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Did matriarchal forms of social organization exist in Çatal Hüyük?

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1. Critical Analysis of the most recent arguments on the subject

On the subject of Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia, an old problem has recently been taken up anew and come under discussion by archaeologists: Was the social order matriarchal or not? In Çatal Hüyük, what did it really mean to be born as a woman, or as a man? Jan Hodder has presented new research findings in summary form, attempting to prove that the matriarchal culture of Çatal Hüyük is merely a fairytale.¹

The argument runs like this, and I quote:

“With new methods the findings will be investigated, as well as skeletons from the numerous graves. These people buried their dead under the floors of their houses in order to be close to their ancestors. Do the skeletal remains of men and women indicate that they had different lifestyles? In a word, No! If one sex had played a dominant role, this would have been accompanied by high quality nutrition – more or better meat. The results of the study demonstrate, however, that there is no proof of significant nutritional differences.”

And thus archaeology has meticulously proved that in Çatal Hüyük, equal rights began and ended at the dinner table. For if one or the other sex had been dominant, the members of that sex would have eaten more meat – an unusual line of reasoning. It is common knowledge that dominating men eat more meat. But since when does a matriarchal social order require women to dominate, and to eat a big steak every day? We agree with Jan Hodder: In Çatal Hüyük, equal rights prevailed at the dinner table.

But did men's activities perhaps require them to be outside in a hostile environment, while women were more likely to be engaged inside the dwelling place? Jan Hodder reports:

"The inhabitants evidently performed similar activities, and this is borne out by the stress indications on the skeletons. . . The comparison indicates that in Çatal Hüyük, in every era, men and women spent the same amount of time outside and inside. . . .The study of osseous remains also indicated that the men were scarcely larger."

So here too we find no favoritism or dominance, but rather a well-balanced life together. This permits the conclusion that there was equality in their economy.

But what about the social order in Çatal Hüyük? In Jan Hodder's view:

"Perhaps there were different floor plans at different stages of (human) life? Skeletal remains have not contributed much to this conclusion, but perhaps there is other evidence. Every dwelling had a hearth or stove, . . . this was in fact the place where food was prepared. One find appears to affirm that this was the domain of women: Graves of newborns, to whom the mother naturally would have had a closer relationship than men would, are often found near the hearth. But neither is this image so unambiguous, for in the ashes of the hearth there are also numerous obsidian chips.... If tool-making and trade were men's work, they apparently didn't carry out these tasks in a special place. Short and sweet: there is no archaeological evidence for a sex-specific division of space."

We agree with Jan Hodder that there was apparently no throne room for a king in Çatal Hüyük. That fact speaks against a patriarchal hierarchy and domination. Rather, people seem to have sat around the hearth to do their work. Does that really argue against a matriarchal social order?

Doesn't it rather indicate a group of blood relatives who live as equals; a clan, perhaps tracing its lineage through the maternal line, whose members sit around the hearth together? And just because it is the hearth, does that mean it is not a special place? The place where dead babies are buried is certainly not just a profane, utilitarian kitchen, but functions as a sacred hearth. And this, as opposed to a throne room, is indeed typical of matriarchal societies.

The way the space was apportioned indicates equality in the social order as well; this argues strongly for matriarchy, providing that it is not misunderstood to mean domination by women. Matriarchal societies are fundamentally egalitarian and balanced, which affects the relationship between the sexes as well as their whole way of living. It is only patriarchal prejudice that tries to make matriarchy a mirror image of patriarchy, featuring women who rule from their position atop of the society and, while wolfing down their daily mound of choice meat, mercilessly oppress men. This caricature never existed in actuality, but matriarchal societies have existed, often, and in very many places in the world, up until the present time.

And the funeral customs in Çatal Hüyük? Here is Jan Hodder:

“Another source of clarity about power relations between the sexes is a custom that appears bizarre from today’s standpoint: at some burials, the grave was reopened after about a year and the skull removed with a knife. ... These heads must have served ritual purposes. In some places, such as Jericho, the skull of the dead person was given facial features modelled out of plaster. Such special treatment was probably only given to especially important persons – perhaps literally the head of the family. Here again, there is no indication of a differentiated social status between the sexes. Even if it is speculation, it is probable that family membership was defined through the mother as well as through the father.”

Yes, that is in fact pure speculation! From such findings it is not possible to conclude that these people knew their lineage on their father’s side, as this was a much later development, introduced via patriarchal dominance relationships. Equality between the sexes in matters of burial customs points rather to matriarchal relationships and to the mother’s lineage, since only women were heads of families in this case. However, this does not exclude the possibility that there were men standing beside these matriarchal heads of families. It was typical in matriarchal societies for a brother to represent the clan’s honor vis à vis the outside world, standing by the matriarch’s side and enjoying high esteem. As to power positions, these were also shared equally and in balance between the sexes; this is counter to the false impression of the lone woman ruler in matriarchal societies.

Another interesting archaeological conclusion is that:

“Because of its geography, Çatal Hüyük was quite easy to defend, but this appears not to have played a role in the cultures that developed there, as evidenced by the fact that so far, no trace of fighting or war has been found in its 1200 year settlement history.”

That is remarkable, as it reflects a peace-oriented social order where war was unknown.

Now that Hodder has ascertained so much equality between the sexes in Çatal Hüyük – a remarkable fact in itself – in addressing the realm of culture and belief, he finally comes, in a sense, to the point. For he asserts:

“Equality first emerged in the area of symbolic expression and art. ... The abundant wall paintings usually depict men engaged in the hunt, clothed in leopard skins, or male animals with erect sexual organs. And the countless animal skulls that hang on the inner walls of the houses are from wild bulls or rams. This masculine focus in art has a long tradition in Anatolia. ... These artistic examples point definitely to a divided world: one side dominated by men and their activities centered on hunting and wild animals, and the other, less often portrayed, of women and plants.”

It is remarkable that as soon as men show up, they „dominate“ with their activities, while women are apparently relegated to the margins. And this in an integrated, egalitarian society, as established by Hodder earlier! The archaeological significance here is trapped in a tangle of projections. And to make things worse, the numerical dominance of the male is based not on men themselves, but on animals with erect phalluses – as if we all knew that these animals can only signify maleness, and that we need seek no further for their meaning. The symbol of the bull in matriarchal societies has scarcely anything to do with masculinity, but rather is associated with the life force and fertility, while the ram has been a sun symbol, rather than a male symbol, since earliest antiquity. In addition, it is not mentioned that on the inside walls of the houses hang enormous images of women in birthing position; these appear to be much more powerful than the bulls’ and rams’ heads.

But let’s take a look at the female figures and hear what Jan Hodder has to say about them:

“And what about the powerful female figure upon the leopard throne? A recent find at Çatal Hüyük depicts a female figure whose back is embedded with wild seed. The so-called goddess with the leopard has a similar connection to agriculture: she was found in a grain bin..... It is remarkable that the multiplicity of ‘male’ examples in art and symbolism has effectively no ‘female’ counterpart.”

The woman on the leopard throne is handled as follows:

“This little clay statue of a female figure surfaced in the very first dig. Her shape, along with the leopard that supports her, suggested the interpretation that she was a mother goddess. Probably, however, she symbolized the role of woman in early agricultural art.”

Woman in the role of soil tiller, sitting upon a real throne? That would seem to be quite a poor fit with the idea of field work. And who is authorized to sit upon a leopard throne, which is mostly symbolic, unless she is supernatural? Furthermore, this powerful figure is giving birth, in this proud position, to a child. A mother goddess after all? And doesn’t the fact of fewer goddess images support the argument that images of men and bulls, allegedly so numerous in comparison, are numerous just *because* they are not divine?

Working with unsubstantiated allegations that systematically distort the facts and diminish the stature of women while magnifying that of men is a method that originates from the same patriarchal background as Jan Hodder does. That the distortion is intentional is made clear in a last citation:

“The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas asserts that an early matriarchally-oriented stage of culture is verifiable with the advent of agriculture in Europe, and is especially observable in Çatal Hüyük. ...This idea became the central pillar of the New Age movement in the 2nd half of the 20th century. Tour buses

carted the 'Great Mother's' modern lads to Çatal Hüyük to pray, imagining themselves to be in proximity to the goddess."

In this assertion Hodder is utterly wrong, since the New Age movement has nothing to do with Marija Gimbutas, and vice-versa.² The statement makes women invisible once again: it was not New Age boys, but rather women, who, in the context of the feminist movement, went to research their own buried herstory. This last quote lays bare his underlying bias and gives the lie to the pretended objectivity of the whole article.

2. The new definition of „matriarchy“ in Modern Matriarchal Studies

The beauty of Jan Hodder's argument is, of course, that his findings, which he thinks refute Çatal Hüyük's matriarchal social order, actually prove it existed. His concept of „matriarchy“ is nothing but a tired, out of date prejudice – not a scientific definition. Without precisely defining terms, a serious scientific argument is not possible.

I would like to back up these statements of mine with a definition of matriarchal societies that describes the deep structure of such societies. This definition is the core of a rapidly advancing new science of modern Matriarchal Studies which was presented at two “World Congresses on Matriarchal Studies”, organised and guided by me in 2003 in Luxembourg and in 2005 in the USA, and presenting this new socio-cultural science to a broader public. The definition is not formulated abstractly, but I arrived at it by investigating an immense amount of ethnographic material.³ This makes clear the important methodological role of anthropological research in formulating the definition of matriarchy.⁴

Now I will present the criteria of matriarchal society on the four levels of economics, of social patterns, of political decision making, and of culture and world view:

- *Economic criteria:* societies with self-supporting gardening or agriculture; land and house are property of the clan; no private property; women have the power of disposition over the source of nourishment; constant adjustment of the level of wealth by the circulation of the vital goods in form of gifts at the numerous festivals. Thus, I define matriarchal societies at the economic level as **societies of reciprocity on the basis of gift-giving.**

- *Social criteria*: matriarchal clans, which are held together by matrilineality and matrilocality; perfect balance between the genders and the generations; each gender with its own realm of action and influence; mutual marriage between two clans as a mutual aid system; interrelatedness of all the clans; marriage often in the form of visiting marriage, with additional sexual freedom for both genders; biological fatherhood (if known) without societal significance, instead social fatherhood of the mother's brother. As a result I define matriarchal societies at the level of social patterns as **non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship**.

- *Political criteria*: principle of consensus with each decision making: in the clan-house, in the village or town, and in the whole region where the people live; delegates of the clans who meet at the councils only bearers of the communication system, not decision-makers; absence of classes and structures of domination. So I define matriarchal societies at the political level as **egalitarian societies of consensus**.

- *Cultural criteria*: concrete belief in rebirth into the same clan; cult of the ancestress as the first mother of the people or the clans; worship of Mother Earth in many forms and the Goddess of Cosmos in many forms; divinity of the entire world; absence of dualistic world view and morality; everything in life is part of the symbolic system, therefore no division between the sacred and the secular. As a result I define matriarchal societies as **sacral societies in the meaning of cultures of the Goddess or the Feminine Divine**.

On the basis of this definition, which sets out the interrelated structures of matriarchal societal organization, I would ask, in light of Jan Hodder's given evidence of Çatal Hüyük's egalitarian culture, that you evaluate for yourselves just what *was* going on in this Neolithic community.

Notes

¹ Jan Hodder: "Stable isotope evidence of diet at Neolithic Chatal Höyük", in: *Journal of Archaeological Science* 30, 2003, S. 67-76.

Translated into German: "Chatal Hüyük- Stadt der Frauen?", in: *Spektrum der Wissenschaft*, September 2004, S. 37-43.

² See Marija Gimbutas: *The Language of the Goddess*, Harper&Row, San Francisco 1989. Marija Gimbutas: *The Civilization of the Goddess*, editor: Joan Marler, HarperCollins Publishers, San Francisco 1991.

³ Heide Goettner-Abendroth: “The Structure of Matriarchal Society. Exemplified by the Society of the Mosuo in China”, in: *ReVision*, no. 3, editor: Joan Marler, vol. 21, 1999, San Francisco, USA.

Heide Goettner-Abendroth: “Matriarchal Society: Definition and Theory”, in: *The Gift*, editor: Genevieve Vaughan, Athanor, Meltemi, 2004, Rome, Italy.

See for information about the two World Congresses on Matriarchal Studies: www.hagia.de

⁴ Independently of my research, Peggy Reeves Sanday also re-defined matriarchy, from her approach in a more implicit way, but I think this strengthens our common matter a lot. See Peggy Reeves Sanday: *Women at the Center. Life in a Modern Matriarchy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London 2002, pp. 225-240.

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