

Çatalhöyük, Turkey: a summary of some recent results

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ABSTRACT - Recent (since 1993) work at Çatalhöyük has allowed re-evaluation of the reasons for the complex symbolism at the site. It is suggested that the art at the site had a domestic context. Closer understanding of the role of symbolism can be gained from the detailed excavation and analysis of Building 1 in the North area of the East mound. Here geometric wall painting occurs in the cleaner part of the building, associated with burial, especially the burial of young people. Different types of art at Çatalhöyük probably had different functions, but some wall painting seems have had a function linked to death, contacting or protecting from the dead.

POVZETEK - Novejša izkopavanja v Çatalhöyüku (od leta 1993) so omogočila, da na novo ocenimo razloge za kompleksni simbolizem na tem najdišču. Menimo, da je imela umetnost tega najdišča družinski kontekst. Vlogo simbolizma lahko bolje razumemo na osnovi natančnih izkopavanj in analiz stavbe 1 v severnem delu vzhodne gomile. Tu najdemo v čistejšem delu stavbe geometrične stenske slikarije, ki so povezane s pokopi, predvsem s pokopi mladih ljudi. Različne vrste umetnosti v Çatalhöyüku so verjetno služile različnim namenom, toda nekatere stenske slikarije so bile očitno povezane s smrtjo, ali so varovale pred njo ali pa nevezovale stik z njo.

The 9000 year old site of Çatalhöyük in central Turkey was first excavated by James Mellaart (1967) between 1961 and 1965. It quickly became of international importance for a number of reasons. For example, there is its early date. There are ¹⁴C results from the site and dendrochronological studies suggesting a range of dates from the mid seventh to the mid sixth millennia bc (uncalibrated), although 5 metres of occupation which occur below Mellaart's lowest level (XII) indicate an earlier foundation for the site. Initially these early dates indicated the importance of areas outside the Fertile Crescent for the early development of agriculture. Discoveries since the 1960s have, however, demonstrated that many earlier sites exist in Turkey with large settlements or agriculture. But Çatalhöyük retains an importance in terms of its symbolic complexity. While similar symbolic themes such as the bull, the vulture, the removal of heads, and female figurines, have now been found widely from the Near East into southeast Europe, Çatalhöyük stands out in terms of the complexity and density of its use of these themes.

There are certainly other reasons for pointing to the complexity of Çatalhöyük. For example, the artifacts demonstrate widespread exchange (e. g. obsidian, Me-

diterranean shells) and technical proficiency or even specialisation (as seen in polished obsidian mirrors and finely flaked flint daggers). However, recent evidence suggests that there are other reasons for arguing for a limited degree of complexity. We remain unsure of the degree of dependence on domesticated plants and animals, but certainly an important component of the subsistence was wild resources such as tubers and equids. The continued dependence of early, large settled sites on wild resources is seen at a number of other sites in Turkey (e. g. Asikli Höyük and Çayönü). At Çatalhöyük, intensive use of wild resources may have been facilitated by location in a wetland environment along the Çarsamba River. In addition there is no evidence of central administration, ceremonial centres or public buildings, although in a site 13.5 hectares in size (Çatalhöyük East), such evidence may prove difficult to find (Fig. 1). Overall, Çatalhöyük stands out not so much in terms of its size or political, economic or social complexity, but in terms of its symbolism.

New work began at the site in 1993, under the auspices of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara. The first three years of fieldwork concentrated on studies of the surface of the West (Chalcolithic)

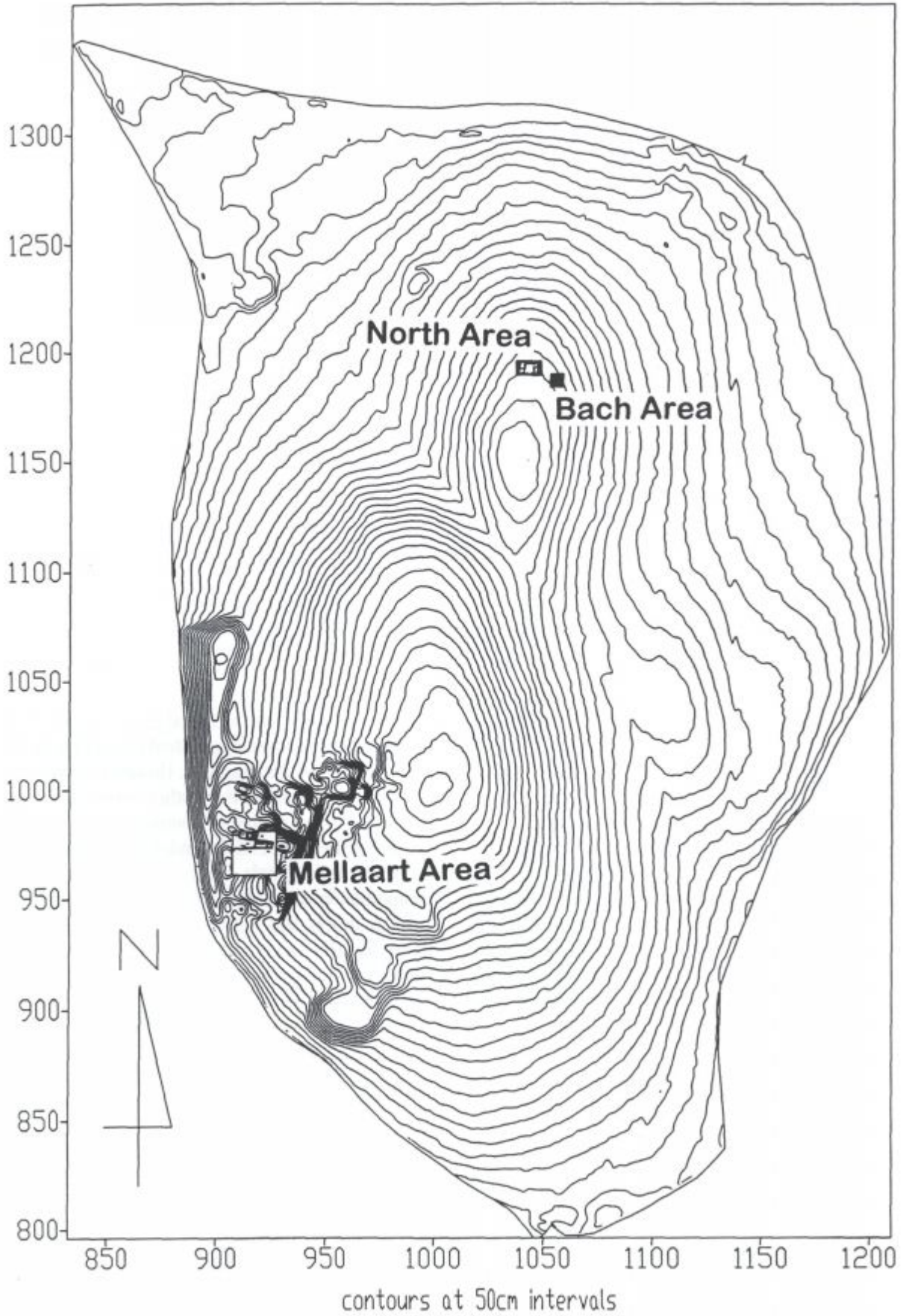


Fig. 1. The excavation areas on the East mound at Çatalhöyük.

and East (Neolithic) mounds (published in *Hodder 1996*). Since 1995 excavation has been undertaken in the areas identified in Figure 1. One of the aims of this work is better to understand the art and symbolism at Çatalhöyük East.

BUILDING 1

I wish to provide an example of the social character of art at Çatalhöyük East by discussing the first building that we have excavated in detail - Building 1 in the North area of the site.

Scraping of the surface of the mounds at Çatalhöyük had earlier proved successful in establishing the overall arrangement of architecture on the Neolithic East mound. Despite some later (Hellenistic and Byzantine) occupation, in many areas on the top of the mound removal of the plough-soil immediately exposed plans of Neolithic buildings. These results and the supporting geophysical prospection are described by R. Matthews (1996) and Shell (1996). It became clear that the upper levels of occupation on the East mound consisted largely of densely packed small buildings and extensive midden areas. The small rectangular buildings recalled closely those excavated by Mellaart (1967) in the southwestern part of the mound. Indeed, the scraping technique suggested that these buildings, even well away from the area excavated by Mellaart, included elaborate examples with complex internal fittings. This suggested that the so-called 'shrines' occurred in different parts of the site at a high density. Rather than envisaging a priestly elite in one quarter of the site, it became necessary to think of domestic cults widely spread.

Further study of the material excavated in the 1960s, including the artefacts housed in museums in Turkey, suggested a more complex picture (*Hodder 1996*). A continuum of variation could be identified between more and less architecturally complex buildings. The more complex buildings with more platforms, bins, pillars, sculpture and painting also tended to have more bifacially flaked obsidian points and more obsidian cores. They also tended to be more innovative in the use of ceramic forms, and to have more figurines. It was also clear that the more elaborate buildings in one phase would often continue to be more elaborate when rebuilt in ensuing phases. There are many difficulties with the definition of such variation between more and less elaborate buildings because of the limitations of the surviving records. In any case, what variation occurs is

within a narrow band, and micromorphological work (*W. Matthews et al. 1996*) indicated that even the more elaborate buildings (termed 'shrines' by Mellaart) had traces of a wide range of domestic activities on their floors.

In approaching Building 1, therefore, we were of the opinion that the art at Çatalhöyük had a domestic context but that certain buildings played a slightly more central role in the generation and transmission of cultural elaboration. Unfortunately, the preservation of Building 1 proved to be relatively poor since the walls and upper fills had been subject to millennia of erosion on the top of the North mound, and since the plasters on the surviving walls and floors (the latter only 50 cm from the surface of the mound) had been affected by roots, animal burrows and freeze-thaw action. Nevertheless, the building yielded a large amount of information, resulting from detailed data collection. All soil from the site was dry-sieved, and 30 litres from each deposit were wet-sieved in a flotation system. The heavy residues from this were collected in a 0.5 mm mesh, were dried and then sieved through 4 mm, 2 mm and 1 mm meshes before hand sorting. The resultant heavy residue plots from the floors in Building 1 will be discussed below. (The results from the organic and inorganic chemistry analyses of the floor samples are not available at the time of writing.) This work on micro-artefact distributions on the floors at Çatalhöyük is needed because the floors were carefully swept clean in antiquity. Macro-artefacts (above 4 mm) occur rarely on or beneath floors, and when they do they appear to be special foundation or abandonment deposits or material which has fallen from roofs or walls.

Up to 40 layers of replastering were found on the walls and floors of Building 1. We believe, on the basis of correlations with dendrochronological sequences, that these replasterings occurred annually (*Kuniholm and Newton 1996*). The use of the building has been divided into the 8 phases summarised in Figure 2a-c. The following is a brief summary of the story of these phases. During the construction of the building (phase one), clean foundation deposits were placed between the walls and burials were placed within these deposits. In particular, a row of three neonate burials was placed just in front of what was to be the entrance from the western room (Space 70) into the main eastern room (Space 71). In the first occupation phase (phase two) a fire installation was constructed within the south wall of Space 71. Adjacent to this were the traces of a lad-

der which allowed access to the building, presumably through the same roof hole through which the smoke from the fire escaped. The western room (Space 70) contained a fire installation in the southwest corner. In the centre of the west side of Space 71 a relief sculpture was placed on the wall, although since this was later removed (see phase eight) we do not know what this consisted of. Certainly there was a frame of vertical plaster edges within which the relief sculpture was placed. Although traces of red paint were found elsewhere on the walls of Spaces 70 and 71, the only concentration of painting and the only evidence of designs and motifs occurred around and on the northwestern platform (Platform 13) in Space 71. Here some of the early layers of plaster were painted in geometric designs in various hues of red and in black.

In order to understand the social role of painting in Building 1 we need to try and determine what activities were taking place in the building, particularly around the northwest platform. The micro-artefact distributions suggest a wide range of activities, as do the micromorphological studies by W. Matthews (*et al.* 1996). It is clear that micro-traces survive of obsidian knapping, fish processing, wood-working, bone implement manufacture, hearth sweeping, plant storage, within the buildings at Çatalhöyük. There are indications of animal dung, even on the cleaner floors, although this may derive from dung used as fuel (*ibid.*). However, in Building 1 most of these activities occurred in the southern part of Space 71 and in the western room (Space 70), as is indicated by the micro-artefact plots. The floors in the north and east parts of Space 71 had thicker and cleaner plaster and fewer artefact residues. It is possible that this differentiation into 'clean' and 'dirty' floors resulted from the placing of carefully woven reed mats on the floors of parts of the building (the imprint of such mats having been recorded by *Mellaart 1967*).

The painting in Building 1 thus occurred in a domestic context. And in particular it occurred in the 'cleaner' parts of the building away from the main food preparation and storage areas. In order to understand these areas better, and in order to understand what particularly was happening on the northwest platform, we need to continue on to the second occupation phase (phase three). In this phase, the fire installation in the south wall of Space 71 was blocked up. A small basin (F27), perhaps used for grinding (grinding stones with traces of red ochre were found within it) was placed in the southern part of

Space 71. A wooden bin, perhaps for storage was built within Space 70. In this phase, the same division in the use of space between the southwest and the northeast parts of the building occurred, as seen in the micro-artefact distributions and micromorphological studies.

In phase four, the third phase of occupation, a substantial fire installation was built in the southwest corner of Space 70. A grinding installation was also constructed in this room. A storage bin used mainly for lentils was placed on the south wall of Space 71. The entrance between Spaces 70 and 71 was remodelled and a cattle horn set within the western wall of Space 71.

What activities were occurring in the 'cleaner' parts of Building 1 (that is in the north and west parts of Space 71) during these first three occupation phases? One important activity seems to have been burial. At least 64 individuals have been found in a series of graves beneath the northwestern platform, beneath the floor immediately to the east of the northwestern platform, and beneath the main eastern platform. Study of the human remains (*Molleson and Andrews 1997*) has indicated that most of the burials were placed in small graves while still fleshed, the bodies tightly flexed and often wrapped in cloth or braids. As later bodies were added into graves, earlier bones were disturbed, moved aside or removed. This repeated cutting and recutting of graves has made phasing of the grave sequence difficult, as will be discussed below. But bodies seem to have been added to the building throughout the phases of occupation.

The spatial patterning of the ages of the individuals buried in different parts of the building is informative. The northwest platform has not only the highest concentration of burials. It also has the highest proportion of young individuals. So the painting in Building 1 is associated with burial, especially of young people. If this spatial link can be established, what of the temporal link between the painting and the burials?

The fourth phase of occupation (phase six) occurs after a serious fire, perhaps deliberately controlled, had destroyed the southern half of the building. As a result, the building was remodelled (phase five). A wall was constructed to separate the rubble in the southern half of the building from the re-occupied northern half. The eastern platform was rebuilt as a separate small room (Space 110) and a small, per-

haps storage room, was built in the northeast of the building (Space 111). A fire installation was placed near the northwest platform.

The micro-artefact distributions suggest that even in this remodelled space the west was kept for food processing and other 'dirty' activities, while the eastern spaces were kept 'clean'. Burial continued especially under the floor of the eastern room (Space 110), and declined beneath the northwestern platform (Platform 13). Perhaps this was because this latter platform had come to be used for domestic activities. Indeed, the last floor surface on this platform was associated with a concentration of fish bones. It is thus of interest that the latest layers of plaster around this platform do not seem to have been painted.

There is thus both a spatial and a temporal link between the painting around the northwestern platform in Building 1 and burial, especially of young people. What can we say about the traces of relief sculpture on the west wall of Space 71, including the cattle horn set into the wall here? In the first three phases of occupation the sculpture is not associated with a particular activity area. Instead it seems to be centrally located, looking out into Space 71 as a whole. Behind it is the food storage and preparation taking place in the smaller western room. Unlike the painting which has a short, annual cycle of use, the relief sculpture has a life cycle linked to the building itself. Fixed to the wall it is less easy to change and transform. As Mellaart often remarked (1967), the relief sculptures are integral to the architecture of the Çatalhöyük buildings, being attached to upright beams and pillars.

The sculpture in Building 1 is centrally placed in the building and it has a life cycle which spans the building as a whole. That 40 year cycle in Building 1 seems to follow the life of an extended family. There are too many individuals buried in Building 1 to have been produced by deaths within a small nuclear family in this time period. We assume that a larger, extended group had rights of burial in this building. However, the early burials are predominantly of young individuals and the later of older individuals. It would appear, therefore, that the building was constructed by a young family which suffered a high death rate among its young children. Most of these young deaths were accommodated beneath the northwestern platform. But as the family matured, some individuals lived on within the building, they had fewer children, and the building was abandoned

after the burial of the last old family head beneath the floor in Space 110.

The relief sculpture thus seems to be related to this longer family/house cycle. A specific relationship between this sculpture on the west wall of Space 71 and the house cycle is indicated by the final phases of use of Building 1. We do not know what happened to the sculpture in the fourth occupation phase. This is because, after the abandonment and infilling (phase seven) of the fourth occupation in the building (phase six), a pit was dug down against the west wall of Space 71 and the sculpture removed (phase eight) leaving only traces and fragments. Small deposits of bone points and obsidian blades were left as offerings against the wall. The pottery from the robbing pit suggests that the removal of the sculpture occurred in the Neolithic, not long after the abandonment of the building.

This social concern with the sculpture on the west wall of Building 1 is reflected in numerous similar acts at Çatalhöyük. In Building 2 in the Mellaart area of the site (Hodder 1997), the west wall had been violently destroyed, and in the debris around the wall a very large wild bull's horn was found. Mellaart (1967) had noted a repeated pattern of destruction of the west walls of buildings. These actions can be seen as destructive, or as attempts made to recover sculptures of great social significance. Whatever the specific interpretation, it does seem that the end of the use of a building was often linked in some way to the relief sculptures within it. As already noted, the sculptures are often found integrated into the architecture of the buildings. And the buildings themselves are built and rebuilt as part of family cycles.

CONCLUSION

Clearly we do not yet have a full answer to questions regarding the meanings of the unique flowering of art at Çatalhöyük. So far we have made only short steps. But the approach being followed is to contextualise the art and by doing so we have seen that the art had a social character.

The life of the houses in which the art occurred may relate to the life cycles of extended families. Some of the art, especially the relief sculpture on the western walls, seems to be related to these longer cycles. It seems to have been used and destroyed as the house was used and abandoned, and as family heads grew

from young to old. The destruction or recovery of relief sculpture from central points in abandoned buildings perhaps suggest a concern with the passing on of authority, rights of access, or ancestral ties.

Other aspects of the art, in this case the geometric wall painting, seem to be linked to shorter cycles of activity. The painting in Building 1 is placed on plaster which is annually renewed. Any particular painting is quickly covered over. Mellaart (1967) records examples of repeated repainting of similar motifs. But the best examples of this are on relief sculptures such as leopards and bulls' heads. Our own observations are that most walls have some painting but that this is infrequently applied, to different degrees in different parts of a building. The motifs painted are much more varied than the relief sculptures. It is thus of interest that in Building 1, the painting around the northwestern platform seems to be related to specific events rather than to the life cycle of the building as a whole. The painting here seems to be related to concentrations of burials, especially the burials of young people. Perhaps this spatial and temporal link implies some generic association between painting and young people, say between painting and the initiation of young people. On the other hand, the painting may be related specifically to the death of young people.

Because of the link to young people under the northwestern platform, it seems unlikely that the painting (perhaps in contrast to the relief sculpture) is associated with ancestors. Rather, the painting may have something to do with protecting the inhabitants of the building from negative spirits surrounding young death, or the painting itself may have helped directly to calm or control those spirits (as happens in many small-scale, shamanic societies - *Humphrey and Onon 1996*).

Jean Clottes (pers. comm.) has pointed to the way in which animals in some southwestern French Palaeolithic art seem to be 'coming through' the walls in the deep parts of caves. David Lewis-Williams, in his work with the Çatalhöyük project, has suggested that the bulls' heads and some other relief sculpture at the site may be seen as 'coming through' the membrane of the walls in the interior parts of buildings. Certainly, there is much evidence of vulture beaks, jaws of fox and weasel and the tusks of wild boar protruding through the walls into the interior spaces at Çatalhöyük (*Mellaart 1967*). It is possible that much of the art and symbolism at Çatalhöyük has little to do with representation and symbolism

at all. It may be more like a tool, used to control or communicate with animals, spirits and ancestors. The common use of the hand motif at Çatalhöyük may suggest the idea of touching or reaching through the walls. The location of the images deep in buildings does not suggest a concern with communication or display to other people. Rather it suggests a concern to control or communicate with another world.

We must await further excavation at Çatalhöyük in order to see whether the patterns so far identified in Building 1 are repeated elsewhere. We still have little idea of the degree of conformity to social norms at the site. Hopefully further analyses in Building 1 and further excavation of other buildings will allow a fuller contextualisation of the imagery. In this way can the different types of 'art' be related to the differing social rhythms of life at Çatalhöyük, and perhaps to conceptualisations of the world very different from our own..

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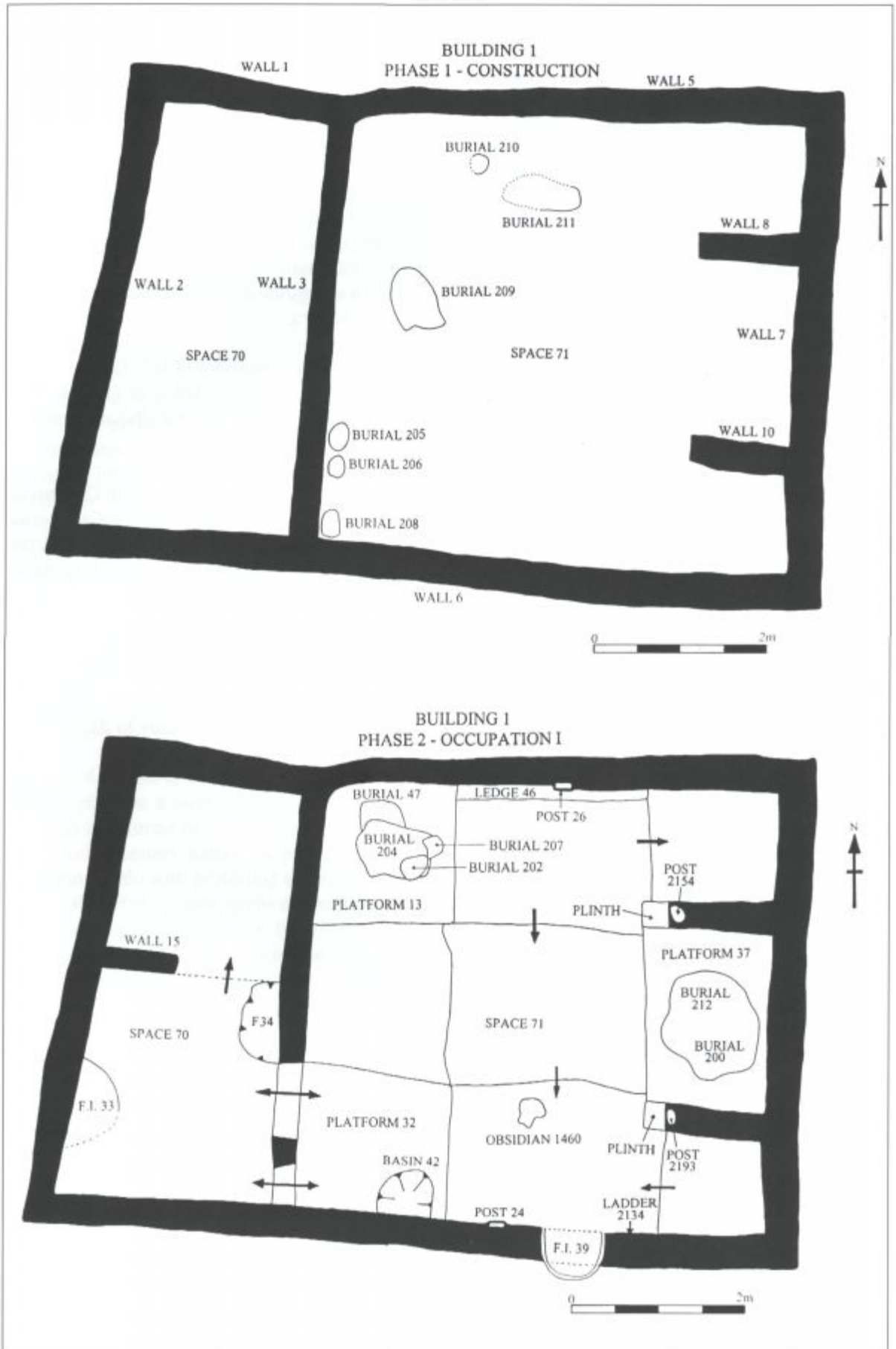


Fig. 2a. Building 1 at Catalhöyük. The eight phases of use are summarised.

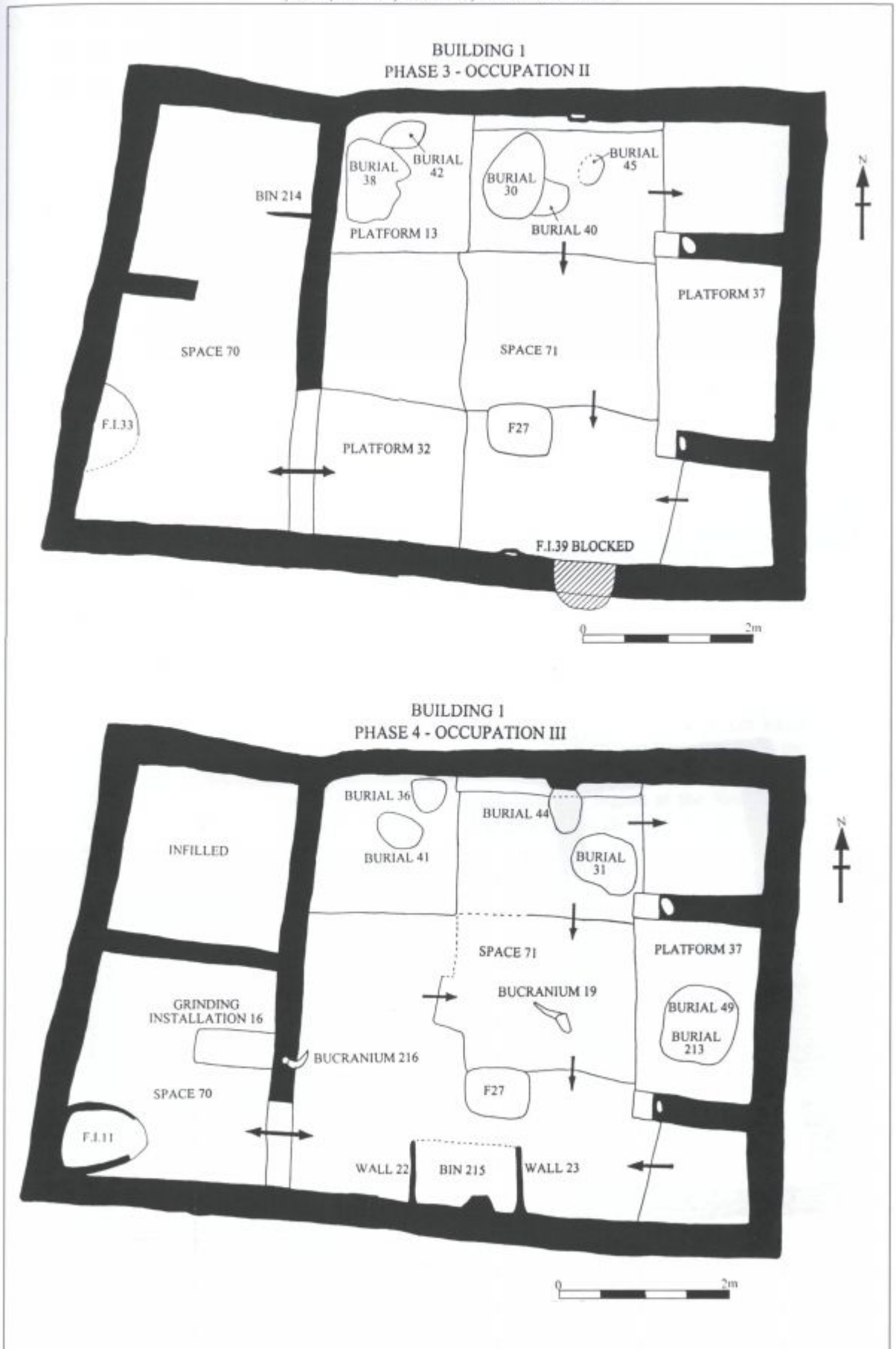


Fig. 2b. Building 1 at Çatalhöyük. The eight phases of use are summarised.

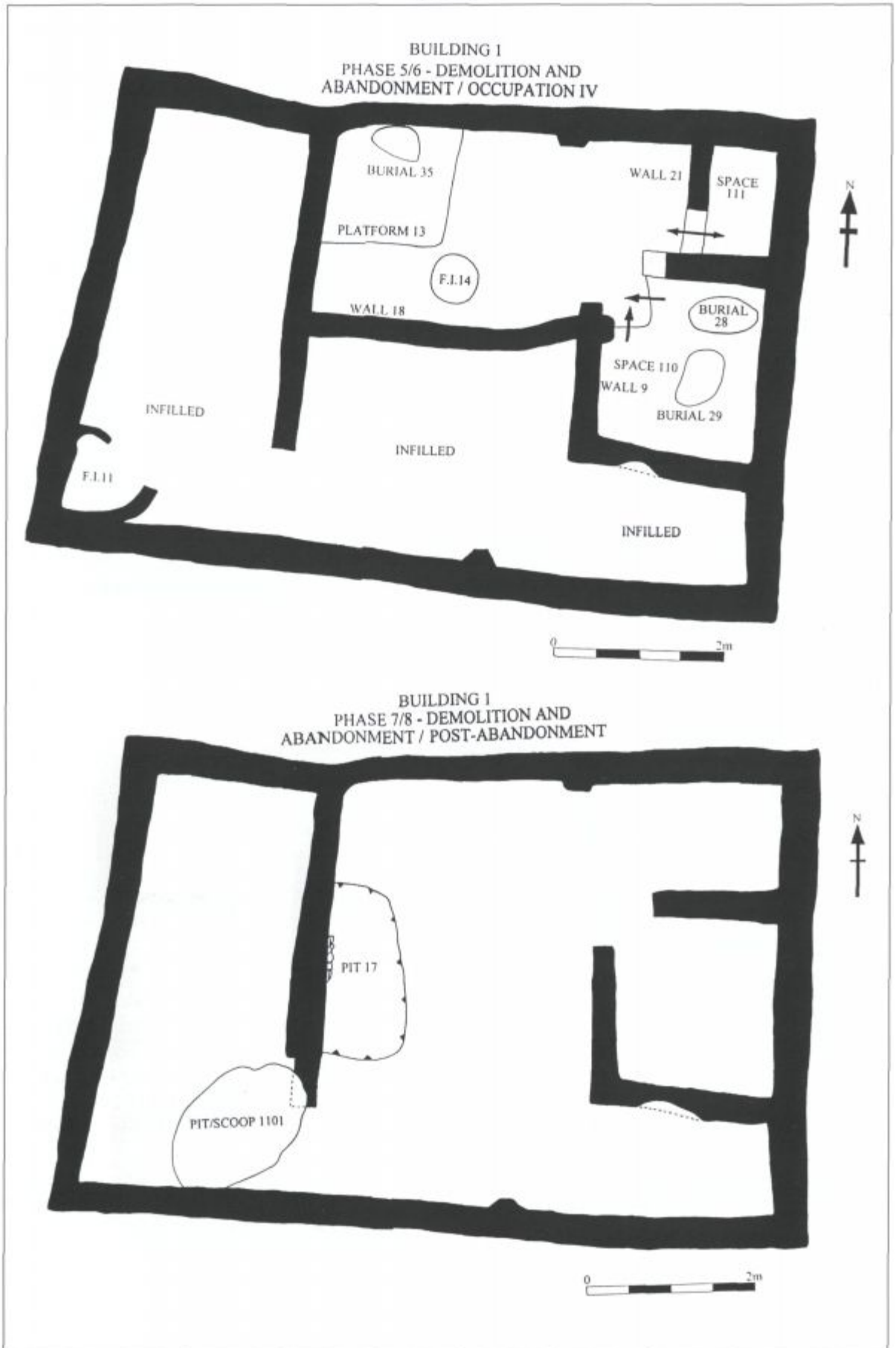


Fig. 2c. Building 1 at Çatalhöyük. The eight phases of use are summarised.