at a distance' was followed by a multi-team field project at the site, which aimed not only to elucidate the social context of the iconography and unique settlement style but also to encourage innovative methods of conducting and writing archaeology (Hodder 1999a). At the heart of Hodder's original interpretative approach to the Çatalhöyük iconography was his interrogation and inversion of earlier interpretations of 'mother goddesses' and other female individuals or body parts there. He questioned the implicit assumption that, because female persons or parts are commonly and often centrally located in the site's rooms, it follows that living women were accorded similar social centrality or high status, as had been asserted by the site's original excavator, Mellaart (1967). Hodder's thesis



**Figure 1** SVI.10 east wall, with modelled bull's head and open breasts each containing the skull of a griffon vulture (*Gyps fulva*) with beak protruding from red-painted areola. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 48, plate 28.

was the very opposite, which he worked through in a 'contextual analysis' of the associations of portrayals of female persons or body parts in relation to representations and actual remains of wild animals, and of their placement in Çatalhöyük architecture (Hodder 1987, 1990).

Looking towards Anatolia, and specifically to Çatalhöyük, for the origins of Neolithic gender asymmetries, Hodder argued in *The domestication of Europe* that the emergence of the cultural construct of the house and its contents (the *domus*) was a pivotal social and cultural innovation in Neolithic societies which, as much as domesticated crops and animals, diffused into Europe from the Near East. The *domus*, according to Hodder's definition (1990, 45), is 'the concept and practice of nurturing and caring, but at a still more general level it obtains its dramatic force from the exclusion, control and domination of the wild, the outside'. He further linked the emergence of the *domus* with the containment of women, citing Çatalhöyük iconography as a visual 'justification' for such containment.

Hodder's initial analysis centred on the emplacement of skulls of wild carnivores (figure 1) and jaws of wild boars in three-dimensional modelled clay protuberances (figure 2) that both Mellaart and Hodder accepted as effigies of breasts. These occur on the east walls of what Mellaart called 'shrines', spaces that more recent excavators interpret as rooms in living space (Hodder 2005d). In his original analyses of the site's symbolic materials, Mellaart (1967) argued that these signified women as life and fox, vulture and so on as death. Hodder made the new attribution of 'danger' to the carnivores encysted in the breasts. He then traced the association of women, vultures, foxes and other carnivores through a variety of contexts and



**Figure 2** SVI.8 east wall, with six modelled breasts each containing lower jaws of wild boars (*Sus scrofa*). Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 48, plate 27.

spatial associations, arguing that these juxtaposed symbols are the material expressions of an ideological basis for male control of women.

In this initial interpretation, Hodder thus suggested that the Western trope of women as nature and men as culture was somewhat displaced in the earliest Neolithic of Anatolia and south-eastern Europe. He argued that women in the *domus* indeed transform (domesticate) nature, but, according to the Çatalhöyük iconography, they also literally embody symbols of the wild, of danger and of death (Hodder 1990, 5–11). Hodder argued that these aspects of female power would have justified male efforts to contain and control women. Although he does not cite Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967) in his original analysis of Çatalhöyük iconography (Hodder 1987), this and several other of Hodder's pieces from the 1980s (e.g. 1983) were strongly structuralist, in a more classical, dichotomizing mode than he perhaps would pursue today.

Hodder himself later (1991) critically re-examined his own position on representations of women versus those of men at Çatalhöyük. He noted that whilst he had been inclined to problematize facile correlations of representational centrality with social centrality in portrayals of women, he had treated representations of males as literal and unproblematic. He went on to diagnose a paradoxical androcentrism in his former, ostensibly feminist approach, an admirable example of the reflexive interpretative archaeology he has championed. Recent research has produced further shifts in Hodder's perspective on the site and its imagery, has recontextualized Çatalhöyük's visual corpus within those of Anatolia and adjacent regions of the Near East, and has added the voices of others to interpretation of its iconography.

Hodder's more recent work on Çatalhöyük (Hodder 2005c; 2006a) has mobilized several theoretical resources, including practice theory as developed by Bourdieu (1977; 1990), to stress the interactions of individuals within a cultural structure expressed through discursive and non-discursive practices, including the built environment and portable 'art'. The latter approach accords greater agency of individual actors to learn and manipulate their culture's symbolic resources as they negotiate their lives. Rather than assuming, as did classical structuralist theory per Lévi-Strauss, that humans follow a deeply embedded 'script', it aims to strike a balance between the enduring elements of social and cultural structuration, on the one hand,

and individual agency, on the other (Bourdieu 1990). As many others have emphasized (Lightfoot, Martinez and Schiff 1998), practice theory offers archaeologists a way to theorize the redundancies as well as the departures from the norm that they perceive in archaeological materials. Hodder also draws on phenomenological approaches citing Merleau-Ponty (1962) to think about the lived experiences of Çatalhöyük people who inhabited such richly decorated spaces.

The present essay responds to Hodder's original (1987; 1990) formulation, and it can be considered structuralist as well, but the author is much in accord with Hodder's more recent perspectives. It aims to suggest an alternative to Hodder's original reading, while acknowledging changes in his and others' perspectives on the representational corpus and gender roles at Çatalhöyük resulting from research by the Çatalhöyük Research Project (Hodder 2000; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2006a; 2006b). It argues that Hodder's reading of the Çatalhöyük materials was coloured by unacknowledged, culturally specific perspectives that may divert attention from other, perhaps more localized, interpretations of the iconography. It lays out another interpretation of these associations, in which the roles and essences of wild and domestic, women and men, food and death, are complex, interpenetrating and mutable. The author also acknowledges the valuable contribution of sustained zooarchaeological analysis at the site in forming this perspective (Martin 2000/2001; Martin and McGowan 2005; Russell 2003; Russell and Martin 2005; Russell and Meece 2005).

Given its structuralist elements, this essay stays closer to Mellaart's and Hodder's evocative touchstones, and thus takes a different analytic approach from Lewis-Williams's recent (2004) interpretation of Çatalhöyük architecture and iconography, which he contends reflects the persistence of shamanic practices among early farmers and herders.

Such issues are open to debate because the Çatalhöyük site was constructed and occupied between the mid-9th millennium and late 8th millennium before present (7400–6000 B.C.), during the 'Early Neolithic' of Anatolia, when other recently studied sites from only slightly earlier, such as Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori (Hauptmann 1999; Schmidt 2001) testify to a vibrant iconography featuring wild animals, mainly male, at a time when domestic cereals were already present in living sites. These facts, and the findings that the bones of cattle at Çatalhöyük derive from wild animals and that wild cattle were preferred feasting foods (Russell and Martin 2005), point to the continued importance of hunting in the ideologies and experienced lives of people in the region during this period. Lewis-Williams asserts that shamanic rituals, including trance and visionary states, endured into the times that Çatalhöyük was occupied and are responsible for the distinctive nature of its iconography. Hodder's recent reflections on the iconographic corpus appear to incline towards reading the ancient inhabitants' practice of embedding animal elements in house walls as a possible form of shamanic practice (2006a, 196–98). While the present essay focuses on gender, reproduction, wild animals and power, it does not intend to deny that altered states of consciousness may have been involved in the production and renewal of

**Table 1** Directional location and tabulation of motifs mentioned in the text. Data from Mellaart 1967, 102–3; Russell and Meece 2005, 225.

	<i>Direction</i>			
	North	East	South	West
<i>Motif</i>				
Bull-baiting painting	2		1	
Bull head with/without horns	2	16		14
Bucrania	5	6		
Horns in bench		4		
'Net' painting	6	8	1	1
Leopard skin/felid painting	18	56	2	7
Leopard model	5	1		3
Boar painting	1	1	1	1
Stag/cervid painting	3	3	7	3
Vulture painting	8	4		
Goat painting	9	4		
Splayed figure	3	2	1	4
Breasts		18		

Çatalhöyük's representations of humans and animals, whether or not strictly speaking 'shamanistic'.

Some final notes on the iconographic corpus analysed here are relevant. This article deals solely with the representations reported by Mellaart (1963; 1966; 1967), as did Hodder in his original writings (1987; 1990). Recently acquired archaeological evidence from Çatalhöyük suggests that areas called 'shrines' by Mellaart were in fact sections of living spaces (Hodder 1996; 1999b; 2006a). The Çatalhöyük Project developed a new, more neutral denomination system for rooms and spaces in the settlement. However, because I stay close to the corpus illustrated by Mellaart, in this article I will follow the same shorthand as did Lewis-Williams to denote rooms referred to in Mellaart's 1967 book as 'shrines', labelling them S (for 'shrine') IV.A.8 and so on. This is simply intended to facilitate readers' reference to Mellaart's 1967 illustrations, and has no interpretative implications.

New findings have also prompted some revisions of Mellaart's naming of some representations. For example, the widely encountered (table 1) modelled relief that Mellaart named the 'birthing goddess' is now called a 'splayed figure'. This is because most such effigies, the heads and hands of which were apparently destroyed on abandonment of the rooms in which they were located, do not clearly show female (or male) physical traits (see Hodder 2006a). Moreover, a recently excavated clay stamp portraying such a splayed figure clearly shows the head and paws of a bear (Hodder 2006a). Hodder (2006a, 143–44, 201–2) argues that these reliefs may represent

human–bear hybrids from a myth, or possibly shamanic transformations into bear form.

More relevant to this article, a spirited discussion has emerged among researchers at the site over whether the modelled breasts are truly breasts at all (Russell and Meece 2005). This article proceeds on the assumption that they are, and it will discuss why this interpretation is likely in the analysis below.

### **Another reading**

The alternative reading presented here rests on revision of meanings for several key symbols, but these must first be understood in their previous interpretative terms. Both Mellaart and Hodder interpret the Çatalhöyük breasts as symbolizing women, a seemingly unarguable point. Hodder reads breasts as attributes of women in the sense of their male-identified sexuality – that is, as markers of females-ready-for-sexual-congress. Such a perception of breasts is common in contemporary Western contexts, thanks both to long-lived habits of viewing and representing female bodies in the Western aesthetic tradition (Berger 1972) and to the exaggeration of this perspective in modern mass media. However, in many cultures, breasts symbolize the generative power of adult women in a wider sense, rather than simply as a marker of eligibility as sexual partners for men (Dettwyler 1995; Quandt 1995). In such contexts, breasts are at least sometimes read as providers of food.

Many modelled Çatalhöyük breasts, whether or not they contain carnivore or boar jaws, appear to connote their food-producing capacity by their literal ‘open’ quality (e.g. SVI.10, SVII.5; figure 1). These effigies range in shape from short cylindrical forms to long, tubular structures with red-painted tips at the end, interpreted as areolar areas. They terminate with an opening, rather than a closed nipple. Though not anatomically realistic, the extended, tubular structure of the modelled breasts may be seen as an attempt to render the functioning, milk-producing and often pendulous mammary rather than the smaller, and less distended, nulliparous breast through which milk has not flowed.

It is relevant here to address the question of whether the more tubular structures modelled on the walls are in fact likely to be evocations of breasts, as has been raised by some Çatalhöyük researchers (Russell and Meece 2005). Based on their red-painted tips, on correspondences between them and statues that represent human females and on representations of breasts on some wall paintings, this author believes they are. A fired clay female statuette from SVI.A.61 shows the same ‘open’ nipple area on her unambiguous breasts (figure 3), though other female figurines do not. The Level V painting that shows men hunting or the baiting of a bull (Hodder 2006a, plates 15–16) depicts a female figure with cylindrical breasts jutting from either side of the torso.

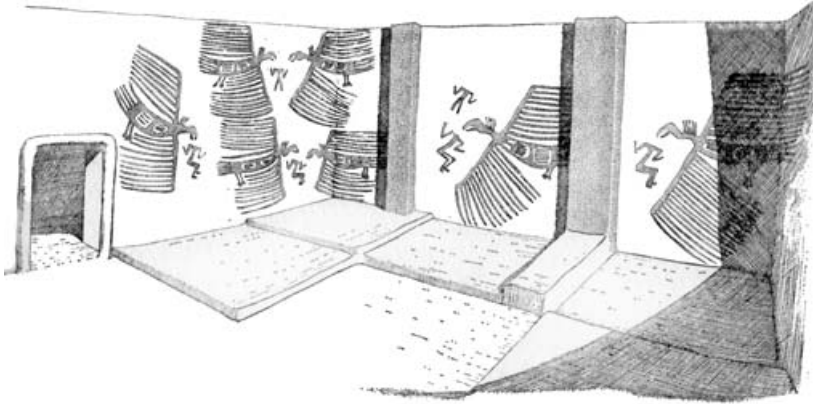
When one expands the meaning of Çatalhöyük breasts to include the breast as a food source, a new interpretative relationship with the encysted carnivore skulls is enabled. Whereas Mellaart (1967, 48) read carnivore skulls as representing death (scavenging species), Hodder read them as representing



**Figure 3** Baked clay figurine of a female from SVI.A.61, showing 'open' breasts. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 145, plate 79.

wildness and danger to humans, especially men. In fact, species enclosed in the breasts include foxes, weasels (or other mustelids) and vultures. Russell and Meece (2005) have pointed out that these are small animals that present little actual danger to humans, in contrast to the leopards and bears that would have been true hazards to people in ancient Anatolia. The wild boar jaws found in one set of putative breasts (figure 2) represent a species that could have threatened people and is sometimes portrayed as a fierce prey in painted scenes or on ornamental art. However, as will be developed in this essay, their relation to the small carnivores may rest more on their scavenging propensities, rather than on their intrinsic dangerousness.

One might argue that leopard or bear skulls could not fit within the breasts modelled on the Çatalhöyük walls; however, this may be an



**Figure 4** SVII.8, 'the Vulture Shrine', north and east walls, showing vultures feeding on headless human bodies, with a 'hand' pattern on their backs. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 169, figure 47.

unnecessarily literalist argument. Evidence exists that Çatalhöyük artists were not constrained by literal realism in making representations. Sizes of red deer, cattle and boar are sometimes wildly exaggerated relative to that of human males gathered around them, as in friezes of SA.III.1 and SF.V.1 (Mellaart 1966, plates LII.b, LIVb, LXI.a). The plasticity of clay, the apparent license in proportion that these anatomical effigies do display, and the fact that some do contain jaws of wild boars all suggest that the absence of leopard and bear parts is a deliberate choice not to include the landscape's most dangerous creatures in these effigies.

The habits of foxes, weasels and vultures, which would have been well known to people living in an as yet little transformed environment, suggest an alternative connotation for their emplacement in breasts. These smaller animals do consume flesh, either as primary predators (mustelids, foxes), or as scavengers (foxes, vultures). The latter live on animals dying from old age, injury or illness. Significantly, foxes and vultures often subsist on the spoils of the hunt of larger carnivores – they flock to larger predators' kills (Nowak 1991). The association of wild boars is somewhat anomalous here, but wild pigs do scavenge carrion as part of their diet (Nowak 1991). In all cases, these animals transform the flesh of other dead animals into their own living flesh.

The vultures command more attention, not only because their heads are found in modelled breasts, but also because they are represented feeding on decapitated human bodies in wall paintings at Çatalhöyük (e.g. SVII.21, VII.8), and in some statuary (figure 4). Urbanites of European cultural traditions might associate vultures with 'danger', or certainly with a horror of scavengers, but this is not a universal reaction to such birds. Several African and Asian religions, including the ancient Egyptian and contemporary Zoroastrian and Tibetan Buddhist, accord the vulture a place of honour because of its ability to transform dead flesh into life. Revulsion with dismemberment and scavenging animals may stem from medieval Christian horror of dismemberment and of animals that consume human bodies, itself



rooted in a theology that stressed the importance of preserving a body's integrity in anticipation of its resurrection (Bynum 1995).

This interpretation of the species encysted in the breasts as scavengers of larger predators' kills permits the following respective reinterpretation of key components of Çatalhöyük iconography and reconceptualization of their intimate association:

woman > food producer

fox/vulture/weasel/pig > flesh consumer(death transformer).

Their juxtaposition elides to

fox/vulture/weasel/pig > women > flesh consumer > food producer.

Women are thus good scavengers, feeding on wild beasts obtained by other predators, transforming the dead flesh into the life-giving milk of their breasts. Or, in the shorthand of the breast-encysted skulls, breasts feed on hunted flesh and flow with food.

Lewis-Williams (2004, 48) in fact presents a similar interpretation of the encysted skulls, emphasizing the mouths of wild animals situated in breasts, rather than Hodder's abstract 'danger' or 'death'. Lewis-Williams places the conjoined symbols in a broader context of shamanistic belief and practice, associating both with sustaining powers of life. However, I opt to stay closer to the core paradox of the juxtaposition, the carnivore mouth (food-consuming) inside the lactating nipple (food-providing).

Turning to the role of men in Çatalhöyük, an interpretation that links to women as described above is possible. Paintings show men in dynamic association with large wild game, primarily the bull, the red deer and the boar, either hunting or baiting them (Russell and Meece 2005). Men may be portrayed as tiny in comparison to exaggeratedly large wild creatures, yet they are shown as competent to tease, snare or kill them (figure 5). Zooarchaeological evidence from the recent Çatalhöyük excavations has shown that the bones of cattle at the site are attributable to wild *Bos primigenius*, that very large, probably male, animals are common, and that cattle were the favoured species at feasts, while domestic sheep and goats were more quotidian fare (Russell and Martin 2005). Hodder (2006a, 198–204) now interprets the painted scenes as representing part of a 'prowess-animal spirit-hunting-feasting nexus' intimately involved in social ritual and the making of adult gender identities at Çatalhöyük.

When men are shown interacting at close quarters with these large and dangerous animals, they wear the skin of the leopard, the greatest wild predator of ancient Anatolia (figure 5). Leopard skins are widely portrayed in Çatalhöyük paintings and carvings (table 1), and paired individuals of the species appear in repeatedly plastered and painted reliefs.

Only one leopard bone has been found at the site, as a pendant in an unusual burial of a woman holding a plastered male head, which Hodder interprets as the result of a taboo (Hodder 2006a). Of interest is the fact that, although leopard skins are very commonly represented as special human garments in



**Figure 5** SA.III.1, 'the Hunting Shrine', east wall, painted mural showing hunters wearing leopard skins baiting a huge bull. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 135, plate 61.

the iconographic corpus, and although actual skins may have been included in some male burials (Mellaart 1967, 208), Çatalhöyük paintings never depict a leopard hunt. Thus, although highly valued for its skin, it would appear that leopards are 'off limits' as a regular prey animal, perhaps because human hunters are deeply identified with them.

When men are shown hunting or baiting large prey, they, rather than women, are identified with this most dangerous denizen of the Anatolian forest, literally donning its skin to pursue large prey. Thus

men > leopard > predator/meat-getter

with the larger iconographic narrative being

man > leopard > hunter > kills > living flesh to dead flesh > life to death

woman > vulture > scavenger > eats > dead flesh to living milk > death to life.

In this reading, the transformative powers of women are sustained by those of men. Men (leopards) hunt, bring home the dead bull and other noble prey. Women (small scavengers) eat the dead flesh of men's victims, change it into milk, and nourish young. Sexual union, birth and lactation close off the cycle in which both genders play a part.

Seen from this perspective, the much-published 'mother goddess' from A.II.1, seated on two leopards (figure 6), rather than portraying domination over wild beasts, depicts women's literal support by (male) leopards. Sculptures from Çatalhöyük show women sitting upon adult leopards and holding leopard cubs (hunters' offspring?), and occasionally they may be clothed in their spotted skins, but never during a hunt. Carved limestone statuettes recovered from VI.A.10 (Mellaart 1967, plates 73–76, colour plate X) represent 'goddess', 'maiden' and young (apparently male) child, seated or leaning upon leopards – here may be read dependency upon the hunter.

Russell and Meece (2005) have pointed out that some mobile art presents problems for mapping leopard skins exclusively with men. A headless, flat-chested 'maiden' wears a short leopardskin cape (Mellaart 1967, plates 75–76) like a neckerchief. This breastless individual might not



**Figure 6** Sculpture showing goddess seated upon two large felines, probably leopards. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 157, colour plate IX.

be female, thus maintaining the difference between resting on leopards (dependency) versus being in the leopard's skin (identity). However, another, more clearly female, effigy found in A.II.1 (Mellaart 1967, plate 87) wears a leopardskin blouse, suggesting that both the females and males represented could assume the symbolic connotations of leopardskin, at least under certain circumstances. It is important to acknowledge that these effigies, as other Çatalhöyük representations, may not portray living women and men, but rather personages, ancestors or essences from the mythic or spiritual realm. However, these beings are gendered, and their associations follow certain rules of inclusion and exclusion.

According to this reading, 'danger' aligns differently, in the person and the actions of the leopard; this is expressed by men who don leopards' skins to challenge the greatest of the beasts in the hunt, perhaps with rituals such as bull- and stag-baiting (A.III.1, F.V.1 paintings, Mellaart 1963; 1967). Male dangerousness may also have been evoked by a beautifully pressure-flaked dagger with a carved handle in the form of coiled serpent recovered from a male burial (VI.A.29, Mellaart 1967, figure 54, colour plate XIV). From the shape of its head, the snake is a poisonous adder, which species has broader

iconographic associations in the region (see ‘Discussion and conclusion’, below). Another such knife, with the handle in the form of an open-mouthed boar’s head, has been recovered in recent excavations at the site (Hodder 2006a).

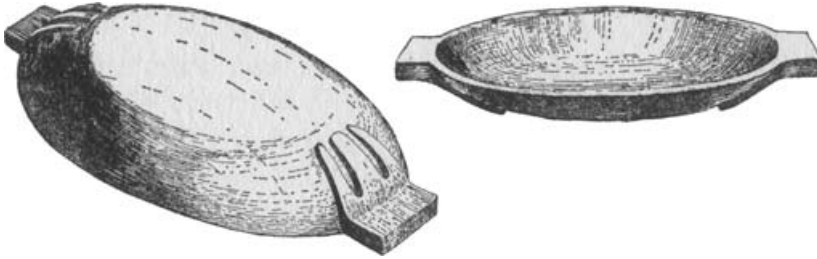
### **Transformative agency: vultures, hands, nets and flesh**

Çatalhöyük paintings of vultures show them feeding on human bodies, most of which are decapitated (SVII.8, SVII.21, SVIII.8; Mellaart 1967, 166–69; here figure 4). In contrast to what might be implied by these paintings, and to Mellaart’s original interpretation, the Çatalhöyük Project’s analysis of human remains has revealed relatively few secondary burials, and little physical evidence of excarnation before burial; however, some individuals buried under benches in houses were later exposed and decapitated (Andrews, Molleson and Boz 2005). Hodder (2006a) interprets the vulture paintings as depicting scenes from history or myth (see figure 4).

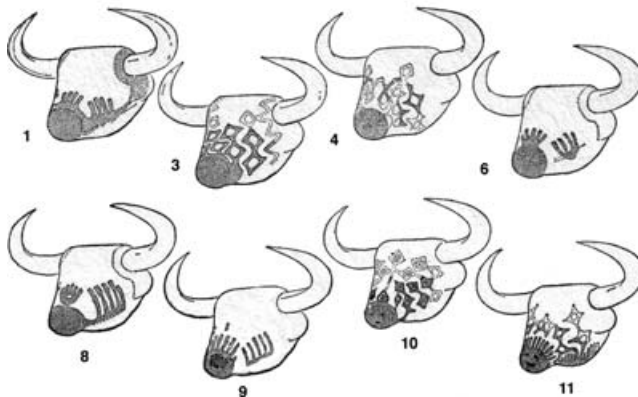
These depictions may also signify the transformation of the flesh from one state to another by alluding to agency, by carrying on the proposed metonymy of women and vultures. In addition to being linked through the symbolism of the vulture skulls in modelled breasts, women and vultures are juxtaposed in statuary recovered from Çatalhöyük. Mellaart (1967, plates 80, 82) recovered a figurine of a kneeling mature woman and another of the head of a bird of prey from SVI.A.25. Mellaart, Cauvin (1972) and Hodder (1987, 46) assert that these represent a link between females and vultures. Perhaps a more compelling association of vulture with female human is found in another Neolithic site in southern Anatolia, Nevali Çori, occupied for the last half of the 9th millennium B.P., which shares some iconographic conventions with the somewhat later Çatalhöyük. At Nevali Çori a figurine of a bird of prey (putatively a vulture, from its postcranial form, although its head is missing) was recovered. The bird is perched over one or two stylized female human figures (Hauptmann 2002). This site and that of Göbekli Tepe will be discussed in the final section of this essay.

It is possible that the metonymic relationship of women and vultures as flesh-processors is further expressed through the association of hand-like designs with vultures, and of the same hand-like design with a food plate and applied to modelled heads of cattle (see below). Humans remove meat from bodies with their hands, in the process covering them with blood. Clearly, real vultures have no hands and remove flesh from bodies with their beaks, which become bloodstained. In reality, vultures are brownish-black, but those depicted eating the human bodies on SVII.8 walls are portrayed in red, the colour of flesh and blood. In flight, five of the primary feathers of griffon vultures extend beyond their wings in a pattern that may evoke fingers, perhaps suggesting the metonymic relation of vulture beak and human hand. Vultures painted in SVII.8 and SVII.21 do not display realistic wings but do show an open space on their backs, within which are painted line motifs quite unlike vulture plumage, including one resembling a human hand (figure 4; Mellaart 1967, plates 45, 48–49).

The association of hand with flesh carries on in a large wooden platter recovered from SVI.61 (figure 7), in which the carved handles are extended



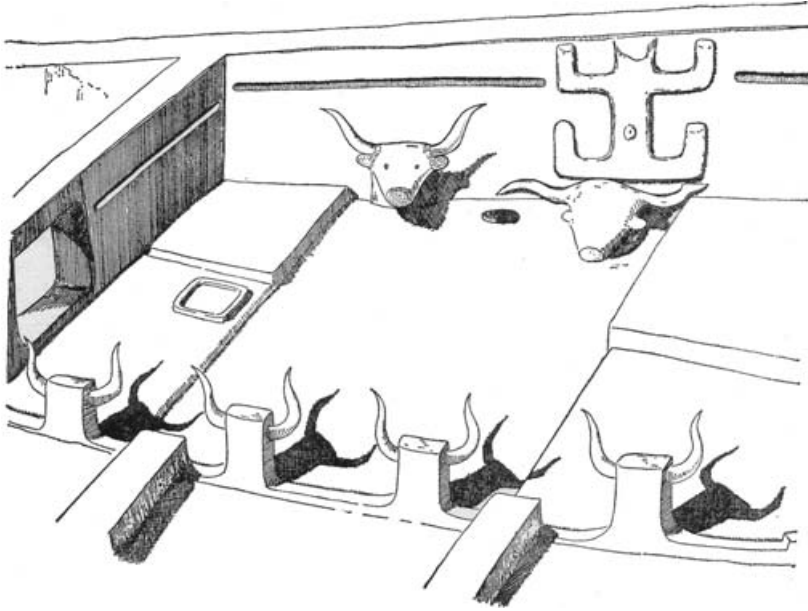
**Figure 7** Wooden 'meat dish', recovered from SVI.61, showing finger-like extensions on the underside of the handles. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 215, figure 55.



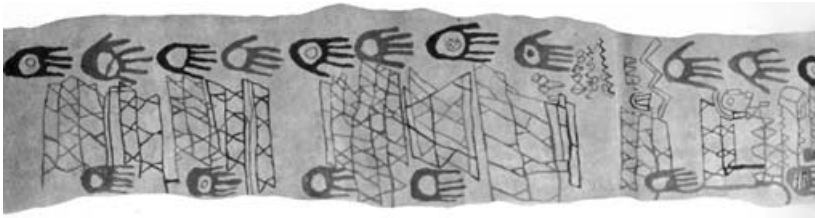
**Figure 8** SVI.B.8, east wall showing successive layers of red designs painted on modelled bulls' heads. These include hands with fingers or vulture wings, as well as geometric, 'net' patterns. Numbers are from Mellaart 1967, 123, figure 36.

on to the underside in a bas-relief resembling a three-fingered hand. If women, who butcher and prepare prey with their hands, thus change the flesh of dead prey into their own living bodies and into milk, the vulture scenes present a parallel symbolic transformation of dead human flesh into life through 'handling' by the birds. The vultures of SVII.21, unlike those portrayed in SVII.8, have human legs, suggesting again that humans and vultures are elided, although in this case the legs cannot be assigned a gender.

In SVI.B.8 the hand/vulture-wing motif is applied in successive painted layers on the muzzles of modelled bulls' heads (figure 8). The application of these red painted motifs to a prey species, on walls associated with post-mortem processing of humans, suggests that these animals are literally marked for processing. A 'net' motif is also applied to the muzzles of modelled bulls' heads in SVI.B.8, as well as being painted on either side of the bull's head in VI.B.10 (figure 9). The 'net' motif is sometimes shown with human hands, as in the north-west corner of SVII.8 (figure 10). Mellaart (1967, 172-73) argued that hunting or baiting scenes on the north wall of SAII.1 and in SEIV.1 show a net near a bull's hindquarters and near a bear-like figure. The net design, always in red when applied to prey animals, may thus signify



**Figure 9** SVI.B.8, east and west walls, showing modelled splayed figure above a modelled bull's head on the west wall, with bucrania arranged in front of the east wall. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 124, figure 37.



**Figure 10** SVII.8, north-west corner, detail of panel showing red and black hands with a pattern interpreted as nets between them. Reproduced from Mellaart 1967, 92, plate 43.

capture and possession by humans, as the hand/vulture-wing motif may stand for butchery or food processing.

### Directionality and transformation

Çatalhöyük rooms display strong and consistent associations of compass direction with specific classes of parietal representations, modelled clay installations, modelled animal and human body parts and human burials. Mellaart's original diagnosis of such a strong emphasis on directionality is supported and augmented by findings of the recent excavations, which, through micromorphological and other evidence, have permitted closer specification in the location of various activity areas. This aspect of the habitual practices of Çatalhöyük residents is directly relevant to the alternative reading offered here. Breasts with implanted animal skulls occur on the east walls of rooms (e.g. Mellaart's SVII.1, SVII.21, SVII.35; see table 1 above). North and

east walls of rooms are associated with death by repeated acts of emplacement and representation. First, the majority of adult burials occur along the north wall (Mellaart 1967, 204–9; Hodder 2006a, 215). Second, all paintings of vultures on human bodies were placed on north and east walls of rooms (Mellaart's SVIII.8, SVII.8, SVII.21; Mellaart 1967, 102–3; table 1 above).

Whereas Hodder (1987; 1990) interpreted this juxtaposition as the symbolic mapping of women with danger and death, the interpretation advanced here suggests that the death-to-life motif is being symbolically worked through, as carnivores lie within breasts growing from walls of the dead. This perspective is especially compelling if vultures are read not as a literal dead end, but rather as the transformative agent engendering another round of life.

Wild cattle are the subjects of many of Çatalhöyük's representations, the flesh of this species was a principal feasting food (Russell and Martin 2005), and their spatial disposition in relation to other symbols sustains the themes outlined above. Cattle are portrayed in several ways, and these depictions sort out directionally. Cattle, especially bulls, were portrayed in paintings of hunting or baiting scenes, in engraved and painted outlines and as modelled heads with or without actual horn cores installed; their frontal bones with horns were incorporated as single or multiple components in pillar-like installations (bucrania); and, finally, the multiple sets of frontlets were set into horizontal plastered 'benches' (table 1). Individual cattle horns were also encountered protruding from room walls, and some debate exists over whether these are purely utilitarian 'hooks' or also part of the representational corpus (e.g. Russell and Meece 2005).

Huge, repeatedly painted bulls in bas-relief were placed on the north walls; one lies on a south wall (table 1; Mellaart 1967, 103; Russell and Meece 2005, 225). Hunting or baiting scenes occur on the north or east walls, the side of the dead. Modelled bulls' heads are found on the east, north and west walls (table 1). However, their associations vary significantly according to their directional settings, and they therefore may testify to different states in a continuum of transformation of this prey from living animal to human food to milk. Bulls' heads on the west walls frequently lie below splayed figures (Mellaart 1967, 102–3). On the north and east walls, zones associated with the human dead (real and painted), with vultures and with scavengers-in-breasts, bulls and splayed figures are not positioned together vertically. Instead, bulls' heads may appear near breasts, here read as woman-scavengers eating prey flesh and producing nourishment (Mellaart 1967, 107). Bulls' heads placed on the north and east walls thus may signify cattle-as-food rather than cattle-in-life.

Significantly, dismembered horns in bucrania were installed on the east and north walls only, or in benches in front of the east wall only (table 1; Mellaart 1967, 102–3). Figure 9 shows the contrast between bucrania on the east wall and modelled bulls' head below a splayed figure on the west wall. These opposing walls might thus be read as representing cattle in two states on their post-mortem path from life to dismemberment, paralleling that depicted for people, who also lose their heads, at least in painted contexts.

Hodder (2006a, 49–54) has summarized the results of archaeological research on the directional orientation of activities within Çatalhöyük's

houses, as well as trends in the differential placement of burials of people of different ages. Although this topic is too extensive to develop fully here, a few points are worth noting. As noted earlier by Mellaart and now substantiated by micromorphological analysis, the southern sectors of houses held hearths; although the floors in this sector were kept clear of larger debris, they incorporated ash and microdebris of cooking, stone tool-working and other activities, whereas those of the northern sector did not. While Hodder reads the southern floors as ‘dirty’ in comparison with the plastered floors of the northern sectors, it is not clear that the inhabitants, who scrupulously cleared out cooking and other debris into spaces between houses or abandoned zones and regularly re-plastered the southern floors (Hodder 2006a, 126–28), would have seen these in the same way. Storerooms normally lay to the eastern side of the food preparation areas. Obsidian preforms obtained through long-distance exchange were buried in the southern sectors near hearths (*ibid.*, 51). Newborns and very young children were also buried in the southern sector, and evidence exists for their containment in baskets (*ibid.*, 215).

In the narrative of transformation developed here, these facts may be read as a discourse on states in the transformative process. The southern sector is the zone of materials-as-potential, of a stage in their transformation. Foodstuffs and obsidian rest in the southern sector, literally or figuratively buried in the house floor and its storage bins, until acted upon to produce their final form. The fact that very young children were placed in this zone may signify their unrealized potential as adults, just as those adults buried under benches on the north wall would signify persons of realized potential, of accomplished female or male lives. In this reading, the east wall is a liminal zone, where the potential of foods and persons is actively managed, perhaps by women of the house. In the eastern and northern walls, vultures and women transform the potential of flesh into food; rather than allowing it to slide into putrescence, they produce from it living flesh and food. The fact that figurines of ‘goddesses’ have been retrieved from deposits of plant seeds and from an eastern grain storage bin (Mellaart 1967, 182–83) may also reflect the active management of other stored food resources, on spiritual as well as practical levels.

### **Discussion and conclusion: oppositional dualism or transformative dynamism?**

This alternative reading supports Hodder’s contention that the art of Çatalhöyük is about gender and power, while at the same time suggesting that, conceptually, gender relations are being negotiated in a more dynamic way. The painted friezes, installations of animal parts in and on house walls, statues and other representational art are seen as conversations that unite gendered social roles, food production and human reproduction. These symbolic juxtapositions are not aptly labelled oppositions, for within, in some cases literally, each component exists a signified potential for transformation towards another state. They thus display the dynamism alluded to at the outset of this essay. Rather than assign either gender to a fixed and opposing role, this reading of Çatalhöyük symbolism apprehends each as an agent in the process of acting in the world, engaging together and effecting transformation. For example, in elaborated hunting scenes, male humans and male animals are featured, but a



few clearly human females, signified by breasts and different dress, are depicted in some scenes. Whether or not these are narratives of mythic relations, depictions of experienced scenes or something different again, the presence of female personages in effect sows the seeds of the next scene, in which the hunted prey is handled through butchery and translated into food as meat and milk.

Other contextual associations may be reinterpreted. As stressed by Lewis-Williams, Hodder's grouping of all wild animals into a single category merits critical scrutiny. The varied habits and propensities of individual species would have been thoroughly understood by Çatalhöyük's people, and their evocation in the site's iconography may thus symbolize diverse qualities or powers. The 'wild' is a category that makes sense to inhabitants of our much tamed, post-industrial landscapes, where it is contained in game reserves and national parks, but it might have been less comprehensible to those who portrayed the Çatalhöyük animals. Likewise, Hodder's reading of painted representations of decapitated human bodies, and even of buried bodies (decapitated or not), in the houses as 'death' bears some examination. Certainly it is unarguable that dead persons are painted and placed in the houses of Çatalhöyük. However, whether they symbolize 'death' in any sense of the modern abstraction, rather than a stage in the cycle of renewal of flesh, stores of powerful and accomplished ancestors or something else is an arguable point. According to the reading presented here, neither men nor women are differentially 'of nature'. They each engage with wild animals, but differently, facing and even being different sorts of dangers, as they change prey into human flesh, and human flesh into reborn life. What is repeatedly invoked is the transformative role of gendered individuals, and apparently only two genders.

The Çatalhöyük visual corpus has thus far been mute on whether this ideological system incorporated sexual congress between men and women as an essential link in the life cycle. No portrayals of phallic imagery or of explicitly sexual acts have been recovered, although examples of embracing figures were recovered from VI.A.30 (Mellaart 1963, plate XXI.d, VI.A.10; 1967, plate 83). This contrasts with the phallic imagery and portrayal of a human female about to be penetrated by what is apparently a disembodied penis at Göbekli Tepe, a putative ritual centre in south-eastern Anatolia dating to 9500–8000 B.P. (Hauptmann 1999). Hodder (2006a, 198–99) has linked Çatalhöyük's paintings of feats of men's prowess in baiting male prey animals, which are often depicted in a state of sexual arousal, to Göbekli Tepe, which does include some stylistic similarities in the form of splayed figures. A second site in southern Anatolia, Nevalı Çori, later than but near Göbekli Tepe, sustains the association of a dangerous serpent with a male entity, interpreted by the excavator as a male god (Hauptmann 1999). This serpent, like that on the Çatalhöyük knife handle, has the head of an adder, but could have additional phallic imagery. Research in the Anatolian region suggests that iconography similar to that at Çatalhöyük is found into the Balkans (Özdoğan 1999) and may, in time, enable a fuller reading of the iconographic resources mobilized in this region.

The Çatalhöyük Project's findings have led Hodder (2006a, 208–13) to rethink and de-emphasize a strongly dichotomous gender differentiation and

power asymmetry between men and women at the site. In part this is due to the lack of skeletal evidence for pronounced differences between Çatalhöyük females and males in their diet (Richards and Pearson 2005; Richards *et al.* 2003), health status or post-mortem treatment.

The reading presented here also portrays gender relations approaching parity, with women less threatening yet more proactive as carnivores and mothers, and men more wild and dangerous as predators. It could be argued that this is a story about flesh, animal and human, its making, unmaking and remaking, and the roles that men and women play in this recursive process. Gender differentiation does not necessarily imply differentials in social power, at least in the levels of the site studied so far. However, it is also the case that – as Hodder suggested in his initial work on the site – iconographic discourses can differ substantially from lived experience of power differentials. The question arises as to which gendered persons created this corpus. Were its creators men, showing how women's reproductive powers depended quite literally upon male courage and skill, their assuming of leopard nature? Was it women, showing how woman's power drives the hunt, nourishing leopard children on the magic of meat transformed to milk? Could multiple stories be told from this iconography, by differently placed actors, both in the making of these multiple types of visual and tactile representations and in the ritual and everyday practices that went on with and near them?

This essay has largely been a structural interpretation of iconography that implicates gendered meanings. However, in closing, it is worth considering that the strong emphasis on gendered entities and actions in the Çatalhöyük's corpus could mask other tensions than those between genders. Hodder (e.g. 2006a, 57–64) discusses, as Mellaart did before him, the differences in the degree of ornamentation of various excavated houses. Hodder (2006a, 177–79) emphasizes the tensions that may develop in a dense settlement during a time span when people were making the transition to food production. He draws attention to the increasing material 'entanglements' in Neolithic life and their underlying potential for exacerbating social tensions involved in different households' divergent material fortunes. He notes that the wild-animal imagery is expressed in public space at the earlier site of Göbekli Tepe, while at Çatalhöyük, although public feasting outside the houses continues, animal imagery is brought into the houses (Hodder 2006a, 195–206). I would suggest that, just as nationalism has in recent times masked tensions among social classes, so, too, a story of male and female powers might serve to draw together a community dealing with other communal tensions. A 'universal' narrative of men and women, powerful animals, hunting, flesh and human reproduction would offer a community with potentially schismatic tensions unifying themes in which all could participate, reinforced by imagery and ritual. If these rituals were situated in more richly decorated, and more powerful, 'houses', where lineage heads of several generations back could sometimes literally be resurrected and given a plastered face (Hodder 2006a), the forces of schism could be counteracted, at least for a while.

As interpreted here, Çatalhöyük's iconography displays substances usually kept under culturally proscribed wraps in our own times and places, offering

us a discomfoting level of wetness in bloody food and bodily fluids. In contemporary Western culture, the viewable breast is the nulliparous object of male desire, whereas, according to this reading, Çatalhöyük features the pendulous and flowing mother's breast, the object of infantile desire. Images summoned in this reading of Çatalhöyük's provocative representations – breasts as food, women as scavengers, human flesh as food – render them more alien to us the viewers, or, perhaps more aptly, render us the viewers more alien to them. Therein may lie this reading's main merit, as it disables an unreflective sense of familiarity with the site's symbolic content and with the people who produced it.

### Acknowledgements

This paper was inspired by a talk given by Ian Hodder many years ago at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and I am grateful to him for this stimulus to my thinking, as well as for his encouragement in developing this theme. I thank Margaret Conkey, Thomas Dowson and Nerissa Russell, who read and commented upon drafts of this paper. I thank Christine Hastorf and Shahina Fareed for helping facilitate permission requests to James Mellaart, and I thank James Mellaart for graciously permitting me the use of figures from his 1967 book. All responsibility for the interpretations presented here rests solely upon my own head. I am deeply grateful as well to Arek Marciniak, Alexander Gramsch and Ton Derks, for their help in seeing this essay to publication. I am grateful to my daughter for enabling me to experience the alterities of perception and the cultural circumscription involved in breasts as food.

### References

- Andrews, P., T. Molleson and B. Boz, 2005: The human burials at Çatalhöyük, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge, 33–98.
- Berger, J., 1972: *Ways of seeing*, New York.
- Bourdieu, P., 1977: *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge.
- Bourdieu, P., 1990: *In other words. Essays towards a reflexive sociology*, Stanford.
- Bynum, C.W., 1995: *The resurrection of the body*, New York.
- Cauvin, J., 1972: *Religions Néolithiques de Syro-Palestine*, Saint-Andrée-de-Cruzières.
- Dettwyler, K.A., 1995: Beauty and the breast. The cultural context of breastfeeding in the United States, in P. Stuart-Macadam and K.A. Dettwyler (eds), *Breastfeeding. Biocultural perspectives*, New York, 167–215.
- Hauptmann, H., 1999: The Urfa region, in M. Özdoğan and N. Başgelen (eds), *Neolithic in Turkey. Cradle of civilization. New discoveries*, Istanbul, 65–87.
- Hauptmann, H., 2002: The shock of the old, *Cornucopia* 5, 438–55.
- Hodder, I., 1983: Burials, houses, women and men in the European Neolithic, in D. Miller and C. Tilley (eds), *Ideology, power and prehistory*, Cambridge, 51–68.
- Hodder, I., 1987: Contextual archaeology. An interpretation of Çatal Hüyük and a discussion of the origins of agriculture, *Institute of Archaeology bulletin (London)* 24, 43–56.

- Hodder, I., 1990: *The domestication of Europe. Structure and contingency in Neolithic societies*, Oxford.
- Hodder, I., 1991: Gender representation and social reality, in D. Walde and N.D. Willows (eds), *The archaeology of gender*, Calgary, 11–16.
- Hodder, I., 1996: Re-opening Çatalhöyük, in I. Hodder (ed.), *On the surface. Çatalhöyük 1993–95*, Cambridge, 1–18.
- Hodder, I., 1999a: *The archaeological process. An introduction*, Oxford.
- Hodder, I., 1999b: Renewed work at Çatalhöyük, in M. Özdagan (ed.), *Neolithic in Turkey. The cradle of civilization*, Istanbul, 157–64.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2000: *Towards reflexive method in archaeology. The example at Çatalhöyük*, Cambridge.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2005a: *Çatalhöyük perspectives. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2005b: *Changing materialities at Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2005c: *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge.
- Hodder, I., 2005d: Peopling Çatalhöyük and its landscape, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge, 1–30.
- Hodder, I., 2006a: *Çatalhöyük the leopard's tale. Revealing the mysteries of Turkey's ancient 'town'*, London.
- Hodder, I. (ed.), 2006b: *Excavating Çatalhöyük. South, north and KOPAL area reports from the 1995–99 season*, Cambridge.
- Lévi-Strauss, C., 1967: *Structural anthropology*, Garden City, NY.
- Lewis-Williams, J.D., 2004: Constructing a cosmos. Architecture, power and domestication at Çatalhöyük, *Journal of social archaeology* 4, 28–59.
- Lightfoot, K.G., A. Martinez and A.M. Schiff, 1998: Daily practice and material culture in pluralistic social settings. An archaeological study of culture change and persistence from Fort Ross, California, *American antiquity* 63, 199–222.
- Martin, L., 2000/2001: Hunting, herding, feasting. Animal use at Neolithic Çatalhöyük, Turkey, *Archaeology international* 2000/2001, 39–42.
- Martin, L., and K.J. McGowan, 2005: Çatalhöyük bird bones, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge, 99–116.
- Mellaart, J.A., 1963: Excavations at Çatal Hüyük, 1963. Second preliminary report, *Anatolian studies* 13, 43–103.
- Mellaart, J.A., 1966: Excavations at Çatal Hüyük, 1965. Fourth preliminary report, *Anatolian studies* 16, 165–91.
- Mellaart, J.A., 1967: *Çatal Hüyük. A Neolithic town in Anatolia*, London.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., 1962: *Phenomenology of perception*, London.
- Nowak, R., 1991: *Walker's mammals of the world*, fifth edition, Baltimore.
- Özdagan, M. (ed.), 1999: *Neolithic in Turkey. The cradle of civilization*, Istanbul.
- Quandt, S.A., 1995: Sociocultural aspects of the lactation process, in P. Stuart-Macadam and K.A. Dettwyler (eds), *Breastfeeding. Biocultural perspectives*, New York, 127–43.
- Richards, M.P., and J.A. Pearson, 2005: Stable-isotope evidence of diet at Çatalhöyük, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge, 312–21.

- Richards, M.P., J.A. Pearson, T. Molleson, N. Russell and L. Martin, 2003: Stable isotope evidence of diet at Neolithic Çatalhöyük, Turkey, *Journal of archaeological science* 30, 67–76.
- Russell, N., 2003: Dance of the cranes. Crane symbolism at Çatalhöyük and beyond, *Antiquity* 77, 445–55.
- Russell, N., and L. Martin, 2005: Çatalhöyük mammal remains, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Inhabiting Çatalhöyük. Reports from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge, 33–98.
- Russell, N., and S. Meece, 2005: Animal representations and animal remains at Çatalhöyük, in I. Hodder (ed.), *Çatalhöyük perspectives. Themes from the 1995–99 seasons*, Cambridge, 209–30.
- Schmidt, K., 2001: Göbekli Tepe, southeastern Turkey. A preliminary report on the 1995–1999 excavations, *Paléorient* 26, 45–54.