JAMES MELLAART

James Mellaart
1925–2012

James Mellaart was born on 14 November 1925 at 466 Oxford Street, London, the son of Jacob Herman Jan Mellaart, a specialist in fine art, and Apollonia Dingena Mellaart (formerly van der Beek). James Mellaart's Dutch immigrant father claimed descent from a Scottish clan called Maclarty (part of the Macdonald Clan) and James in later life listed clan history and Gaelic music among his interests, though he always spoke with a pronounced Dutch accent. As a result of economic difficulties caused by the depression, the family, including one sister, moved back from London to Amsterdam in 1932. His mother died there and his father remarried. James went to various schools throughout the Netherlands. During the German occupation from 1940 the family moved to Maastricht and James worked at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, where he also studied Egyptian languages.

Determined to be an archaeologist, Mellaart started his BA in Egyptology at University College London in 1947, with a particular interest in the Sea Peoples and their activities in the eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BC. During his time as an undergraduate he also worked on excavations conducted by Kathleen Kenyon at the Iron Age site of Sutton Walls in south-west England. On graduating in 1951, Mellaart began a two-year fellowship at the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara (BIAA, now the British Institute at Ankara) that focused on survey of archaeological sites in south-western Turkey. Since he could not drive, he used buses and trains to reach the areas he wished to examine before undertaking long foot surveys. On one later brief survey, conducted in 1957, David Stronach (Professor of Archaeology at the University of

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California at Berkeley) recalls Mellaart's extraordinary ability to spot almost invisible sites and the way his indefatigable short swift strides ate up the kilometres in even the hottest conditions. From 1951 onwards Mellaart discovered many hundreds of pre-Classical sites, mostly Chalcolithic and later. One of these was the important Chalcolithic and Bronze Age site of Beycesultan.

While on an excavation in Turkey in 1952 he met Arlette Meryem Cenani and they were married in 1954. Arlette was born in 1924 to an upper-class Istanbul family linked historically to the Ottoman ruling class. Her own father, a Romanian, died when she was twelve and she was brought up by her mother and stepfather, Kadri Cenani, a prominent Turkish politician. In 1939 the family moved into the Savfet Pasha Yalı in Kanlıca on the Asian side of the Bosphorus near Istanbul, where her mother entertained guests such as Agatha Christie and Somerset Maugham. In the early 1950s Arlette attended classes on the Hittites by Kurt Bittel at Istanbul University. In 1952 she excavated with Bittel at Fikirtepe and met James when he visited the site. After the birth of their son Alan in 1955, Arlette worked with Mellaart on his excavations as translator, photographer and camp manager. Indeed, in the village by Çatalhöyük it is she who is still remembered as the excavator of the site. She remained a loyal and loving support to James throughout his life until her death in 2013.

Throughout the 1950s until 1959 Mellaart was a scholar and fellow at the BIAA. During that time he worked on a number of significant sites and started his own excavations. He conducted a survey in the Jordan valley and in 1952–4 he joined Kenyon's excavations at Jericho, where he demonstrated the importance of exploring the deepest layers of the site. Taking advantage of Kenyon's absence from the site he dug on down to demonstrate that the base of the mound was deeper than had been thought. In 1954–9 he worked with Seton Lloyd at Beycesultan. The latter, in the upper Menderes catchment in south-west Anatolia, had been recognised by Mellaart as a major and long-lived site. Documentary sources suggested that the Hittite empire had expanded its control to the Aegean coast, and this was the prime focus of the Seton Lloyd-Mellaart campaign. The stratigraphy was explored through the Bronze Age and into Late Chalcolithic levels.

In 1956 Mellaart found yet another important early site—the Chalcolithic site of Hacılar that he then excavated from 1957 to 1960; 15 km north of Burdur in south-western Turkey, this site promised to furnish information of the earlier phases of the Chalcolithic prior to Beycesultan.

The layout of the settlement was exposed and rich finds of decorated pottery and elaborate figurines were recovered, providing a full picture of the layout and organisation of the defended settlement. Unexpectedly the site appeared to have basal levels that were Aceramic Neolithic, although this finding has been questioned by Duru (1989). Mellaart suggested that Early Neolithic communities in Greece and the Balkans shared a common ancestry in Western Anatolia at the site of Hacılar. Current excavations conducted along the Aegean coast of Turkey and in the broader Marmara region, halfway between Hacılar and Europe, confirm this link and provide a more complex and accurate picture of the spread of farming to south-east Europe (Brami and Heyd, 2011).

Mellaart was made Assistant Director of the BIAA under Seton Lloyd in 1959 and held that position from 1959 to 1961. He was lecturer in prehistoric archaeology at Istanbul University from 1961 to 1963. In 1964 he was appointed Lecturer in Anatolian Archaeology in the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, where he worked until his retirement in 1991.

Çatalhöyük

Mellaart's interest in surveying for sites in the Konya Plain in central Anatolia partly derived from his Bronze Age interests. By the 1950s archaeologists in Greece had noted a cultural break between Early Bronze II and III, and had speculated that the break might indicate the arrival of the first Greek-speaking peoples (Watkins, 2012). Linear B was now known to be a form of early Greek and the Hittite language was known to be Indo-European. A break had already been identified at the end of Troy II that Mellaart surmised might result from similar changes in north-western Anatolia. Could Mellaart find Early Bronze II destructions in the Konya Plain that might mark the spread of the Hittites?

But it was not the Bronze Age sites in the Konya Plain, but a Neolithic site that was to change the direction of Mellaart's career. In November 1958, together with David French and Alan Hall, Mellaart discovered the Neolithic date of a large mound in the Konya Plain called Çatalhöyük. He had actually seen the site in the distance in the early 1950s but had been overtaken by a stomach bug and was unable to get there. In the Konya Plain, Mellaart had been seeking signs of Hittite expansion, but he was also looking for signs of Neolithic settlement in Anatolia in order to overturn the accepted view that the main Neolithic developments had occurred

in the Levant and in the Fertile Crescent. He was thus keen to return to excavate at Çatalhöyük and he was able to do this in 1961 after the completion of the Hacılar excavations. Mellaart continued to work at Çatalhöyük in 1962, 1963 and 1965. He found a large number of richly furnished buildings with reliefs, bull horn installations and elaborate narrative wall paintings that shocked the archaeological world since such impressive art had not been found previously in the Near East. The story also had an important public impact, partly as a result of the accounts provided by Mellaart in the *Illustrated London News*. Mellaart's reconstructions of the buildings at the site enabled a wider engagement with the site, beyond the accounts in scholarly journals. Mellaart identified at least thirteen levels of occupation at Çatalhöyük and came very close to reaching the base of the mound. Over four seasons of work, Mellaart exposed over 150 buildings and excavated 480 skeletons. His 1967 book Çatal Hüyük: *a Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London) is an important achievement that is still read by students of the Neolithic and is referred to by a wide range of disciplines including architecture, art, urban studies and anthropology.

Controversy

In 1964 Mellaart's request for a permit to excavate at Çatalhöyük was refused by the Turkish Department of Antiquities. This was partly a result of his publication in 1959 in the *Illustrated London News* of a Bronze Age treasure supposedly from Dorak in north-western Turkey and containing an Egyptian gold artefact with hieroglyphs that proved Mellaart's claims of long-distance Bronze Age trade at an early date. Mellaart held the controversial view that the Trojan Early Bronze Age was as early as the Ur Royal Cemetery and contemporary with the Egyptian Old Kingdom. The hieroglyphs that he claimed to have found in the Dorak treasure included a cartouche of the Egyptian pharaoh Sahure of the twenty-fifth century BC. So Mellaart's early dating and long distance connections seemed to have been proven in the Dorak treasure. No wonder Mellaart was so keen to publish in the *Illustrated London News*. He could not wait any longer despite contrary advice from the British Institute in Ankara.

However, on inquiry from the Turkish government and scholars, the treasure or any corroborated documentation of it could not be located. Mellaart claimed that in 1958 he had been travelling by train to Izmir when he met a girl wearing a bracelet that he recognised as a type found at

Troy. Intrigued, he was taken by the girl to her home in Izmir where he said he found numerous items from tombs at Dorak. Without a camera, Mellaart spent four days sketching the objects. When the objects were published in the *Illustrated London News*, the Turkish authorities and newspapers were alarmed and Mellaart was accused of having smuggled the artefacts out of Turkey. A search could not find the girl, Anna Papastrati, and the address he gave for the house proved not to exist. A book on *The Dorak Affair* (Pearson and Connor, 1968) by *Sunday Times* reporters Kenneth Pearson and Patricia Connor was unable to determine what had happened, though there was clearly some sympathy for Mellaart's position. A committee of inquiry set up in 1968 by the BIAA accepted Mellaart's account. But questions regarding the authenticity of the treasure continued throughout his life. Although he was able to return to excavate at Çatalhöyük in 1965 under a permit provided to Ian Todd, further work was stopped as a result of questions surrounding the Dorak material. But there were other reasons too. Artefacts including painted pottery and figurines reputedly from Hacılar and Çatalhöyük had begun to appear on the antiquities market; and the Turkish authorities had begun to be worried about the difficulties of preserving the paintings and complex symbolic features at Çatalhöyük.

The 'Dorak Affair' remains unsolved. It is possible that Mellaart was duped by dealers seeking authentication of the artefacts from a respected archaeologist, and this was the view that Mellaart himself maintained. Another possibility is that Mellaart invented the finds in order to prove his own theories about the early date and long-distance connections of the Trojan Bronze Age. In later years it became clear that Mellaart had a habit of imagining evidence, as in the case of tablets with 'writing' symbols that, in an unpublished paper, he claimed to have found at the base of Çatalhöyük, and as in the cases of pebbles with painting that he claimed to have found on Turkish beaches. The example of the invented 'lost' murals from Çatalhöyük will be described below. As Balter (2010) notes, unless the treasure shows up one day, the mystery is likely to remain unsolved.

In 1976 his wife's family house (yalı) on the Bosphorus burned down, destroying many of Mellaart's excavation records. In 1987 a seminar took place in the Institute of Archaeology in London in which Mellaart showed previously unpublished drawings of paintings from Çatalhöyük. These were later published in a four-volume book entitled *The Goddess from Anatolia* (Mellaart et al., 1989) that argued that the designs on Turkish kilim carpets originated from or had some affinity with the geometric wall

paintings at Çatalhöyük. One of the main themes in the designs was the goddess motif that could be used as evidence for the view that the Anatolian Mother Goddess from Classical times originated at the site. The publication thus resonated with the Goddess community (Balter, 2010) that had grown up around the work of Marija Gimbutas (1982), whose work had also been influenced by Mellaart's initial interpretations of the figurine from Çatalhöyük showing a woman seated on a 'throne' of 'leopards'. Many of the paintings shown in 1987 and published in 1989 were fantastic and few specialists in the field accepted the authenticity of the drawings. No photographs were ever produced and no similar paintings or fragments of paintings have been found in more recent excavations at the site.

Later years

From the mid-1960s, Mellaart continued his research and writing based in the Institute of Archaeology in London. Apart from his articles and his book on Çatalhöyük, his important publication of *Excavations at Hacilar* (Mellaart,1970), and his co-publication with Seton Lloyd of Beycesultan in the 1960s (Lloyd and Mellaart, 1962, 1965, 1975), he published important syntheses of the archaeology of Anatolia and the Near East. In particular, in 1965 he published *Earliest Civilizations of the Near East*, in 1966 *The Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages in The Near East and Anatolia* and in 1975 *The Neolithic of the Near East*. These were masterful summaries of large amounts of detailed information and were widely used by students at all levels.

In later years Mellaart and his wife Arlette lived at 13 Lichen Court, 79 Queen's Drive, London. In the early 1990s Mellaart showed enormous generosity in supporting the reopening of Çatalhöyük by a new team led by Ian Hodder. Retiring in 1991, the time seemed right for him to accept new excavations and the Turkish authorities wanted the site excavated again to stop the erosion that had become severe after the sudden cessation of excavations in 1965. James Mellaart and Arlette visited the new excavations three times, and they were always kind and engaged hosts when the team visited them in their London flat to tell of recent discoveries. Çatalhöyük was Mellaart's most important find and he showed grace and curiosity in relation to the new project (if tinged with some frustration at its slow pace). He was pleased when his grandson Sinan participated in the excavations during the 2000s.

The new excavations that started in 1993, and are planned to continue to 2018, have allowed many of Mellaart's key ideas to be explored further (Hodder, 2006). The new findings have by and large corroborated Mellaart's claims made in the 1960s. For example, with regard to the overall layout and organisation of the site he was right to emphasise that contemporary houses were so clustered together that people had to access houses through roof entries. The new excavations have shown that the construction of individual houses was exactly as Mellaart had claimed, with mud brick walls supported by a frame of wooden vertical and horizontal posts, and with wooden uprights plastered and topped by 'pillow-shaped' capitals. He understood extremely well the complex stratigraphy. After initially suggesting that there were thirteen levels of occupation he came to realise that the situation was rather more complex, and the new excavations have indeed shown that house rebuilding was continuous and diverse across the site. The Mellaart system of levels identified by Roman numerals has had to be abandoned in favour of a more complex scheme in which more levels occur; yet the new scheme is largely based on the old (Farid, 2014). Mellaart had identified 'courtyards' between the houses and the new project initially reinterpreted these as refuse middens. However, more recent work has shown the diversity of activities on these middens and recognised that many did indeed serve as 'yards'.

Mellaart had focused his excavations in the south-west part of the Neolithic East Mound at Çatalhöyük as it was here that the slope of the 20 m high mound was greatest, with erosion exposing painted wall plasters on the surface of the mound. On to a good thing, Mellaart continued all his excavations in this one area, apart from a few small trenches on the neighbouring Chalcolithic West Mound. He presumed at times that he had stumbled across the priestly quarter of the Neolithic East Mound town, thus explaining the concentration of elaborate buildings with paintings, animal skull installations and burials beneath the floors of the buildings. The new excavations continued in the same area of the site (termed South) but also opened up new areas to the north of the site (termed North). In the North area elaborate buildings were again found, suggesting that the elaborate buildings identified by Mellaart as 'shrines' existed right across the site. Careful forensic analysis of the residues on the floors of buildings also demonstrated that even the most elaborate and 'ritual' of buildings were lived in as domestic houses. Mellaart's distinction between 'shrines' and 'houses' had to be rethought. In the new excavations it has become clear that some houses have more ritual elaboration and

more burials, and they endure longer, being rebuilt on the same spot many times. These special buildings are now dubbed 'history houses' to distinguish them from other shorter-termed houses. In general terms, however, 'shrines' and 'history houses' are different labels for very comparable phenomena. Mellaart had been right to see the social and ritual differences between buildings at the site.

Other changes in interpretation at Çatalhöyük have resulted from the application of analytical techniques that were not available to Mellaart in the 1960s. For example, in the early 1960s it was common not to sieve the excavated soil through fine meshes, and as a result of such practices Mellaart did not find small animal bones. He, and his faunal analyst Dexter Perkins, therefore concluded that the subsistence economy at the site had been based on cattle. More recent excavations using intensive recovery techniques have found large amounts of small bone indicating a heavy reliance on domestic sheep. Similarly, intensive recovery techniques have shown that the vast majority of figurines at the site are very small clay representations of animals, and that large female figurines are extremely rare. As regards the obsidian at the site, Mellaart assumed that it came from Hasan Daĝ in Cappadocia. Indeed, he identified a painting at the site as representing the exploding double-peaked volcano at Hasan Daĝ. More recent chemical analysis has shown that the obsidian comes from other sources in Cappadocia (Carter and Milić, 2013). Modern bio-archaeological work on the human remains at the site has shown that the artistic images of vultures defleshing headless human corpses are not reflections of the dominant burial rite, which actually involved the burial of whole fleshed bodies.

Mellaart took these shifts in interpretation with a good grace. He was continuously fascinated by the site that he had made known to the world and with which he identified strongly. Even after his health prohibited further visits he remained engaged and supportive, always keen to know the latest discoveries. Mellaart died on 29 July 2012 at Whittington Hospital, Islington from stroke and pneumonia, and his funeral took place on 13 August at the Islington Crematorium, East Finchley.

Conclusion

Mellaart was a precocious young archaeologist of enormous abilities. He had considerable intellectual energy and had encyclopaedic knowledge of

the archaeology of Anatolia and the Middle East. He made immensely important discoveries early in his career. These included the discovery of Beycesultan, and the excavations of Hacılar and Çatalhöyük. Mellaart's greatest achievement was to excavate Çatalhöyük and to show that Anatolia was not a cultural backwater during the Neolithic period, a view that has only been vindicated and reinforced by more recent archaeological research throughout Turkey. His accounts of the stratigraphy and organisation of the settlement at Çatalhöyük have largely been corroborated by the detailed scientific excavations now under way. His substantive work at the site has withstood the test of time. Mellaart was appointed Fellow of the British Academy in 1980. Çatalhöyük was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2012.

Mellaart had a flair for publicity and for presenting his results to a wide range of audiences. These qualities were mixed with an ambitious drive to make spectacular and sensational discoveries that led him into a series of undocumented imaginings. These resulted in him being unable to follow his chosen career of being an active field archaeologist in Anatolia. There was also a sense of intellectual superiority. He once said that he knew the cultures he was studying so well that 'if something I envisaged didn't exist, it should have done'. As a person he was engaging, generous and kind, a charming, sparkling companion especially when downing his Scotch whisky and handling a Dutch cigar. He left many devoted to him and inspired by him. After his death, on an evening in 2012 a vigil was held for him at the top of the mound at his beloved Çatalhöyük. The team of 140 people were there because of him and they remembered him, all sides of him, with affection and with thanks for what he had made possible.

IAN HODDER
Fellow of the Academy

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