“Patterns and Paradigms: (Re)new(ed) Perspectives on Mortuary Practices at Neolithic Çatalhöyük”

Çatalhöyük is a Neolithic settlement located in south-central Turkey dating from roughly 7100 to 6000 cal BC. Beginning with James Mellaart’s work (1961-1965) and continuing with Ian Hodder’s current research project (1993-present), excavations at the site have produced vital information that has enriched our understanding of early settled life in the Near East. At Çatalhöyük, as elsewhere in the Neolithic Near East, there is an emphasis on the manipulation and redistribution of human body parts, with particular attention paid to the skull. Evidence for this practice occurs with the observation of ‘headless’ primary burials and the secondary re-deposition of disarticulated crania and mandibles within primary and secondary burial contexts. The manner in which these practices were carried out and the motivations for such behaviour have been the subject of much debate since the site was first excavated in the 1960s. In recent years, our understanding of the mortuary customs practiced by the Neolithic inhabitants of Çatalhöyük has changed considerably, largely as a result of new insights and new personnel, but also by revisiting previously discounted interpretations which had long been ignored. As the Çatalhöyük Research Project nears the end of its 25 year remit, I will discuss the most recent interpretations of the mortuary practices, while also providing a critical appraisal of the ways in which these interpretations have evolved over the years.

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