

The Istanbul-Chicago Universities' Joint Prehistoric Project

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We suppose that almost everybody must think that archaeological excavation is a fascinating matter, perhaps especially so if the yield pertains to the early stages of one's own cultural tradition. Getting ancient things out of the ground is one thing; interpreting their meanings is another.

Take the example of Çayönü, our early village site at the very threshold of the then new food-producing

way of life, some 10,000 years ago. The site lies in the Tigris river hill country of southeastern Turkey. Its original inhabitants had domesticated wheat and certain pulses, such as peas and lentils and also the dog. Wild plants and nuts were also collected, but the only source of animal protein came from hunting until almost the end of the site's duration. Only then did domestic sheep and goats become part of the subsistence economy. In all, the village's succession of re-buildings probably went on over a period of no more than four or five hundred years.

Çayönü's artifacts of daily

use were fairly simple. Çayönü's building foundations of cobblestones, however—while not impressive at first glance—say something very important about the rapidity of cultural change that attended the birth of the village-farming community way of life. In fact, the excavation of these architectural remains keeps a team of seven German architectural historians and geodetic surveyors busy, fascinated, and happy (and these are architects who have also worked at such spectacular later sites as Tiryns, Mycenae, and Boghazköy!). Actually the whole Çayönü field staff is deeply involved in attempting to figure out just what the site's architectural remains are telling us.

The present contours of the low Çayönü mound suggest an original settlement of about the area of five football grids combined. In eight short seasons of excavation, we have exposed about one tenth of this area in the upper and middle levels of the mound. Our present guess is that the original village may have included about thirty households. Again, at a guess, with about seven per-

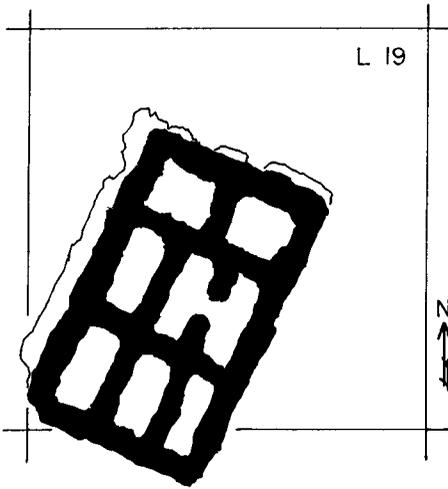
sons per household, this would give about two hundred inhabitants.

The Sears catalogue of the site's inventory shows very little change from bottom to top. There are many implements of chipped stone and ground stone, some finer decorative stone objects, bone tools, a scattering of cold-hammered pins and hooks of native copper, some simple clay figurines and objects, but no pottery vessels. Archaeologically, what impresses one overwhelmingly at Çayönü is its building foundation remains.

There is quite a variety of building remains, including at least one plan type of either sacred or secular purpose. We want to concentrate here, however, on what *should* be the most straightforward examples for interpretation. These are two types of foundation plans, quite evidently, for house structures. A glance at our illustrations will make clear why we call one plan type the "cell" plan and the other the "grill" plan. Their interpretation *ought* to be simple.

The cobblestone foundation remains of the "cell" plan type are later than those

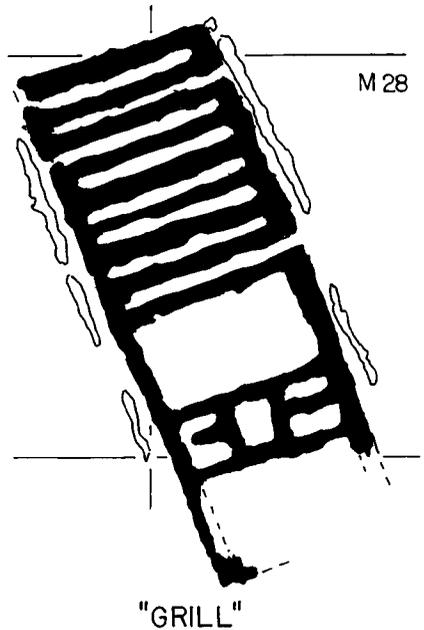
of the "grill" plan type. "Cells" clearly overbed "grills" in several places, but the time difference between the two types need not have been great. There is a remarkable uniformity in the different examples of the "cell" plan, and the same is true for the "grill" remains. Each of these plan types tends to have its own characteristic orientation. The overall size of the average "cell" plan is about 18 by 24 feet and the size of an individual cell within it is about 4 by 7 feet, or less. The overall size



"CELL"

The foundations of a "cell" plan house

The foundations of a "grill" plan house



"GRILL"



of the “grill” plan is about 17 by 40 feet.

So far, we have exposed at least ten examples of “cell” plan foundations. Most of these had traces of a second (or even a third) rebuilding: this means that we already have more than twenty examples to deal with. Of the “grill” plan, at least eight more or less complete examples have appeared; most of these also had traces of several (in two cases, as many as five) rebuildings. We assume, for both plan types, that the cobblestone foundations rose

A view from the photo tower, over a portion of a “cell” plan (foreground) with an earlier “grill” plan (background) and the stream (çay) beyond.

well above their respective ground lines, and that the upper walls of the buildings were of sun-dried mud brick (adobe). Clear traces of mud bricks have been found on top of some of the “cell” foundation cobblestones, but none have yet been found on the “grill” remains. We also think (see below) that the actual living floors were of wood, brush, and mud, framed *above* the cobblestone foundations.

Why should we feel that

An air view of our main exposure at Çayönü at the end of the 1981 season.



the “cell” and “grill” remains were foundations for structures of domestic purpose? First, we take their very frequency and spacing within the original Çayönü village (that is, as we know it through our present exposures) to suggest that these were actually house plans. Second, we are impressed with the quantity and types of the artifacts recovered, especially with the “objects of daily use” found within and adjacent to the “cell” foundations.

There are considerable problems in the matter, however. For example, neither the “cells” (save in one case) nor the “grills” have exterior door openings at what was evidently ground level. Further, the voids in the “grill” plan remain a problem. The approximately twelve to fifteen inch voids, between the grill-lines in the “grill” plan type suggest that these cobblestone lines probably served simply as joists to support a built floor. Thus the voids (open at the ends in a few cases) could have served to aerate the actual living floors.

But, why aerate the floors, if that is what the voids were

really meant to do? We, ourselves, know very well how cold and damp the ground can be in southeastern Turkey in the winter, and we’ve been told that peasants, to the northeast in the Elburz mountains, still build this way to get their living floors up off the cold damp ground. On the other hand Professor Schirmer, the head of the Karlsruhe architectural team, at present tends to favor the idea that the aeration was necessary for proper grain storage. Our Russian colleagues, digging on a site of about the same time range in northern Iraq, encountered instances of such grills and assure us that their Arab workmen also insisted they were for drying sheaves of grain. (Our own previous site of Jarmo also had a trace of grill-like lines of mud.)

As to the “cell” plan type, the individual cells in a “cell” plan are really far too small to have been proper rooms. Should we then assume that someone who was long used to the older “grill” type of construction, decided to open up the sub-floor voids to the size of cells and take advantage of at least some of them as storage bins?

An air view of our western exposure at Çayönü at the end of the 1981 season.



If it weren't for the fact that the general artifactual inventory shows no essential change, we would probably have thought—in the case of the “cell” plan type—that a new group of people, with a different habit of building, took over.

There seems no end to the possible questions. Where are the hearths and oven remains one usually finds in houses of about this time? Were they up on the built living floors we assume were once there?

How did the Çayönü people actually store their threshed grain? Why do we occasionally encounter human burials within one or another of the cells of the “cell” plan, or within one of the small cell-like spaces on the southern end of the “grill” plan? Why were coarse lines of cobbles added, bench-like, along some of the outer walls of both “cell” and “grill” foundations? And, if you wanted to rebuild, why do it almost exactly on the same place

without bothering to simply reuse the old foundations? And was space itself becoming a problem, as regards the overall village plan? We ought to learn about that too.

We suppose that our message here is mainly to say that for all the apparent standardization and sophistication of these two common plan types, their detailed interpretation is not easy. This is one of a number of reasons that makes us believe that more excavation at

Çayönü is still necessary. We feel that the two plan types *ought* to be simply earlier and later house types, but describing just what went on within each type and proving the case, is not easy.

And why the change from one type to another in so relatively short a time? It must mean something about the pace of change as village-farming community life first developed, but just what?

Any ideas?



An air view of the remains of the terrazzo-floored building, overbedding the earlier remains of two "grill" plans.