Incredible discovery of intact female figurine from neolithic era in Turkey

Unusually well-preserved figurine is 8,000 years old and likely represents an elder.

Nine thousand years ago in Turkey, a large settlement called Çatalhöyük thrived for more than a millennium. Full of densely packed mud brick houses covered in paintings and symbolic decorations, its population hovered around 5,000. That made it one of the biggest settlements of its era, somewhere between an outsized village and tiny city. Now, archaeologists excavating there have discovered a rare, intact statuette of a woman buried carefully with a valuable piece of obsidian.

Figurines resembling this one, with large breasts, belly, and buttocks, have been found throughout the Anatolian region. But this is one of the only intact examples ever found. At nearly seven inches long, it's also one of the largest. Made of marble, it lay buried beneath the floor of a neolithic home for 8,000 years before its excavation this past summer.
The figurine was found in the TPC area, in the southern part of the east mound of Çatalhöyük. The city's remains have formed two mounds, a newer west mound and an older east mound, with farms and a river in between. Most of the current excavations focus on this east mound, which was larger and occupied for a longer time.

News of the discovery first broke in The Daily Sabah and spread quickly through Turkish media. Few details were available, but Ars has confirmed the find with Stanford archaeologist Ian Hodder, who has led excavations at Çatalhöyük since the 1990s. He offered a complete description of the figurine, as well as thoughts about its context in both the ancient city and the Anatolian region in the 6th millennium BCE.

Not a goddess

In the mid-twentieth century, archaeologists like James Mellaart believed female figurines like this one represented fertility goddesses. This idea became popular in New Age culture, whose adherents celebrated the idea that ancient peoples were woman-centric and shared a cult of goddess worship. But over the past twenty years, evidence from Çatalhöyük and contemporaneous sites have undermined this interpretation.

As Stanford archaeologist Lynn Meskell has pointed out in a number of papers about figurines found at Çatalhöyük, little material evidence suggests that these curvaceous statuettes were the objects of worship. Nearly all such figurines have been found in garbage piles, as if they were built for a specific purpose—whether spiritual or playful—and then thrown away. They are also rarely built with bases, so they could never have been erected for display. Instead, they might have been passed from hand-to-hand, or perhaps worn as ornaments.

By contrast, statues and representations of animals at Çatalhöyük are clearly given specialized treatment. Bull horns are mounted on walls and next to doors, while some animal bones are embedded inside the plaster walls. Paintings of leopards, bulls, and other animals are given what appears to be special symbolic significance in homes. If any figurines would be candidates for worship, it would likely be these animal representations rather than the plump women.
This female figure, though it resembles many others from the region, is unique because it's so well preserved and detailed. Its position dates it to the late classical phase of occupation, roughly 8,500-8,000 years ago.

Meskell and her colleagues suggest instead that these female figures are likely representations of village elders, respected older women who had a lot of power in the community. She points out that their bodies are not youthful, and their bellies and breasts do not exhibit the roundness of pregnancy or fertility. Instead, their bellies and breasts sag. These are older women, their size possibly intended to convey the accumulation of wisdom—or continued prosperity. Hodder told Aris that the new figurine supports Meskell's interpretation, as it also appears to be an older woman "who has achieved status."

A “ritual context”

What makes this figurine different is that it was not found in a garbage pile, but instead it was carefully buried in a spot that would have been deeply significant to residents of Çatalhöyük. A common practice among these city dwellers was burying
their dead under their floors, usually under raised platforms that served as beds. Often they would dig up the skulls of the dead later, plaster their faces (perhaps to recreate the faces of loved ones), and give them to other houses. Archaeologists frequently find skeletons from several people intermingled in these graves, with skulls from other people added. Wear and tear on some plastered skulls suggest they were traded back and forth, sometimes for generations, before being reburied. According to Hodder, such special skulls are just as often female as they are male.

Co-mingled skeletons found buried under a platform in a house. This treatment is typical of how people buried their dead, though usually there were fewer skeletons than you see here. Often city dwellers would dig up skulls and rebury them in other houses. Archaeologists believe this ritual had spiritual and historical elements, and it was a way of remembering the past.

The new figurine was found buried in exactly the same place that the beloved or honored dead were buried—under a platform on the floor of a house. The house itself had been rebuilt three times over the centuries, in what seems to be the custom at Çatalhöyük. Older homes were knocked down to their foundations, and new dwellings were built on top with the same dimensions. Often the rebuilding involved digging up old skulls and skeletons, then reburying them with great care. The figurine appears to have been buried during one of these times. She was placed during the laying of a foundation for the third house. The builders dug a hole into the old foundation, gently covered the figurine with two layers of clean sand and clay, and then built a whitewashed plaster platform on top.

Hodder told Ars that the figurine's placement and design make it very rare:

*It was not found in refuse but had been carefully placed beneath a platform, together with a piece of obsidian. This is undoubtedly some form of ritual deposition. The context shows that this figurine differed from others in its completeness and careful deposition, as well as in its very fine craftsmanship... The hands are folded under the breasts, which are splayed to the side, as if the figure was depicted lying down. Other features depicted include the eyes, mouth, chin, neck fat, the back of the head roll, all incised. The navel is incised as an asymmetrical triangle pointing up and is more roughly done than the other lines which are very deliberately incised and naturalistic. The hands and feet are disproportionately small compared to the rest of the body. The figurine was first shaped by polishing, and then all the body details were incised. The execution of all details shows great attention to detail and great level of skill.*
Given what we know of how the people of Çatalhöyük treated their female figurines and their dead, this particular figurine appears to have been given the same treatment you'd expect from a plastered skull. Again, this does not suggest we've found a fertility goddess. Instead, it seems more likely than ever that Meskell's idea is right—these figurines represented honored elders. Perhaps this was even a statuette of a specific woman whose skull or skeleton was lost. What Hodder calls the "naturalistic" details of the design support this interpretation.

Without a time machine we can't say for sure what this statuette meant to the people who buried her. But we do know that she was treated like a revered dead person rather than a supernatural object of worship. That means we haven't discovered a goddess-worshipping society at Çatalhöyük, but instead a group of people who honored female elders in art, as well as in their everyday practices.