ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND GODDESS FEMINISTS
AT ÇATALHÖYÜK
An Experiment in Multivocality

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The high-profile Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in central Turkey—made famous by James Mellaart in the 1960s—has become an increasingly contested space in recent years, its meanings being discussed not only among scientists but also within other local and global interest groups, including Goddess feminism. Creating space for the many voices of different interest groups is an explicit feature of the methodology embraced by the current excavation team directed by archaeologist Ian Hodder.

Based on fieldwork at Çatalhöyük, I examine multivocality in this article as a practice, focusing particularly on the voices of archaeologists and Goddess feminists for whom Çatalhöyük is an important ancient and contemporary sacred site. I consider how power and meaning are articulated and negotiated between these two groups. And I query the politics and purpose of multivocality when one voice (archaeology) is attributed official interpretive authority while another (Goddess feminism), which produces an apparently dissenting interpretation, is not. I conclude by looking at recent positive steps toward establishing a dialogue between women in the Goddess movement and the archaeologists at Çatalhöyük.

With the peaking of postmodernism in the 1990s—in some disciplines earlier than in others—the high ground of Truth and epistemological certainty was lost, metanarratives collapsed, and a plethora of “truths,” discourses, positions,

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sites, and voices emerged to form a clamorous new landscape. No discipline was immune. The importance of reflexivity and the need to negotiate cultural meanings had, prior to around the mid-1980s, not been given much importance by most archaeologists, at least by those focusing on cultures in the distant past with no direct or known link to an extant cultural group. In the postmodern and postcolonial context, however, things changed. According to archaeologist Ian Hodder, one of multivocality’s most energetic champions: “It is precisely when the past is claimed by present communities that a reflexivity has been forced on archaeology. By reflexivity here, I mean initially the recognition and incorporation of multiple stakeholder groups, and the self-critical awareness of one’s archaeological truth claims as historical and contingent.”

Present communities—local, national, and international—with claims on the past have a multiplicity of needs and interests, from use of the past in identity and land-rights claims to requests for the return of cultural property or ancestors’ remains for reburial; from a desire to employ the past for economic gain through tourism to a desire to conduct religious rituals, festivals, dramatic performances, or leisure activities at sites. Some of these communities do not want merely to use the past for their own motives; they also wish to interpret it, and some of their interpretations occasionally conflict with those of the officially recognized expert interpreters, the archaeologists.

This article examines one such case: the debate surrounding the 9,000-year-old archaeological site of Çatalhöyük on the Konya Plain in central Turkey, where, in recent years, some Goddess feminists have vigorously challenged current archaeological opinion about it. In 1993, Çatalhöyük became the location of a high-profile experiment in multivocality when a twenty-five-year archaeological project was launched, directed by Ian Hodder. Each summer season, the excavation draws together around 100 excavators and scientific specialists from many disciplines, institutions, and countries.

The site was excavated previously between 1961 and 1965 by James Mellaart and became famous for its association with the ancient worship of a female deity evidenced by the discovery of many clay “Mother Goddess” figurines, especially that of a large, stately woman seated flanked by leopards (see Figure 1). Other art discovered by Mellaart in Çatalhöyük buildings included: plaster reliefs of leopards, plastered bulls’ heads set into walls, paintings of hunting scenes, and vultures with headless human bodies. Mellaart’s designation of the


site as a place of Neolithic Goddess worship incorporating numerous shrines, and then Anne L. Barstow's influential 1978 essay bringing Mellaart's work to the attention of feminists, and archaeologist Marija Gimbutas's writing about it in her 1991 *The Language of the Goddess* and other works, has led modern followers of Goddess spirituality to adopt Çatalhöyük as a quintessential Goddess site. Journeying there is a sacred pilgrimage to one of the earliest sites in the world where evidence of reverence for the divine feminine has been uncovered. For these visitors, Çatalhöyük is a place of inspiration, healing, learning, and celebration of the divine feminine.4


4 Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, in *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* ([London: Viking, 1991], 82), posit that the Goddess flanked by felines may be seen as a Neolithic forerunner of later Bronze Age goddesses who are linked with cats. She has different names and associations depending on the culture in which she was found: Inanna and Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Isis and Sekhmet in Egypt, and a Minoan Goddess in Crete. In the late Hittite Period (ninth century BCE), the Goddess Kubaba is often seen with lions. In the Iron Age, Kybele, the great Mother Goddess of Anatolia and Rome, is frequently depicted as seated between lions, holding a lion in her lap, resting her feet upon lions, or riding in a chariot drawn by lions. Her descendant, Artemis of Ephesus, carries lions on her forearms.
From the beginning of his time at Çatalhöyük, Hodder declared a commitment to making space for a range of viewpoints and interest groups, devoting an edited volume to discussing the operation of reflexivity at the site. Hodder says, “range from amateur vulture specialists, to those carpet dealers interested in the origins of kilim carpets, to eco-feminists, Gaia theorists and Mother Goddess worshippers.” They include local and central government officials, project sponsors, domestic and foreign tourists, tour guides, local and foreign journalists, fashion designers and artists, and people from the nearby town of Çumra and village of Küçükköy, some of whom work at the site. Among these groups and the individuals within them, there is a “kaleidoscope of interests” and “a maelstrom of conflicting interpretations.”

Vast cleavages among the groups in terms of religion, wealth, education, and political motivation, for example, make achieving multivocality, not to mention ongoing harmonious relationships, extremely challenging. For example, Hodder says, the global character of “New Age Mother Goddess, Ecofeminist and Gaia Movements may confront traditional Islamic attitudes to women, but there are undoubtedly significant sections of elite Istanbul society that welcome such links.” Thus, alliances among individuals and groups also form, and there is no clear division between local and foreign communities of interest. The archaeologists’ desire to employ local women from the neighboring village of Küçükköy as workers at the site has also challenged local Muslim men’s beliefs about women’s proper role, but they have gradually accepted their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters working at the site because of the financial benefit to families.

Hodder’s desire for multivocality at the site has a pragmatic as well as a theoretical impulse. In his view, multivocality is in the archaeologists’ interests:

We are in various ways dependent on these different constituencies (financially, administratively, politically, socially, local goodwill, etc.) and have to find ways of working with them if we want to survive. The interactions between these groups are often dangerous and threaten to undermine the project . . . . At the very least, survival of the project, if


8 Ibid., 132.
that proves possible, is enhanced by a fuller attempt to understand and interact with the multiple voices which surround it.9

Not only does Hodder want to create a reflexive process among those on the archaeological team at Çatalhöyük but he is also keen to make space for researchers, both Turkish and foreign, who are interested in studying this reflexive process at work.

My interest in Çatalhöyük emerged from my anthropological research in Malta, which examined a range of contemporary interpretations and agendas brought to bear on Malta’s Neolithic temples (which date to around 3500 BCE). In particular, I focused on the discourses of archaeology and Goddess feminism, but I also considered local popular interpretations and interests, specifically those of workers in the tourist industry, artists (who draw on imagery produced by the Neolithic artists), and hunters (who shoot and trap small birds in areas where some of the temples are situated).10

While I was visiting Istanbul in 2002, I met Reşit Ergener, a Turkish leader of Goddess tours to Turkey, author of Anatolia: Land of the Mother Goddess, and one of the founders of Turkish Friends of Çatalhöyük.11 After hearing about my Maltese research, Reşit was eager for me to meet Ian Hodder, who happened to be flying into Istanbul later that day. A phone call was made and within several hours I was talking with Ian in a bar at the Istanbul airport, where he was waiting for a flight to Konya, the closest airport to Çatalhöyük. Ian invited me to visit the site, which I did the following week, and we talked about my coming to Çatalhöyük the following season. I was eager to learn more about how the much-celebrated multivocality worked at the site, and Ian, after learning about my research on the Goddess movement, was keen for me to develop a display for the site’s visitor center interpreting the site from the perspective of the Goddess visitors.12 A display representing the perspective of local women from Küçükköy had already been mounted in the center, facilitated by Turkish social anthropologist Ayfer Bartu, who had been working at the site for some years.

9 Hodder, Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology, 4.
11 The Turkish Friends’ mission statement says their goal is, in part, “Contribution to the archeological excavations and restoration and preservation work at Çatalhöyük and at other related Neolithic sites in Turkey and to the development of tourism in Turkey,” Turkish Friends, “A Tale of Friendship,” www.catalhoyuk.org/a_mission.htm.
Theoretical and Field Contexts

Many scholars in the past twenty and more years have argued that any construction of the past, one’s own or anyone else’s, is governed by the particular contemporary agenda—social, political, religious, or economic—of its creators: different individuals and groups generate different meanings of the past. Interpretations of the past are social products that arguably have more to do with the social contexts in which they are produced than the historical periods to which they refer. “The past we conjure up is largely an artifact of the present.”

Barbara Bender’s work on Stonehenge has shown how that site has been ideologically and politically contested by a variety of voices, “all mobilizing different histories and differentially empowered,” belonging to people who have engaged with the site and landscape in quite different ways. The exhibition she coordinated (“Stonehenge Belongs To You and Me”) with some travelers and a Druid and her book Stonehenge: Making Space represent bold and practical engagement with the different voices of Druids and other Pagans, travelers, free festivalers, English Heritage and National Trust archaeologists and historians, police, local landowners, and the District Council.

Jenny Blain and Robert Wallis are interested in the multiple groups who have an interest in sacred sites such as Stonehenge, Avebury, and the Rollright Stones. Through their Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights project, they are examining physical engagements with sites, theorizing how “sacredness” is constituted from different standpoints, and exploring the implications of modern Pagans’ engagements with sites for heritage management and archaeology more generally. Blain and Wallis note that since Bender’s book came out in the late 1990s, a more liberal attitude at Stonehenge has obtained toward Pagan engagements—“with managed open access at solstices and equinoxes—and is changing again as policies alter, plans are made for a new visitor centre, and work is expected to commence on dealing with the roads that currently delimit

14 Lowenthal, Past Is a Foreign Country, xvi.
15 Bender, Landscape, 15.
16 Bender, Stonehenge.
17 See Blain and Wallis’s Web site for the project at http://www.sacredsites.org.uk.
the immediate landscape of the monument.” Interestingly, heritage managers are now also using the term “sacred” to refer to Stonehenge and Avebury: apparently, “‘Sacred sites’ are in vogue.”¹⁹

I spent three and a half weeks at Çatalhöyük in July 2003. (The war in Iraq caused the season to begin late, which cut my time short.) As well as developing the display for the visitor center, I wanted to learn more about the articulation of the “voices” of both Goddess visitors and archaeologists—in relation to the site and to one another. Each interpretive voice—whether it belongs to a member of the archaeological team or to someone researching the archaeologists and other interest groups—is uniquely inflected with particular interests. Those that significantly influenced mine have come from feminist and poststructuralist theoretical approaches, several years’ ethnographic research on the Goddess movement, my previous research in Malta, and an interest in the reinvention of culture and the past for contemporary purposes. Before switching to social anthropology in 1990, I completed a master’s degree in archaeology and worked as an archaeologist for three years in New Zealand in the 1980s. I vividly remember sitting in an introductory archaeology class in the 1970s and seeing slides of Mellaart’s extraordinary discoveries at Çatalhöyük. Thus I was excited about the opportunity to spend time at the legendary site.

The biggest difference between the research contexts of Malta and Çatalhöyük was that at Çatalhöyük multivocality was explicitly incorporated within the research design and reflexivity was employed as a deliberate strategy in the construction of archaeological knowledge. An outstanding similarity between Çatalhöyük and Malta, at least with respect to my particular focus, quickly became recognizable as I read up on the site prior to my visit. Just as Malta’s fertility Goddess had been variously commoditized, shunned, embraced, or ignored depending on who was interpreting the past, where, when, and for whom, so had Çatalhöyük’s Mother Goddess. Both in Malta and at Çatalhöyük, indigenous popular accounts of the past claim that the Neolithic remains reveal veneration of a Goddess. In both places, the association of the Goddess, or a Goddess, with the site during the Neolithic has been a source of attraction, celebration, and inspiration for women—and some men—involved in contemporary Goddess spirituality. Thus the Neolithic temples of Malta and the mounds of Çatalhöyük constitute pilgrimage destinations and, often, contemporary sacred space for some people.

Contemporary archaeologists, however, both in Malta and at Çatalhöyük, have been increasingly moving away from interpretations of the past that propose a Goddess-centered religion predominated during the Neolithic, and thus away from the interpretations of their archaeological predecessors, indigenous popular discourses, and the ideas of those in the Goddess movement. Hodder has repeatedly stated that in his view, the evidence his team has gathered does

¹⁹ Ibid., 238, 245.
not suggest an “all-powerful Goddess,” and the “shrines” Mellaart identified are more likely to have been used as domestic houses. The female figurines Mellaart found at the site, especially the famous statue of the enthroned woman flanked by leopards (said by Mellaart to represent a Goddess), represent for Hodder “the symbolic importance of women” in the Neolithic society, but certainly not matriarchy.

The views of the current archaeological team have been published in scientific journals and books and are generally regarded as the most up to date (surpassing Mellaart and largely dismissing Gimbutas) authoritative interpretations of the evidence. The Goddess perspective has been mostly published in feminist and religion academic journals, books, magazines, and Web sites read mainly by the Goddess community; and in less formal communications, such as e-mail correspondence among those who belong to a “Goddess Scholars” electronic list. This state of affairs led me to think about how power is articulated and negotiated in a multivocal context: specifically, how one voice or vocal category (archaeology) acquires interpretive authority while another (Goddess feminism), which produces a dissenting interpretation, does not (or acquires less authority, or authority restricted to a particular audience), and how the former voice consequently gains power over the latter. I began to wonder whether there was much value in having a voice in the debate if the ideas it most ardently expresses are deemed wrong, and its epistemological standpoint invalid, by those whose ideas and standpoint enjoy a more powerful status and authority in the academy and beyond. Does multivocality simply mean parallel narratives, the producers of which all believe they are correct? Or is it intended


25 It is worth noting that some feminist scholars in the field of religion accept current archaeologists’ views as unbiased—the prime example being Cynthia Eller, author of The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory (Boston: Beacon, 2000)—while others, for example, Carol P. Christ in religion and Miriam Robbins Dexter in Indo-European Studies do not.
to mean dialogue and debate among voices coming from different perspectives? If it is dialogue and debate, should we—archaeologists, Goddess feminists, or any of the other interest groups—intend, attempt, or expect to resolve differences? Is talk of multivocality any more than the glib rhetoric of empowered voices, a gesture of inclusiveness that does nothing to disguise their hegemonic position in an interpretive playing field that Hodder has acknowledged is far from even.26

**Being There**

With these musings in mind, I set forth to Çatalhöyük on the overnight bus from Istanbul, arriving at sunrise, June 30, 2003, in the town of Çumra, where I was picked up, driven to the site, and welcomed. In the course of that day and those following, the Çatalhöyük dig-house buildings became a hive of industry with the constant arrival of more people, the unpacking of laboratory equipment, the setting up of computer systems, the greeting of old friends and the induction of newcomers, settling into the dig-house dormitories, site tours, meetings, and the general reestablishment of what effectively is a small, well-organized summer village. The day after I arrived, teams comprising contract archaeologists, postgraduate and undergraduate students (mostly from the United States, United Kingdom, and Turkey, but also from several other European countries), and men from the local village began clearing vegetation off a 40-by-40-meters area of the mound that was subsequently opened up for excavation.

I spent my days informally conversing with different workers on the site, joining site tours, talking with fellow social anthropologists (several of whom were also there to study reflexivity in practice), reading material on the site database and from the site’s bookshelves, reading the site visitors’ book, helping the conservators clean walls in the “experimental house” in preparation for painting a new design, and preparing the text for the visitor center display. I also had two opportunities to interview Ian Hodder (and would have liked more but he was in high demand).27

During my preparatory reading for this trip to Çatalhöyük, it had struck me that there was little difference of opinion among archaeologists publishing their ideas about the site. I was especially interested in the fact that no one currently working there dissented from the view that Mellaart’s earlier ideas about a Goddess-centered religion at Çatalhöyük during the Neolithic were wrong. At a site

26 Hodder, “Past as Passion and Play,” 139.

with such a large number of archaeologists, one that claimed to be multivocal, why was there not more variety of opinion? I wondered.

When I asked Ian Hodder about this, his reply shed light on the particular way of “doing multivocality” that he said team participants had opted to use:

In 2000 and 2001, we spent a lot of time with twenty or thirty scientists in discussion. It was very interesting to watch that. And there was absolutely a desire to reach a consensus and a concern that we should write it as that and that it would not be a dominant view. It seemed that people wanted a sense of everybody contributing to a consensual view that people were comfortable with. I think people felt if there was a whole set of different viewpoints there would be a power play. . . . If there are different voices, the danger is that one of them would become dominant. 28

I commented that in this way the interpretive process rather than the interpretive product became multivocal. Ian agreed, reiterating that the archaeologists wanted that multivocal process to be represented by consensus: “In that way they felt their interests were served.”

If the archaeologists were concerned that a failure by them to reach consensus risked a power play among their voices, with the danger that one voice would become dominant, where has that left those voices belonging to other stakeholders? I suggest that in the case of the Goddess visitors and various women’s groups, it leaves them with an even bigger power play on their hands. First, as Hodder has emphasized, this cohort is enormously diverse in its political and religious priorities, motivations, and specific beliefs about the site, and in no sense forms—or could form—the kind of “team” that the archaeologists who work at the site form, their different viewpoints notwithstanding. 29

Some come to the site for a spiritual experience in a place they believe a Goddess was once worshipped, some want to do rituals, some have a political interest in how gender relations were configured differently in the past, some bring crystals and drums, some are ecofeminists, and a few, Hodder told me, see scientific excavation as rape of the Earth Mother and think it should be stopped. Even if one were to talk only about those who self-identify as belonging to the contemporary Goddess spirituality movement, there is no single forum where all such people could come together, and if there were, reaching a consensus about interpretation of the site, except in the very broadest of terms, could, I think, be quite difficult.

Not only do the archaeologists have the advantage of opportunities to try to reach consensus. They also have the advantages of immediate access to “the trowel” and the material that is continually being uncovered, and they enjoy

official sanction as the scientific voice with the most up-to-date theories. There is no doubt that their voices dominate in any contest over who produces the “correct” interpretation of Çatalhöyük. The “Goddess voice” loses the power play before it even begins.

Archaeologists versus the Goddess

So, it is perhaps unsurprising that when Goddess visitors espouse theories different from the officially sanctioned, consensual archaeological voice, theories deemed wrong by the archaeologists, they experience frustration and sometimes anger. Some of the ways they have expressed this anger include withdrawal of their visits to the site for several years (there were no Goddess tours between 2001 and 2005, although individuals still visited), e-mail correspondence among women in sections of the global Goddess network, and comments in the site’s visitors’ book.

Certainly, not all comments from Goddess visitors in the visitors’ book are negative, and it is important to note that the great majority of visitors’ comments are glowing. There are many expressions of excitement, joy, relief at finally having made it, a sense of being healed and blessed, reverence, gratitude to the Goddess, and gratitude to the archaeologists for giving time to provide comprehensive tours of the site. However, some visitors, though grateful for the opportunity to spend time at the site, were critical and angry about aspects of the current archaeological interpretation, which they see as discarding Mellaart’s Goddess-centered interpretation for one that seems “shockingly biased” and determinedly blind to evidence of the sacred feminine. They challenged the archaeologists on specific points. One said that the archaeological goal of discovering whether excavated rooms should be designated “shrines” “seems quite limited to me. The point is that worship of the Mother Goddess occurred throughout this community and that worship needs to be far better recognized in your exhibit.”30 Several women asked why projectile points were interpreted as evidence of warfare rather than of hunting when the artwork shows hunting and there is no other evidence for warfare. One person found it “outrageous” that an “image that has been usually interpreted as the Mother Goddess” had been used at the site as a unisex sign for the toilets.31 (It is unlikely that images of male deities of mainstream religions would be put on toilet doors.)

Another visitor lamented the absence of reference to interpretations that “came before you”—like those of Mellaart and Gimbutas.32 Several who visited

30 Comment made by a participant on a group visit in June 2001. The woman signed her name “Dr. ——” (name omitted here for reasons of confidentiality).
31 Comment made by a participant on a group visit in June 2001 from the California Institute of Integral Studies. She also signed her name “Dr. ——.”
32 Participant on Goddess tour to the site on May 25, 2000.
in June 2001 charged the archaeologists with bias and challenged them to “own their interpretations” and to distinguish between opinion and fact, saying that failure to do so was poor science. This criticism is ironic since archaeologists tend to regard their perspective as scientifically based in contrast with what they see as the nonscientific approach of the Goddess visitors. A number of criticisms showed that these visitors were well aware of the contested nature of the site’s interpretation and the politics involved. In June 2001, someone wrote: “Interpretation begins at the trowel—please own yours.”

The visitors who make such criticisms tend to be well informed about the site and some of the most virulent comments have come from women with high profiles in the Goddess movement. I noted the name of a well-known author and a well-known musician (both of whom also lead Goddess tours to Malta) in the visitors’ book, along with some who prefaced their names with “Dr.” Most came from the United States, but others came from Canada, Europe, and Australasia.

When one compares Çatalhöyük and Malta with respect to the relationship between Goddess visitors and archaeologists, it appears considerably more fraught at Çatalhöyük. Why this should be is an interesting question, given that in both places archaeological interpretation has increasingly moved away from positing the existence of a Goddess-centered religion during the Neolithic period. As I have noted, Hodder has explicitly acknowledged the importance of the Goddess visitors as one of the groups with an interest in Çatalhöyük and he has over the years engaged in discussion with them and supported their having access to the site.33 In Malta, despite their differences of opinion, relations between Goddess visitors and archaeologists have been cordial and mutually supportive, but the archaeologists have never explicitly embraced a reflexive, multivocal approach.34 Why, then, are things not less, rather than more, fraught at Çatalhöyük? Hodder mentioned to me that he had even received death threats from women connected with the Goddess movement. The answer, I suggest, has to do with Goddess visitors’ high expectations as a result of Hodder’s well-published policy of multivocality; the expectation that their perspectives and interpretations will be taken seriously as worthy of interrogation, discussion, and genuine debate, alongside those of archaeologists and other interest groups. This expectation has not always been met, or not met in the way that the Goddess visitors anticipated, leading variously to their disillusionment, cynicism, anger, and, recently, renewed attempts at dialogue.

34 Rountree, “Case of the Missing Goddess.”
The “Goddess Perspective” Display

It is ironic that where multivocality has been openly and officially embraced, members of one important interest group are aggrieved because they feel their views go unregistered in the official interpretation of the site. Inviting me to come to Çatalhöyük and create a display from Goddess visitors’ perspective was one way Hodder was trying to address this situation. The process of setting up this display, however, emphasized the position of the Goddess voice as other in relation to the archaeologists’ interpretation. After I drafted the text, Ian said he thought it would be “inclusive and politic” to post my text on a dig-house notice board to see whether any of the archaeologists objected.

When I asked about the politics of giving one interpretive voice (archaeologists) the right of veto over another (the Goddess perspective) in a multivocal context, Ian said that it wasn’t a matter of silencing or arguing against the Goddess view, it was more a case of whether “we as a group should give space to radically alternative views,” adding that the Turkish government officials may be worried about it as well. This statement seemed to emerge from his ever-present concern about his responsibility as a broker among different interest groups. He made it clear that he personally wanted the Goddess display to proceed, but felt it was necessary to follow a democratic process and consider the thoughts and feelings of the rest of the archaeological team and those of other stakeholders. Hodder’s comment about the Turkish authorities’ potential concern followed other comments he had made about the authorities’ wary attitudes toward the more ostentatious Goddess visitors’ rituals performed at the site, which the Turks found strange and inappropriate. I did not follow up this point at the time, but it now seems very pertinent to ask the questions, as one reviewer of this article did: What, if any, influence are the Turkish authorities’ attitudes and concerns having on official archaeological interpretation of the site, never mind any “alternative” interpretation? Are the views of the owners of the site at some level influencing—even prejudicing—scholarship about the site? Obviously, the answers to these questions bear crucially on such issues as academic freedom and the entanglements of science, religion, and politics.

Clearly, Hodder’s sensitivities about the display were important and understandable. Nonetheless, this situation underlined the fact that it was in the archaeologists’ power to give space (or not) to another voice, and that all voices were very differently empowered. I tried—and failed—to imagine a situation where the archaeologists would submit their interpretive texts to the Goddess community to see whether anyone objected. The fact that the display from the Goddess perspective was restricted to two portable panels (like the display from the perspective of the local village women) also emphasized the otherness or “alternative” nature of these two voices in relation to the archaeological interpretation, which was fixed to all the surrounding walls, implying that it was more stable, comprehensive, and official.
In any event, during the following several days, no one questioned the text submitted on the notice board and we went ahead with the display, which included quotations of visitors’ comments. I wondered whether I should include angry or critical voices. On one hand, this would have drawn attention to the politics and fraught nature of multivocality and would have been an honest representation of the range of Goddess opinions. On the other hand, I did not want to jaundice this positive step toward including the Goddess perspective in the visitor center and perpetuate a grumpiness that would do nothing to improve relations with the archaeologists, an improvement both sides claimed to want. So, although I had misgivings about the dishonesty of excluding them, I left out the “angry voices.”

I would not be surprised if some Goddess visitors perceived this small display at the visitor center as tokenism and an inadequate representation of their perspective. Many Goddess visitors to Çatalhöyük know that the archaeologists’ stated model is multivocality and they take it seriously. And as articulate, well-read, college-educated, middle-class feminists, they are used to debate and expect to be heard and taken seriously—though not necessarily agreed with. One Goddess visitor wrote in the site visitors’ book: “Demonstrate your cooperative, open ways of working by incorporating Mellaart’s work, Marija Gimbutas and many other scholars into this exhibit. You have such an opportunity to do this differently.”

As feminists, some may be unimpressed with what could be seen as the politics of gesture. They might argue that having a voice—rather, being given a voice by the archaeologists—does not mean that it carries equal status with other voices, especially those of the archaeologists. All voices are not equally empowered to speak authoritatively about the site’s interpretation. Other interest groups, such as the villagers from Kışkırt or kilim designers or government officials, while having specific and powerful claims on the site, might not expect much in the way of interpretive power. For these other interest groups, the archaeologists are the experts at interpreting what is excavated.

In this respect, I suggest that Goddess visitors are different from other interest groups. They are more likely to be aware of the contestable nature of interpretations of the past and of the politics of discourse; they believe that accounts of the past emerge through discursive processes and are susceptible to change over time for all sorts of reasons as well as because of the recovery of new data. Ironically, it is precisely because Hodder has chosen to embrace multivocality that the clash of these two discourses has occurred more openly at Çatalhöyük than in other places, such as Malta, where archaeological discourse is equally far removed from Goddess discourse.

Of course, many visitors who come to the site because they are enamored with Mellaart’s interpretation of it are ignorant about or disapproving of those who are critical of the current archaeologists. One writer in the visitors’ book
(entry dated June 2001) exhorts the archaeologists “not to feel threatened by those who use the site as a source of religious inspiration”; another writes (also June 2001), “To the staff and all who participate here, our heartfelt thanks and gratitude for the love and understanding that can be promoted through this work. We can celebrate the differences and bless the Mother Goddess for showing herself at just the right time.” Another entry with the same date concludes: “May the dialogue continue between all those who love this place.” Thus, there is no straightforward breach between the archaeologists’ position and that of the Goddess visitors. There are those who see disagreements in interpretation as simply par for the course. It is also possible that some visitors fear antagonizing the archaeologists who have the greatest access to data about the site and are currently happy to give site tours to Goddess visitors and others.

Dialogue between Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists

In July 2005, there was an important breakthrough in communications between the archaeologists at Çatalhöyük and the Goddess community. This came via a “Goddess Conversations” conference and tour of Goddess sites in Turkey organized by the president of Turkish Friends of Çatalhöyük, Reşit Ergener (my first contact in Turkey), and two American women, Lydia Ruyle and Katie Hoffner.35 Around forty people attended the conference held at the Ephesus Museum in Selçuk. Most also elected to join a preconference tour, which included a visit to Çatalhöyük to meet and talk with the archaeologists.36 The only archaeologist at the actual conference was Pia Andersson, a Swedish PhD candidate also interested in multivocality.

On the afternoon of July 17, the “Goddess Conversations” bus full of pilgrims (mostly women, and a handful of men) arrived at Çatalhöyük. Both sides were well prepared for the meeting. Ruyle wrote: “My anticipation was intense after all the months of planning and emails; the time was at hand. My inner knowing knew the meeting would unfold with respect and excitement on both sides and be instrumental in changing the paradigm.”37 After a tour of the site and tea, the Goddess visitors and around 100 archaeologists and scientific specialists gathered in the meeting room, where four of Ruyle’s brightly colored

36 Because I was at another conference, I was unfortunately unable to be present at Çatalhöyük for this meeting, but I attended the conference at Ephesus and heard (and later read) about the Çatalhöyük meeting from many people who were present.
37 Ruyle, “Goddess Conversations at Çatalhöyük.”
Turkish “Goddess Icon” banners, given to the site ten years before, hung for the occasion.38

Ergener, who saw himself as positioned between the two “voices,” welcomed the group, followed by Hodder, who outlined his vision for Çatalhöyük as a place that welcomes multiple stories and dialogue. Then five of the scholars on the Goddess tour spoke about how the site had informed their work and three of the archaeological team spoke on human remains and figurines.39 The Goddess group gave fifty books about the Goddess to the site library (many written by people in the group) and a monetary gift. Although Hodder explained that the Turkish government would not allow Goddess rituals on the mound itself, archaeologists believed that creating a sacred grove for ritual or meditation, which the Goddess group had proposed, was achievable.40 The gathering then broke into smaller discussion groups, each comprising some Goddess pilgrims and some members of the archaeological team. After a reporting back time, the group stayed to share a barbeque with the archaeologists.

I heard nothing but positive responses to this meeting from the Goddess visitors’ camp: some were ecstatic while others were cautiously optimistic about future relations. One of the Goddess speakers, Vicki Noble, received so many inquiries about how the meeting with the archaeologists had gone that she wrote an account and posted it on the conference Web site.41 By the end of the trip, she reported, “we were in fairly strong agreement that things went well in the formal discussion between our group and the members of the excavation team at the site—and that something beneficial will come of it.” She commented on the intellectual openness of the archaeological team and said that “it remains to be seen how all of this “feel good” stuff will shake down into concrete action and change, but it seems to me an excellent move forward. My own experience was somewhat in the nature of a personal breakthrough.”

Clearly, it would be naïve to expect this event to herald the dawning of a new age of agreement or consensus between archaeologists and Goddess visitors, and neither side expects it. But the events of July 2005 do indicate a mutual will to continue, at the very least, a respectful dialogue and genuine exchange

38 Lydia Ruyle is an artist, scholar, and author who has created numerous “Goddess Icon” spirit banners inspired by sacred images of the divine feminine from many cultures. Her banners have flown in twenty-five countries. Small versions of the banners have been reproduced as prayer flags, which were attached to pilgrims’ clothing when they visited Çatalhöyük in 2005. Ruyle’s Web site is http://www.lydiaruyle.com.
39 Those who spoke from the Goddess tour included Joan Marler, Harald Haarman, Vicki Noble, Peggy Reeves Sanday, and Lydia Ruyle.
of information and ideas about a place in which both groups share a passionate interest.

Talking Past Each Other

One of the problems in recent years has been that the archaeologists and the Goddess groups have been “talking past each other,” often in parallel monologues to audiences who share their own views of the past. Sometimes the different groups seem to speak different languages, employ different epistemologies, and misunderstand one another to the extent that even points of agreement are taken for disagreement and communication stalls in bewilderment, frustration, and sometimes anger.

A major point of contention is over “the Goddess” at the site. I asked Ian Hodder what he thought were the core beliefs of the Goddess visitors who came to Çatalhöyük. After emphasizing that the women’s groups were highly diverse and did not form a coherent community or voice, he said:

I think there is a range of opinion, from believing this is a place of renewal and rebirth and regeneration for them as individuals to people who believe there really was a Goddess here, and that Goddess was worshipped and could be re-worshipped. In terms of core beliefs, it’s something to do with . . . there was a time prior to the Bronze Age in which women were in some sense dominant or at least more powerful than they were after it. It seems to me that that view can have a very empowering impact on women without it necessarily being the case that there was a Goddess involved. I think that’s where all the confusion lies.

There seems to be some sort of link between that view and the view that there is a spiritual presence here. On one hand, I’m very convinced that some women come here and they have a powerful experience that renews them as women today, but I’m not convinced that means necessarily that they have to believe that there is a Goddess. 42

Here, Hodder identifies what he sees as four areas of confusion or contention: (1) the source of women’s powerful experiences when they visit the site, (2) the relationship between gendered social relations and the belief system in the Neolithic, (3) the relationship between material evidence and people’s stories about the past, and (4) whether Goddess worship in the past means there is still a “divine presence” at the site. The second and third of these points are crucially important to any interpretation of the site and debate among people from different perspectives could be very fruitful. But it is difficult to see how there could be a fruitful debate about the first and fourth points because individuals’ positions—whether they are archaeologists or Goddess followers—hinge on

42 Hodder interview, July 17, 2003.
subjective beliefs and experiences that are not objectively verifiable but nonetheless form the basis of an epistemology.

An atheist, Christian, or Muslim, for example, might accept that the Neolithic people participated in a religion that included Goddess veneration, but would not accept that there was a Goddess at the site (or anywhere else) in the past or in the present. This being the case, any powerful experience would need to be attributed to a source other than a divine one. However, a person from a religion that has a Goddess or includes goddesses and gods might have less difficulty with the idea of a Goddess “presence” at the site in the past or present. These points can be discussed in terms of philosophy or theology, but not in terms of scientific rationality. Ian Hodder went on to say:

As in any religion, it [the Goddess interpretation] wants scientific proof, despite the fact that religion really transcends truth of an objective nature. It’s the same in Christianity and Buddhism; there are these big archaeological sites where people are trying to prove the existence of some shrine . . . . They [the Goddess visitors] want us to prove that the Goddess was here. There’s absolutely no way that any archaeologist anywhere can prove anything of that sort. What we can do is say that there was a powerful female deity of some sort, but to interpret that in terms of what you mean by a Goddess is a rather difficult matter. If you feel a powerful spiritual presence on the site, that is evidence that the Goddess is here for you. I can’t provide evidence that She was here. I can show you a figurine, but whether you get a powerful presence out of that or not is a separate matter. . . . People ask me if I can prove that the Goddess was here and that leads into a discussion of the role of figurines.43

Because I had read Hodder’s Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology, in which he says that “the evidence that we have gained at Çatalhöyük suggests not an all-powerful Goddess and a priestly elite,” I was astonished to hear him say in this interview that the archaeologists could say “there was a powerful female deity of some sort” at Çatalhöyük.44 A “powerful female deity” is what I call a “Goddess.” Hodder clearly did not realize this, because he went on to say that it was difficult to interpret the “powerful female deity” in terms of what I meant by a “Goddess.” In fact we had not discussed what I meant by a Goddess. Two things dawned on me as a result of this experience: (1) that Hodder and I understood the meaning of “Goddess” differently, and (2) that we had both assumed (wrongly) that we knew what the other’s understanding was, that is, the same as our own. We were talking past each other. It occurred to me that if Hodder had written that he thought there was evidence for a powerful female deity at the site, a considerable blockage in the communication between the ar-

43 Ibid.
44 Hodder, Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology, 11.
chaeologists and the Goddess community might be removed and a platform for further debate (about the nature and role of such a female deity in the Neolithic system of beliefs and rituals) might be established.

An important problem for Hodder (in the quotations above) seems to have to do with distinguishing between finding evidence pointing toward the veneration of a female deity at the site in the distant past and sensing the presence of a divinity at the site today. He apparently feels that if archaeologists do the former, this will justify Goddess visitors doing the latter—and that his science will be implicated in validating their religious beliefs and claims about the site. Or worse, if archaeologists conclude that the ancient rituals and beliefs of the Neolithic community apparently incorporated a female deity, this implies that archaeologists agree that there really was (and is) a female deity at the site who can still be worshipped by contemporary people. This does not follow. Evidence of belief or worship, whether in the past or present, is not evidence that what is believed or worshipped existed or exists. The evidence tells only about the human group. Neither an archaeologist’s report of evidence concerning past beliefs and rituals nor an anthropologist’s report concerning evidence of present-day beliefs and rituals proves, or is capable of proving, that the object of belief and worship exists. Archaeologists cannot “provide evidence that She was here,” but they can provide evidence suggesting that people here fervently believed so.

**Multivocality**

An experience on the last night of the 2005 Goddess Conversations conference led me to realize that there was much less agreement even among the Goddess pilgrims about the meaning of “Goddess” than I had assumed. After dinner, we went around our table of twelve and each gave a personal meaning of “Goddess.” No two meanings were alike. Yet none could say that another’s meaning was incorrect and all were interesting and valued, each adding a new dimension.

This exercise in multivocality within our small group suggested two things: first, that “voices” or vocal categories may be less stable, homogeneous, and coherent than they are thought to be or presented as being, and a good deal more fluid, ephemeral, and complex; and, second, that multivocality can be safe and worthwhile when the power relations are conducive to this. The reification of “voices,” as if they presented a broadly unified, consistent perspective is an oversimplification. This is not a straightforward debate between a scientific perspective and nonscientific perspectives: Mellaart, we recall, was a scientist and he believed Çatalhöyük was a place of Goddess worship.

And individuals’ positions are not necessarily singular or fixed any more than whole groups’ positions are. An event that occurred three days before I left
Çatalhöyük illustrated to me that it is possible for individuals to articulate with
different voices according to context. An embodied, experiential epistemology
may produce a very different voice from one operating from the standpoint of
scientific rationality.

On this particular afternoon, the team of Polish archaeologists who were
excavating in another part of the mound found a tiny “Goddess” figure when
they were sieving excavated material. She was finely worked in pale green stone
with extremely fine facial markings, almond-shaped eyes, arms folded across
her chest, an exaggerated pubic triangle, her legs broken off below the thighs.
She was no bigger than my fingernail and quite exquisite. Although very small,
like a pendant, she had no suspension hole and I privately thought she could
have been a talisman kept in a pouch, possibly worn around the neck or some
other part of the body.

This find caused much excitement at the site, and everyone who told me
about it exclaimed, “Have you seen the Mother Goddess?” Not one of these
archaeologists asked, “Have you seen the new female figurine?” Later, when
some of us were looking at her under the microscope in order to see the deli-
cate markings better, one woman scientist asked if she could touch the figurine.
Doing so, she exclaimed, without a detectable hint of irony, “I have touched the
Goddess!”

The mound of Çatalhöyük is a high ground that is not ultimately suscep-
tible to capture—at least not permanent, exclusive capture—by any of the many
interest groups who play out upon it different beliefs, motivations, agendas, and
bodily practices. The nature of reflexivity is that the “ground” is always shift-
ing—whether as the result of one person’s digging or another’s meditating, or
the two in dialogue together.

45 It was interesting that the generic term “Mother Goddess” was used, despite the absence
of any characteristics identifying the figure as a mother—for example, she wasn’t holding a baby
or obviously pregnant. Tracing the uses of the term “Mother Goddess” among different cohorts of
users at different times and in different contexts, and the politics that accompany the uses of this
term and ensuing debates, is beyond the scope of this article.