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The Homes Built on the Graves of the Dead

Agriculture spread rapidly eastward and southward from its heartlands on the upper reaches of the Euphrates and the Tigris. As we have seen, the Mediterranean island of Cyprus was one of the first stops when the farmers began their travels westward. But it took over a millennium for farming to reach western Turkey as well.

A number of tentative attempts can be discerned dating back about 9,700 years. They were made by early farmers who had not yet begun to use ceramic ware. However, the first sizeable wave of westward migration got under way more than a millennium later, when pottery was well established. The most massive wave of migration started about 8,200 years ago.

This point in time coincided with the climate event that took place 8,200 years ago – the great pan-European period of cold caused by the melting of an iceberg in Canada, as a result of which icy meltwater ran out into the Atlantic, altering the course of the Atlantic currents. It was at this point that people disappeared from Cyprus for several centuries, probably because of drought.

In the past, archaeologists disagreed on whether climate change in the Middle East really affected the lives of early farmers. The latest evidence, however, strongly suggests that it did. German and Israeli geologists and others have drilled in the bed of the Dead Sea. The core samples they obtained have enabled them to study variations in water level, pollen and clay particles, and thereby to establish how the climate has changed, century by century.

A dramatic change can be seen that occurred 8,200 years ago. The composition of pollen altered. The proportion of typical Mediterranean vegetation fell, while plants typical of

deserts and dry steppes became far more common. At the same time, there was a dramatic drop in the level of the Dead Sea. The only possible explanation is a drastic fall in precipitation. Large areas that had once been suitable for cultivation dried out, becoming deserts. The Turkish archaeologist Mehmet Özdoğan believes the change in climate drove people away.

Today there are over 30 archaeological sites from the era when farming arrived in western Turkey. The finds from these excavations confirm that some farmers went to sea and followed the coasts westwards, while others made their way on foot overland. To simplify matters slightly, there were two distinct groups with slightly different cultures.

The seafarers generally constructed round buildings. They decorated their pottery by pressing seashells into the clay, and they buried their dead in separate burial places on the outskirts of their villages.

Those who made their way through inland Anatolia, on the other hand, built square houses. They used monochrome pottery that was generally undecorated and buried their dead under the floor in their homes.

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Çatalhöyük, a flagship among archaeological sites in inland Anatolia, has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. It is sometimes called 'the world's first town', as there were several thousand people living there a full 9,000 years ago. The dwellings were square and built very close to one another – so close that there was no room for streets that would have enabled the inhabitants to move around. To reach their homes, they had to walk over their neighbours' roofs.

The only way of entering their dwellings was to climb down through an opening in the roof. The same aperture also served as a chimney, the oven being placed directly underneath the opening to allow the smoke to escape. There were probably ovens on the roofs as well, where Çatalhöyük's inhabitants seem to have spent much of their time during the warm part of the year.

Calling Çatalhöyük a 'town' is somewhat misleading. It was more like an unusually large village; although archaeologists have searched for many years, they have not found any communal structures. No shared storehouses, temples or burial places were built there, for example. Instead, each individual dwelling fulfils all these functions.

Each family had a small cupboard in which grain and lentils were stored, in woven baskets and grain containers of mortar and clay that were attached to the wall. Their main room contained a structure reminiscent of a shrine, which was kept particularly clean and well cared for. Some families adorned their shrine by incorporating the skulls of wild oxen directly into the wall. The horns of the oxen were painted with red ochre so that they stood out in all their splendour against the whitened walls. The red pigment was also used for mural paintings depicting creatures such as vultures, aurochs and leopards.

Often, the main room also contained the skulls of dead family members that were left lying out in the open. Their skeletons, on the other hand, were buried under the floor. The families living in Çatalhöyük built little platforms over the graves. We cannot rule out the possibility that they slept on these platforms – a few inches above their ancestors.

The walls, platforms and floor were daubed with different grades of clay and then limewashed, presumably several times a year. The white limewash made the rooms reasonably light, even though the sun's rays only filtered down into the interior through the little skylight.

The rooms would have had to be limewashed frequently because of the smoke and soot that billowed out of the ovens. And even though people kept their own dwellings whitewashed, clean and neat, they dumped rubbish, leftovers and human waste in the empty spaces between the houses, where the stench must have been abominable.

About once every hundred years, families built new houses on top of the old ones. The new house was nearly always identical to the old, with all its walls, both external and

internal, in exactly the same positions. This could continue for 1,000 years – more than 30 generations.

Society thus seems to have been very conservative, with the ancestor cult playing a central role. However, life in Çatalhöyük was also very egalitarian as regards both social status and relations between the sexes. The homes of different families do not reflect any obvious difference in wealth. Analyses of skeletons and graves show that men and women ate food of the same quality and had equal status.

There have even been theories suggesting that Çatalhöyük may have been a matriarchy. Some researchers in the past believed its people mainly worshipped a goddess, given the numerous finds of terracotta figurines and drawings of plump female figures. The rotund terracotta figurines are very like those made by groups of European hunters all the way back to the Venus of Hohle Fels, nearly 40,000 years ago.

Such theories have encouraged contemporary followers of goddess cults to make pilgrimages to the site. Not infrequently, there have been cultural clashes between goddess-worshippers from elsewhere and people from farming villages near the excavations, who often have traditional Muslim values.

Ian Hodder, the archaeologist who has directed excavations in recent years, does not share the view that Çatalhöyük was governed by women who worshipped special fertility goddesses. Women could certainly play key roles, but so could men. Sexuality and fertility were important, but that applied to both sexes, according to Hodder.

The staple foods in Çatalhöyük were cultivated grain and lentils. There seems to have been a veritable plague of mice, which often nibbled at the grain containers in the home. Yet there are no signs of any cats. On reflection, I can well imagine that cats would have stayed at home in the regions where agriculture first emerged. Cattle, sheep and goats can be driven long distances, while dogs follow of their own accord. But cats do as they please.

Sometimes the villagers held great feasts at which they would grill meat from wild animals. There are a number of murals in which bearded men with quivers and leopard-skin

loincloths are attacking aurochs and wild boar. Both the aurochs and the wild boar are males and are depicted in a state of sexual arousal. The terracotta art objects that have been discovered – apart from the female figures – nearly always represent wild beasts such as leopards and wild oxen. Sheep and goats are hardly ever depicted, although finds in the dwellings show that people ate such animals far more often than wild oxen.

Wild animals seem to have played a more important role than domestic ones in the imaginative world of Çatalhöyük's inhabitants. Although these people had lived mainly from farming for a few millennia, the ancient mythology of the earlier hunting culture lived on.

Çatalhöyük shows how two millennia of agriculture altered many aspects of life. Settlements could be much larger, accommodating 10 times as many people as in the past. People's diet contained more grain and therefore more carbohydrates, which sometimes led to caries. Life seems to have revolved more around the individual's own family and immediate forebears, rather than around the group as a whole. However, many aspects of the old hunting society remained. There were the same mythological wild animals and similar ritual female figures (whether or not we call them goddesses).

The people of Çatalhöyük seem to have lived in isolation to a large extent, and they were essentially self-sufficient. But they did import certain products from distant places. One of these was obsidian, a type of volcanic rock brought from mountainous areas 170 kilometres (110 miles) away. However, there is nothing to suggest that the newly arrived farmers in inland Anatolia met any local hunters – either in Çatalhöyük or anywhere else. In coming to Anatolia, they appear to have colonised an uninhabited land.

The migrants who made their way to the Sea of Marmara, the area that is now Istanbul and the shores of the Black Sea, had different experiences. These regions of course, had been inhabited since earlier times. The newly arrived farmers and the older hunting population must have been brought together here.

To judge from the remains Turkish archaeologists found, this went very well. Buildings, graves, tools and diet all indicate that groups of farmers and hunters merged, apparently in a peaceful fashion. This can be seen, for example, from the archaeological sites at Yenikapı and Pendik, near Istanbul.

Apparently there were no local hunters on the shores of the Aegean Sea, in the area where the port city of İzmir is now situated. But another kind of cultural encounter took place here. This was the meeting place of farmers who had migrated on foot across central Anatolia and farmers who had navigated along the coastline. In other words, migrant farmers from the hinterland and coastal farmers who had arrived by boat began to live together.

Sites such as Ege Gübre and Yeşilova near İzmir show how these two farming cultures merged. This fusion may quite conceivably have played a decisive role in the history of Europe. Presumably the coastal areas around İzmir were the starting point for the 'island-hoppers who brought civilisation to Europe', as some newspaper headlines expressed it.

'Island hopping' is a kind of holiday that involves travelling from one Greek island to another by ferry. I know people who spend their holidays this way. It now turns out that island-hopping farmers got about in a similar way all of 8,000 years ago. The newspaper headlines referred to a Greek study including DNA analyses of people living in Turkey, Greece and other parts of Europe today. The Greek researchers can demonstrate a clear pattern: people in central Anatolia are noticeably closely related to people living on Crete and the Greek islands known as the Dodecanese (which lie in the Aegean Sea between İzmir and Crete). These places also have a genetic link with mainland Greece and Macedonia to the north.

A number of other researchers would like to see more sound evidence in the form of DNA from archaeological finds. However, the Greek researchers themselves have already drawn their conclusions: one of the main routes along which farming came to Europe ran through inland Anatolia,

then via the Greek islands to mainland Greece and northwards over the Balkans.

So it seems my foremothers on my paternal grandmother Hilda's side began their life in Europe as island-hoppers in the Aegean Sea.

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The pioneers of European agriculture would have taken a range of different routes, including the one along the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. But I shall follow the route running northwards from the Aegean Sea and mainland Greece to the region around Thessaloniki, up along the River Struma and the River Vardar, through Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Albania, and then northwards towards Hungary. This seems to have been the most important route by which agriculture reached Europe.

It is also the route taken by my own foremothers, Grandmother Hilda's grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's mother in the direct line, going back about 300 generations. The pattern on the map the family history research firm gave me is strikingly clear.

My paternal grandmother Hilda belonged to the subgroup of haplogroup H known as H1g1. On checking the genealogy researchers' register, I see that the most south-easterly instances of this haplogroup are to be found on the Peloponnese Peninsula in southern Greece and in the area around Athens. Genealogy researchers with the same DNA variants also crop up in Macedonia, Bosnia and Serbia, along the routes taken by Europe's first farmers on their way northwards towards central Europe.

When I began to plan this book, I asked the researcher Wolfgang Haak to comment on the degree of dispersal of haplogroup H1g1. He immediately observed that it seemed to be a typical marker of the first wave of migration of farmers into central Europe. Several subsequent DNA results confirm that theory. Today, conventional archaeology, researchers' DNA analyses and the private DNA analyses that I and other

people researching their genealogy have commissioned all point in the same direction: a group of early farmers 'island-hopped' from the west coast of Turkey to mainland Greece before beginning the trek northwards towards Hungary.

Their arrival may well have been the most influential event ever to take place in this part of the world. Life in Europe would never be the same. After 30,000 years of the hunters' egalitarian, nomadic lifestyle, agriculture began to push Europe towards more private property, permanent year-round dwellings and greater class differences – in short, towards what many people call civilisation. It took a few millennia, but the first farmers to land in Greece took the first steps.

Having arrived in western Hungary, the first farmers developed the Starčevo culture. This was of decisive importance for the subsequent history of central, northern and north-western Europe. The Starčevo culture was the forerunner of the Linear Ware culture, which would later disseminate agriculture and dominate much of Europe, from France to northern Poland, for over a millennium.

There are detailed DNA analyses from Hungary that cast light on the first farmers in Europe. I hear about the results at a major annual conference organised by the European Archaeology Association. The conference is held in the Czech city of Pilsen, which is best known for its classic beer. That seems fitting to those of us who believe that agriculture and civilisation were driven largely by feasting and plentiful beer.