

Plaster, as a vital material:

The agency of plaster in the curation of the Çatalhöyük skull

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

The discovery of Neolithic plastered skulls has attracted widespread interest but there has been a disproportionate focus on the construction and meaning of the skulls, with little regard paid to the material, plaster, itself. In 2004, in Çatalhöyük, a plastered skull was excavated, which had been found nestled in the arms of a female skeleton. Focussing upon this skull, this dissertation seeks to bring plaster, as a “vital material,” into the conversation, co-equal to other actors in this mortuary rite.

Using evidence from contemporary artists and ethnographic data, this paper seeks to explore the symbolic role that plaster played in the cosmological expression of Neolithic Çatalhöyük, and argues that this gave plaster the power to act as a force, or “*flow*,” enabling it to transform the skull into an “*über-ancestor*,” in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It explores how plaster became synonymous with value by being used on valuable objects, with both the material and the skull gaining further prestige from this transaction. It continues with an evaluation of the role of plaster in the social construction of the new memories and new identity, expressed through the performative act of plastering the skull. Exploring how plaster as a dynamic material can be equated with flesh, it argues that by plastering the skull, the artist was not only refreshing it, but also affirming life over death in a repeated act of regeneration. The vitality of plaster allowed the skull to transcend the immediate present and situate itself in a trans-dimensional location. The dissertation concludes with a discussion on the idealisation of the *über-ancestor* upon which socially constructed concepts of personhood were projected through the agency of the plaster acting upon the skull.

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Although I have never met them, Dr. Scott Haddow and Kathleen Killackey have both responded so quickly and helpfully to my emailed enquiries, giving me valuable information about Çatalhöyük and the plastered skull. Dr. Metin Özbek and Dr. Bleda Düring have also very kindly taken time out to respond to questions and theories.

Finally, thanks to my long-suffering family who have learned to avoid saying the words plaster or skull in my presence in case it sets me off on regaling them with a new bit of information.



Figure 1 Map showing Çatalhöyük. Source 125.stanford.edu

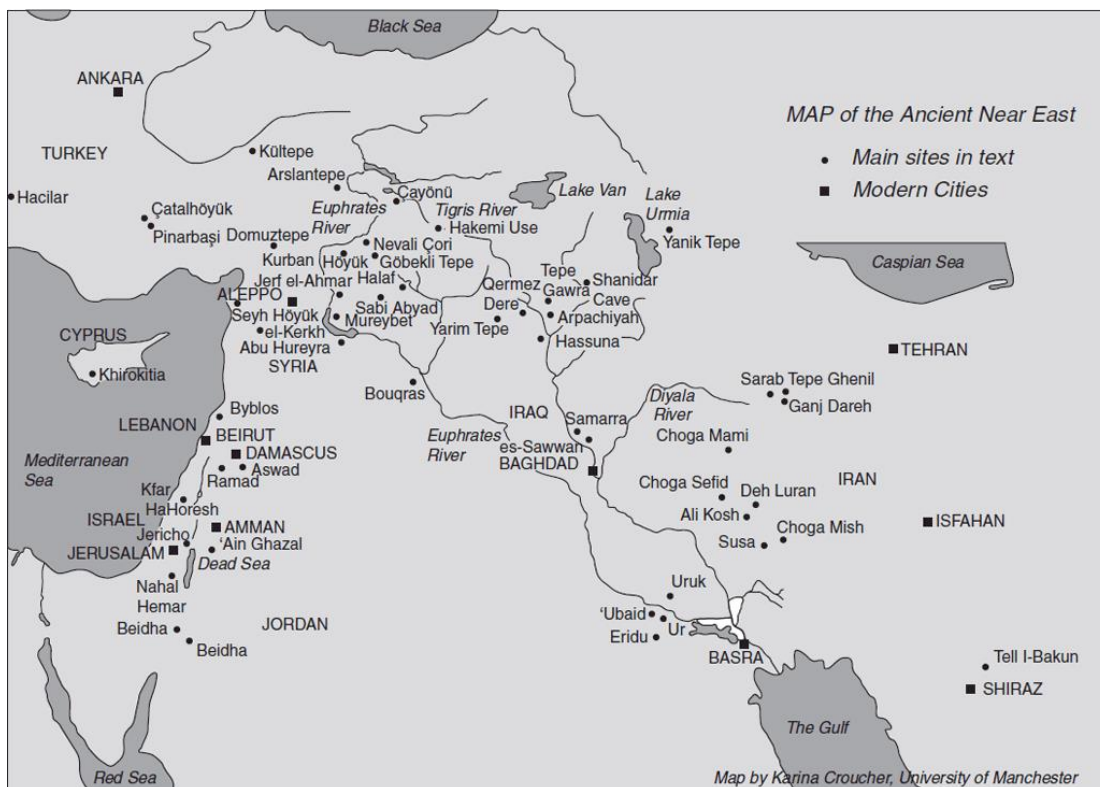


Figure 2 Map of the region showing key archaeological sites in Neolithic Levant and Anatolia. Source: Croucher (2012)

Chapter 1 Literature Review

This dissertation seeks to foreground plaster as a medium of significance in the curation of plastered skulls, specifically Skull 11330 discovered in Çatalhöyük in Building 42, dating from approximately 6400-6000 cal B.C during the Early Pottery/Late Neolithic (Fig. 3). There are many works (e.g., Arensburg and Hershkovitz, 1989; Schmandt-Besserat, 2013) offering insight into the construction and function of such skulls, but none have explored the symbolic transformation enacted by the use of plaster. This dissertation puts forward the theory that the skull, possessing personhood, is transformed into a “super-person” or “über-ancestor” through the abundance of symbolic and technical attributes inherent within the plaster. The chapter begins with a review of two works which contribute greatly to the way researchers interpret the skulls, and a third which examines personhood, demonstrating how a skull can be a whole person, not a grave good. The second part of the chapter reviews two works focusing on Matter, and a doctorate exploring the use of plaster.

Çatalhöyük was built upon the alluvial clay of the Konya Plain of Anatolia in present-day Turkey (Fig. 1) during the early days of sedentism and inhabited roughly between 7100-5700 BCE (Hodder, 2006) during the Early Pottery to the Late Neolithic (Fig. 1). Mellaart began the first excavations there in the 1960s, discovering a town where intramural burial traditions were practised, a widespread tradition in Neolithic Anatolia and the Levant (Düring, 2006a). He discovered red painted crania, though no evidence of plastered skulls (Haddow, 2012), and suggested secondary burial was common (Düring, 2006b, 605). Excavation then ceased for three decades. The latest excavations, from 1993-2018, led by Ian Hodder, benefitted from

advanced archaeological techniques, and overturned some of Mellaart's assumptions, including that of secondary burial as a common tradition (Hodder, 2006, 125) and intramural burial also being common (Düring, 2003). Hodder sought to examine the relationship between human society and material culture in a critical hermeneutic approach (Hodder, 2014) in an attempt to make sense of the shift to agricultural settled life (Hodder, 2006).

In 2004, Scott Haddow's team, found a plastered skull in the arms of a skeleton (Figs. 6,7 and 8). It was immediately classed as a grave good (Çatalhöyük Research Portal) and taken to the Konya Museum. There was insufficient time for an in-depth analysis on either the skull, or the plaster, though Haddow was able to make superficial observations, noting the plaster was very white, similar to the final coat used on walls (Haddow 2020, personal communication). Research and theories on this particular skull have therefore been limited to passing sentences within the archive material from the dig (<http://www.Çatalhöyük.com>), a blog from Haddow (<http://scotthaddow.wordpress.com>) and a few mentions within the framework of broader writing on plastered skulls (E.g., Hodder and Meskell, 2011; Meskell and Nakamura, 2013; Çamurcuoğlu 2015; Pilloud, Haddow, Knüsel and Larsen, 2016) . In contrast, there is an abundance of academic literature concerning the plastered skulls that have been excavated in the area between The Levant and Anatolia as a whole (E.g., Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal; 1999; Bonogofsky, 2004; Kuijt, 2008; Croucher, 2012, 2016; Schulting, 2013; Garfinkel, 2014; Garrard, Edwards, Stock and Yazbeck, 2018). Since the Çatalhöyük skull, with tantalising hints of others also found there (Haddow, 2012), appears to fall within a general Neolithic tradition of plastered skulls, this critical survey is based on more general ideas surrounding the curation of plastered skulls.

Chronological phases

Period	Approx. dates (BC)
The Natufian	12 500–10 000
PPNA	10 000–8550
EPPNB	8550–8100
MPPNB	8100–7300
LPPNB	7300–6750
Final PPNB/PPNC/Early Pottery Neolithic	6750–6300
Pottery Neolithic/Late Neolithic*	6300–5200

(*) This period encompasses the Halaf period, also categorized as being in the Chalcolithic period by some sources.

Figure 3 Timeline showing the chronological phases of Neolithic Levant and Anatolia. Source: Croucher (2012,30)

1.1 Developments in the ways of interpreting plastered skulls

The first plastered skull was discovered in 1935 by Professor Garstang, but it is the discovery in 1953 of what became a cache of skulls in Jericho by Kathleen Kenyon that the public usually thinks of (Fig. 4). So far, over 60 similar skulls have been excavated in various sites (Fig 2) over the area of the Levant (Zielo, 2018) and at least 12 in Anatolia (Bonogofsky, 2005) with regional variations, but a remarkable similarity in many important aspects, implying a shared tradition that wove its way from village to village over the millennia (Fig 2). However, differences do occur in style and therefore, in possible meaning (Appendix A); ears are sometimes depicted, sometimes not; eyes may be of plaster, or shell, or bitumen. These small differences cover a vast area and timespan and may have had a huge symbolic difference, meaning being contextual (Croucher, 2012, 82). One obvious difference is the presence or otherwise of the mandible. Once removed, the skull should properly be termed ‘crania.’

However, many archaeologists do not differentiate between the words, unless necessary for the context of their discussion. Therefore, I shall follow the general convention and refer to skulls to describe both skulls and crania, saving the latter term only when discussing particular relevant cases. Similarly, although different forms of plaster are available, I use “plaster” as a generic term encompassing both kiln dried and non-kiln dried varieties.



Figure 4 Jericho skull discovered by Kathleen Kenyon and now in the British Museum. Source: The Trustees of the British Museum

Michelle Bonogofsky’s research into the sex and age of the plastered skulls opened up the path for new interpretations of what they might represent. Until Bonogofsky published her findings on both the teeth and sex of over 61 plastered skulls examined in a piece of significant research,

the theories behind the plastered skulls were generally accepted without too much analysis of the details.

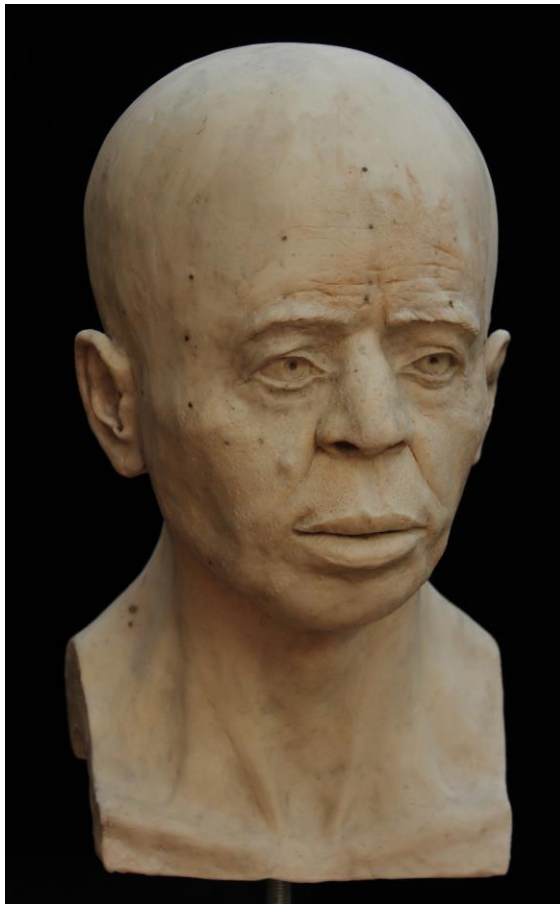


Figure 5 The final reconstruction of the person portrayed in the Jericho skull. Source: The Trustees of the British Museum, Photo by RN-DS partnership

The original interpretation that Bonogofsky in her 2004 paper was questioning was whether there was evidence of an ancestor cult, focussed on male ancestors, family elders. This view had been offered by Kenyon and was widely accepted by the general public and archaeologists alike (Kenyon and Tushingham, 1953, 870). Such a theory correlates with the ethnographic evidence from Melanesia (Appendix A) who were practising similar (though not identical) traditions much more recently (Huffman, 2009, Soukup, 2018). This interpretation of the

Neolithic skulls, though not without some logic as shown by the example in Melanesia, is based on a normative idea of what constitutes an ancestor – old and male. The theory prevailed for decades, without any real scrutiny until it was augmented by a perceived belief that many of the skulls were also missing their teeth, having been deliberately evulsed (e.g., Margolit, 1983). This was based on an absence of teeth in many of the skulls¹; it was thought that younger males who died had their teeth removed to look like old men. However, this interpretation failed to take into account the numerous examples of females and children whose skulls were also plastered, a point noted by Bonogofsky in 2004. She accepts that this discovery was aided by an improvement in analytical diagnostic advances such as computed tomography that was not available when the first skulls were excavated². The use of CT showed that rather than teeth being evulsed, they were actually present under the plaster. The idea that the skulls were part of a male elder cult is nothing more than an archaeologists' myth. Bonogofsky proposes that later research was based upon false information, despite evidence that was available. She suggests that some researchers (e.g., Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal; 1999, 686) missed the fact that more females than males were plastered in some areas, even though Ferembach published this result in 1969.

In her valuable work debunking the accepted narrative of old men, Bonogofsky does not suggest how these skulls are to be interpreted in light of the new information. Though their biological composition does not necessarily equate with their constructed status as elders by western standards, Meskell and Nakamura warn readers against assumptions relating to sex and age, which can be socially constructed and subject to manipulation; it is likely Neolithic people viewed these categories differently to modern perceptions (Meskell and Nakamura,

¹ An Ugaritic poem which possibly refers to dental extraction has also been used for evidence for dental evulsion: See Margolit, 1983, 96.

² Bonogofsky published a short paper on dental evulsion in 2002

2013, 436). Bonogofsky acknowledges the limitations of her study and suggests future scientific analysis of primary data may be valuable for determining the construction and function of the plastered skulls (2003,8). There are, however, numerous papers determining the construction of the skulls (e.g., Arensburg and Hershkovitz, 1989; Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 1999; Garfinkel, 2014), but they are unable to determine the function of a plastered skull. This is why this dissertation proposes a new approach, with an emphasis not on how the skulls were constructed, but the symbolic value of the plaster used.

Another important precursor to this dissertation is Ian Kuijt's 2008 work on Neolithic symbols of regeneration and creation of memories. When Kenyon's team unearthed the first of skulls in 1953, she described them as 'portrait heads' and referred to their great individuality and how they were 'extraordinarily life-like' (Kenyon, 1954, 107). Subsequent academics have continued with this appraisal, remarking on the life-like or dreamy expressions of the eyes (e.g., Schmandt-Besserat 2013; Arensburg and Hershkovitz, 1989), or repeatedly referring to one of the Jericho skulls as the earliest portrait in the British Museum (Fletcher, 2017, 2018). Such a view is backed up by the ethnographic evidence of more recent cultures who have practised the overmodelling of skulls where there is an aim to create as lifelike an effigy of the dead man as possible (Kocher-Schmid, 2009). However, many skulls had had their mandibles removed which pushed up their features resulting in a visibly squat face. Kuijt proposes a new way of interpreting the plastered skulls based on ideas of memory creation and regeneration at a society level. Based on the number of regional anatomical discrepancies, such as the lack of ears, he concludes that what was being portrayed was neither a young nor old ancestor, but an idealised one, suggesting the skulls are 'stereotyped abstractions' (Kuijt, 2008, 180). He argues the skulls are 'idealized presentations,' linked to the circulation of memory in order to reiterate

their ideas on identity and personhood (2008,181). This performative act enabled the community to remember the deceased, initially as an individual, then later as an anonymised member of the community. This allowed the dead to be forgotten, becoming an 'heirloom' (2008,183) and part of a system of exchange.

There are challenges to Kuijt's theories. Hodder and Meskell consider the plaster treatment to be aimed at 'certain individuals,' not 'collectivities,' challenging theories about anonymisation (Hodder and Meskell, 2011,246); only 6 out of 350 skeletons excavated in Çatalhöyük by 2011 (Hodder and Meskell, 2011, 245) showed evidence of skull removal. Kuijt's also assumes skulls belong to someone loved – hence the incorporation into a community of idealised heirlooms. However, many more recent overmodelled skulls are the heads of enemies (Kocher-Schmidt, 2009, Soukup, 2018). Though generally unpopular in regard to Neolithic skulls, this idea is supported by archaeologists such as Testart (2008). Furthermore, the idea of anonymised heirlooms does not fit comfortably with the Çatalhöyük skull, which was cradled in the arms of a skeleton in what Haddow describes as 'a seemingly tender manner'(Haddow, 2012). Such details do not refute Kuijt's argument but raise questions for further research.

Kuijt refers to decapitation as a 'form of depersonalisation' (Kuijt, 2008, 186), but Chris Fowler, who has written broadly (e.g.,2004, 2011) on categories of personhood has broadened the western understanding of personhood, and a body is not a prerequisite. Fowler's 2004 book on modes of personhood is the underlying principle behind the significance of the plastered skull as a person in this thesis. He uses archaeological and ethnographical records as illustrations that Cartesian notions of personhood are not universal. What one perceives as a 'whole' is contextual (Fowler, 2004, 75: Casella and Croucher, 2011, 211: Croucher, 2012,

214). Using ethnographic data, Fowler analyses three contemporary ‘modes’ of personhood; western individuality, and non-western partibility and permeability. He argues that in many cultures the dead are seen as transformed persons and recycling their elements keeps them present among the community (2004, 81). The dead, even as a skull, may have an enhanced influence on the living (2004, 90) to whom the living are indebted (2004, 94). Each part is simultaneously a whole. This explains how the Çatalhöyük skull may be seen as a person, and not a grave good, which is how it is currently recorded (Çatalhöyük Research Portal). Personhood is a process in which death is simply a part of existence continuously reconfigured (Fowler, 2004, 2011). Fowler also explores several ancient examples illustrating non-western concepts of being, demonstrating how individual bones may be examples of dividual, partible personhood. Access to these bones may be highly political (2004, 99), personhood, being ‘an interactive affair based on the perceptions of others’ (2004, 21), which may explain why, in Çatalhöyük, Building 42 where the plastered skull was found, is one of the richer houses in terms of ritualistic discoveries.

1.2 Plaster and its role in Çatalhöyük

Central to this dissertation is how does plaster as a *material* matter and shape the lives of the community. Barad’s 2003 essay aimed to move the focus from representationalism to performativity, with its emphasis on making matter matter. For Barad, phenomena are constitutive of reality in a world which is an ‘ongoing open process of mattering’ (2003, 817). They recognise the emergence of time and space, suggesting agency is a constant reconfiguring of the universe (2003, 818). What they emphasise is the non-static nature of matter; it is a Sartrean ‘doing’ within a discursive practice (2003, 822). Barad says they deliberately

foreground matter, so that it becomes an ‘active participant’(2003, 803) in the universe, in what they describe as a ‘post-humanist material account of performativity’ (2003, 827). Their theories helped to put matter in the spotlight, but their arguments are abstract and theoretical, dealing with matter in a generalised way. It takes another, Boivin, to make use of these abstractions and relate them to the mineral world.



Figure 6 Skeleton 11306 holding skull 11330 under the north-east platform of Building 42. Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project



Figure 7 Close up of Skull 11330. Source Çatalhöyük Research Project

Boivin's essay explores this people-material relationship in a holistic and integrated way. Post-processual archaeology, with its emphasis on the finished object, has overlooked the non-functional aspects of minerals (2004, 2). Boivin's research explores these aspects of the mineral world, avoiding a binary western view and foregrounding the role played by materials in shaping existence (2004: see also Barad, 2003; Attala and Steel, 2019). She considers what minerals can do, as well as what they mean, exploring how they go 'beyond their mere symbolic value,' and affect the way in which humans engage and transform them (2004, 20). This is crucial for understanding a 'predominantly mineral-made archaeological record' (2004, 20). Boivin outlines various materials which are regarded by other societies as meaningful or spiritual, with several references to the role played by clay as a life-giving force, highlighting the importance of sources and origins in relation to the substance (2004, 10). She cites ethnographic evidence to demonstrate how material choices have socially meaningful relationships based on symbolic association (2004, 14). The research lacks the in-depth analysis of Turner's *Forest of Symbols* (1967), meaning complex associations can be reduced to single lines but Boivin does reference ethnographic examples to support her view that

minerals have biographies and ‘have actively *embodied* experiences, memories and supernatural qualities’ (2004, 17), which can actively confer power.

Several research papers offer insight into the manufacture of plaster as a decorating medium during the Neolithic period (E.g. Rollefson, 1990: Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 1999: Clarke, 2012). One in particular, Çamurcuoğlu, has published invaluable doctoral research into the materials and technologies of the wall paintings at Çatalhöyük (Çamurcuoğlu, 2015: see also Siddall and Çamurcuoğlu, 2016). Her experiments are focussed on the wall paintings of the houses and how much specialisation was involved in their decoration. Her aim is to explore plaster and paint within a broader social context. Her investigation concludes that everybody was involved in the process of painting the plastered wall as evidenced by a variation in skill, but that intricate designs were sometimes more likely to have been produced by specialists. Although she is aware of the link between pigment/paint and its symbolic associations, Çamurcuoğlu does not attempt to draw any conclusions as to their meaning, arguing such an attempt would not reflect universally understood concepts (See also: Casella and Croucher, 2011). She is aware of the limitations of experimental archaeology in drawing any conclusions about the symbolic nature of the media, recognising that ‘actions are dependent on the contexts within which they are undertaken’ (Çamurcuoğlu, 2015, 185).

However, she is confident in concluding that sourcing certain pigments led to them being viewed as prestigious and that some would have been perceived as valuable for their symbolic role. as well as practical and aesthetic (2015, 232-235). Çamurcuoğlu’s emphasis is on the technical aspects of plaster, and both the technical and symbolic role played by the use of various pigments. She recognises that plaster allowed other symbolically rich art forms to emerge (Çamurcuoğlu, 2015, 66) but does not pursue the symbolic role of plaster itself. Çamurcuoğlu’s acknowledges that her original aim had been to sample the paster on the skull

now at Konya, but was unable to get the permits (2015, 34). When the skull in the Konya Museum can be analysed more fully, this research will be useful in helping archaeologists to understand the plaster makeup of the object.

1.3 Conclusion

Such works as above have offered valuable theories into the construction and function of a plastered skull, but none have explored how a skull is changed in status by the application of plaster. Taking Boivin's emphasis on the centrality of minerals with the developing information about skulls, especially Kuijt's proposal of anonymity and idealism, this dissertation puts forward a theory that plaster, through an abundance of symbolic and technical attributes, takes a skull that already has personhood, transforming them into a "super-person," central to the ideology and history of the community.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Discussion

This dissertation employs a qualitative research method, with the aim of contributing to the relatively small body of work focussing specifically on the enmeshment between the plaster and a skull in a Neolithic mortuary rite, and the centrality of the former in the status of the latter. This relationship has been largely ignored by other researchers and it is hoped that the outcomes of this study will provide avenues for further discussion about symbolic role of plaster in Neolithic mortuary traditions. It is informed, in particular, by a relational ontological approach situated within the New Materialisms and the use of ethnographic analogy.

The primary research question was the following:-

Through the ritual manipulation, within their mortuary rites, of materials and the Çatalhöyük plastered skull, analyse how the Neolithic communities transformed their dead from a socially known individual into an ancestor of elevated status.

Originally, I had also intended to explore the relationship of colour as well as plaster, where excellent material was already abundant (See: Owoc, 2002: Hovers et al, 2003: Cobb and Drake, 2008: Erdogu and Ulubey, 2011: Anderson et al, 2014) but time constraints focussed the investigation on plaster.

The dissertation starts with two assumptions.

- curated skulls enjoyed higher status than a non-curved one
- skulls were perceived as persons

2.1 Curated skulls enjoyed higher status than a non-curated one

Evidence for this is based on the rarity of such ancient skulls (Hodder and Meskell, 2011) and modern ethnographic data (Aufderheide, 2009). Even where skull caching was more common, it is only a small percentage of the total dead who were buried (Schmandt-Besserat, 2013, 229). Most dead do not appear to have been marked at all (Düring, 2006b). Whether they were perceived as ancestors or venerated is impossible to ascertain, but a Neolithic skull cult existed (Bienert, 1991: Cauvin, 2000: Meskell, 2008) and as very few were chosen for extra post-mortuary treatment, it is likely that these were perceived as being more special in some way (Hodder, 2006). Meskell refers to this as ‘a propensity for headedness: a particular tension surrounding heads, head removal and circulation, and the post- cranial body’ (Meskell, 2008:374). It was a fascination widely practised in the area over several millennia and a great distance, illustrating variations in a tradition which ‘occupied a central role in the mental landscapes’ (Armit, 2006, 11) of the Neolithic, emphasised by the scarcity of such skulls.

Fletcher’s analysis of the Jericho skull would appear to back up this notion that a curated skull reflected a special status, since the skull which was analysed was shown to reveal modifications made before death indicating a potential link between social status, cranial modification and finally becoming a plastered skull (Fletcher, 2018).

We are confident therefore to assume a curated skull is of higher status than a non-curated example, either through the significance of the person whilst alive, or due to its post-mortem treatment.

2.2 Skulls were perceived as persons

Today's common view of personhood in western ontologies has been heavily influenced by a Cartesian division of mind and body which archaeology has only recently begun to address. This binary division between categories impedes our understanding of how different historical worlds came into being and were able to sustain themselves (Harris, 2018, 84). The post-Enlightenment Western view was that personhood was a constant, that the body was a totalised and individualised unit. More recently, western archaeological understanding, informed by anthropological examples, are recognising the limitations of this interpretation (Fowler, 2004: Croucher, 2012: Brück 2019), citing evidence³ to support the view that personhood is neither fixed, nor static or inherited, but an emergent quality dependent upon the social relationships with others. This can include inanimate objects.

Concepts of personhood may have been highly contextual (Fowler, 2004, 3). Fowler uses ethnographic material to illustrate the multiple components that might go to make up a person, without privileging one above another. For the 'Are 'Are of the Solomon Islands, whilst alive, individual personhood is dispersed throughout society in the form of shells, taro or pigs, brought together for the first and only time at that person's funeral. They are then 'deconstituted,' i.e., redistributed and renegotiated around the society creating the means of remembering and forgetting (Fowler, 2004, 84-85). Croucher (2012, 211-212) describes a web of relationships in which the Neolithic individual is entangled within a social mesh involving not just the living, but the dead, as well as objects and animals. It is, she says (citing Brück, 2004), transformative and dynamic. Brück describes the self as a relational construction

³ See for example, Fowler's study of funerary rites at Ertebølle where each body part contained the spiritual essence, leading to an emphasis on monitoring bodily boundaries (2004, 148).

composed of an assemblage of external objects (Brück, 2019, 9). This assemblage is not a passive backdrop but potentially even ‘more critical...than their human agents’ (Harris, 2018, 95). Brück (2019) contends that similar dividuality was a key feature of the Bronze Age cosmology with the body broken up and distributed amongst the living, and in burial sites. Earlier Neolithic partibility is seen in Domuztepe, where skulls were exchanged with different body parts. Such exchanges indicate meaning was embedded within every part, relevant even when separated from the whole (Croucher, 2012, 217).

To what extent were skulls active agents as inanimate objects and to what extent were they interpreted as representative of the person? Barad suggests that agency is not an attribute at all, but a ongoing ‘reconfiguration’ (2003, 818). Malafouris’s theory of ‘*thinging*’ is of relevance here. ‘Thinging is inherently dynamical and non-representational, although in certain contexts it can become the vehicle for external representation (Malafouris, 2014, 143). Taking the view that the plastered skull manifests ‘thing-power’ rather than being a ‘mere object’ (Bennett, 2004, 360) allows it to be interpreted as an ‘actant’ i.e., an ‘entity that modifies another entity’ (Bennett, 2010, viii-ix). It has power because it operates ‘in conjunction with other things’ (Bennett, 2004, 354); in this case, plaster operating, reconfiguring, in conjunction with the skull, the artist and the society. The Çatalhöyük skull 11330 closely held by the skeleton 11306 is classed as a grave good in the archive reports but such a designation ignores not only its biography as an object, but its potential for personhood. Fowler describes the dead as transformed persons (2004, 81), still present within the community either as identifiable forces or through the recycling of their elements.

With this in mind, an assumption of personhood is justified in this dissertation.

Based on these assumptions, this dissertation explores the use of plaster on a skull to transform its status within the community. A tradition of plastering skulls was practised until recently in some Melanesian islands and Papua New Guinea (Appendix B). Ethnographic data from these islands were used, not as evidence that such-and-such happened, but to validate it as possibility amongst a range of options. The use of ethnographic data has been contested (e.g., Hayter, 1994) but also has its supporters, such as Currie (2016) and is, I propose, a useful method of suggesting models and theories.

Many researchers (e.g. Ferembach and Lechevallier, 1973; Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 2001; Özbek, 2008; Garfinkel, 2014) use a quantitative approach when exploring the plastered skulls, focusing on the technical makeup of the plaster, the frequency of its application, the depth of its coats and so on. Such a data driven approach was inappropriate for this dissertation, where it is the symbolic role of plaster that is being analysed. Throughout, the chosen approach to this dissertation is of New Materialism. New materialism is described as an ‘ontology of immanence’ (Fox and Alldred, 2019) in which meaning is continually emerging through interactive assemblages, rather than a fixed and stable system. This foregrounds plaster as a quasi-agent, co-equal to skull, curator, and witness. Materiality is seen as a ‘protean flow of matter-energy’ where the thing is both separate yet part of an assemblage (Bennett, 2004, 349). Just as ‘thing-power’ describes has the ability of an object to exceed its original status and ‘manifest independence or aliveness’ (Bennett, 2010, xvii), the assemblage that is the plastered skull becomes greater than the sum of its parts. It is a post-anthropocentric approach, not dependent solely upon human action. But it does allow for the part of epiphenomena to play an agential role in the creation of memories and imagination to produce material effects (Fox and Alldred, 2019). This recognition of epiphenomena is central to the creation of a plastered skull if it is to have any cosmological meaning. Plaster was actively chosen as a material because of

a value or values it possessed. It acted upon the skull in such a way as to create, or reinforce, certain ideologies. The skull, the artist and the plaster are all agential in constructing, or co-creating, a reality. No one agent can be separate from the other, but nor can one be privileged over the other. Malfouris describes this created reality as a ‘transactional relational achievement’(Malfouris, 2014, 150) dependent upon kinaesthetic awareness and reciprocal agency with each, artist and material, coupled to the other. Human imagination, skull and plaster are melded together in a symbiotic relationship that cannot be divided. This dissertation seeks to understand what that relationship might be. The literature review has shown that there are already many theories as to why the skulls may have been curated in the first place. This research explores what symbols might be at play in creating them, with plaster privileged as matter that matters.

There were three aspects of plaster that appeared particularly relevant to the discussion, each leading to a related question.

- If the status of a skull was enhanced by curation, plaster must be a component that increases its value as a ‘person.’ What factors led to plaster being a facilitator for value?
- If the curated skull was seen as agential within the community of the living, then the method of curation must be able to contradict the implications of death. What life-enhancing attributes might plaster possess?
- If the curated skull was of greater significance within the community than a non-curated skull, as supported by evidence of usage, display and final burial, what role did plaster play in helping it achieve heirloom status. How did plaster aid its memorialisation?

This dissertation explores each of these questions in detail in three separate chapters.

2.3 What factors led to plaster being a facilitator for value?

The first task is to identify what aspects of clay led it to being a valuable material in itself, and thence, how did that add value to the skull? Plaster is a material with transformative properties, where in the hands of one possessing technological expertise, it can change not only in colour from matt earth to shiny white, but also in texture, as it is mixed with water into a suspension, then allowed to harden off. It is often described as the ‘social glue’ of the Neolithic (e.g., Balter, 2001), creating some key questions as to how this was experienced as a lived-out encounter. Did plaster transform the lives of those in the community? Is Gell’s theory of enchantment relevant to the use of plaster in the Neolithic? If an artefact is already precious, can it be further dignified by the addition of a valuable material, and ultimately what cosmological implications might this have? To each of these questions, I argue that the answer is “Yes,” and expand upon them in Chapter 3. Only once they have been addressed will it be possible to evaluate the extent to which plaster enhanced the value of the skull.

2.4 What life-enhancing attributes might plaster possess?

Various scholars (Kuijt, 2008; Goring-Morris, 2005) have looked at the manner in which plaster, artfully layered on a skull, may simulate, or symbolise life. It is useful, then, to analyse the way in which contemporary artists view plaster as a medium and whether it holds life-enhancing properties for them. An artist has an intimate relationship with the medium which is mutually dynamic. This warrants an approach that recognises the mutual agency of each, moving the discussion away from a life-matter binary.

The exploration of the symbolic representation of living flesh leads naturally into the question of whether life was important to the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük at a cosmological level. This is not as bizarre a question as it might at first appear. Different cultures view life differently, attaching greater or lesser importance to it. Even today, some Hindus reject life, even whilst they are alive, giving up all their possessions and becoming Sannyasin, and Ancient Egyptians famously privileged death over life. In Çatalhöyük, artefacts, such as the figurine shown in Fig. 8, depicting corpulence (or pregnancy) and starvation show the concern that both life and death held for the community. Several of the themes connected to the plastering of a skull are repeated in this figurine, hence its inclusion in this chapter. Ethnographic data from Melanesia is used to suggest the possibility that plaster may have been used for enhancing the imperfections of life.

2.5 How did plaster aid memorialisation?

Two chapters explore the performativity of memorialising a skull. Harris (2018) describes everything as being in flow, a term also used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe the movement of '*affects*' (1988). Assigning a nomenclature to plaster to describe its agency foregrounds its significance as matter. Using Barad's theory of material agency as a force which realigns the world (2003), I have therefore extended this idea and interpreted plaster as '*flow*,' a multi-faceted force which elevates the status of a skull. This allows for a reconfiguration of the spatial-temporal continuum with the plaster on the skull acting as flow, a conduit for multiple meanings in a trans-dimensional setting. The idea of a socially constructed memory can then

be explored as a repeated, performative act, with plaster as a co-equal agent in its creation. Finally, in an attempt to move the dialogue away from a simple binary of referential and experiential knowledge, and its subsequent correlation to relationships, the agency of plaster is shown in the concept of an *über-ancestor*, an elite member of the community with whom a personal relationship can be established. This is in contrast to various theories (e.g., Kuijt, 2008) that promote the idea that plastering a skull leads to anonymisation and forgetting.

In conclusion, the approach to these questions is taken whereby plaster is foregrounded as an active and co-equal agent with the other mediators in the creation of a curated skull that is perceived to be of elevated status. This emphasis on the materiality enables plaster to be showcased for its ability to transform a skull into an elite which shapes the lives of the community, by moving the discussion away from an anthropocentric viewpoint and towards a more polycentric approach. Nanoglue suggests that more attention be paid to how the particular materiality of each entity affects the other (2009, 158). This dissertation pushes the discussion away from an analysis of the utilitarian properties of plaster towards an exploration of its symbolic properties. It focusses on the potential cosmological effect and plaster's ability to become the means of transformation whereby one being is transformed into another, becoming the *über-ancestor* to the community after death through the curation of its skull.

Chapter 3 The Use of Plaster as a Medium

Skull 11330, unearthed at Çatalhöyük was covered in several layers of plaster (Boz and Hagar, 2004). This provokes the question - Why was *plaster* the medium chosen to be used in the ritual transformation of a skull in Çatalhöyük? This chapter explores the question by focussing on the symbolism inherent within the technical attributes of plaster. I argue that plaster was chosen as the medium with which to cover skulls, not just because of its ubiquity in the Konya Basin (Balter, 2001, Sidall and Çamurcuoğlu, 2016) where Çatalhöyük was situated, but because the technology associated with the material lent it a special significance in the Neolithic world. In this chapter I put forward three reasons for this symbolic significance.

The first section explores the role of plaster as the social glue of the period, the equivalent of bronze, iron, or silicon in their respective ages. Its use transformed the way people lived and behaved. I suggest that it was a material enmeshed within a network of connections, forming the basis upon which the society was based.

The second section explores how plaster had the ability to ‘enchant’ as defined by Gell (1994). Its use required a depth of technological familiarity and understanding. I propose that similar to the attraction of bronze, iron, and silicon in their day, plaster was seen as a technology of enchantment, affecting the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük with its glistening beauty whilst simultaneously fascinating them with the skill necessary in its creation and application.

The final section explores how these attributes rendered plaster as a material, not just of value, but one that augmented the value of everything it touched. I argue that its use added even more

significance to the artefacts on which it was applied, in a self-perpetuating circle of value-appreciation.

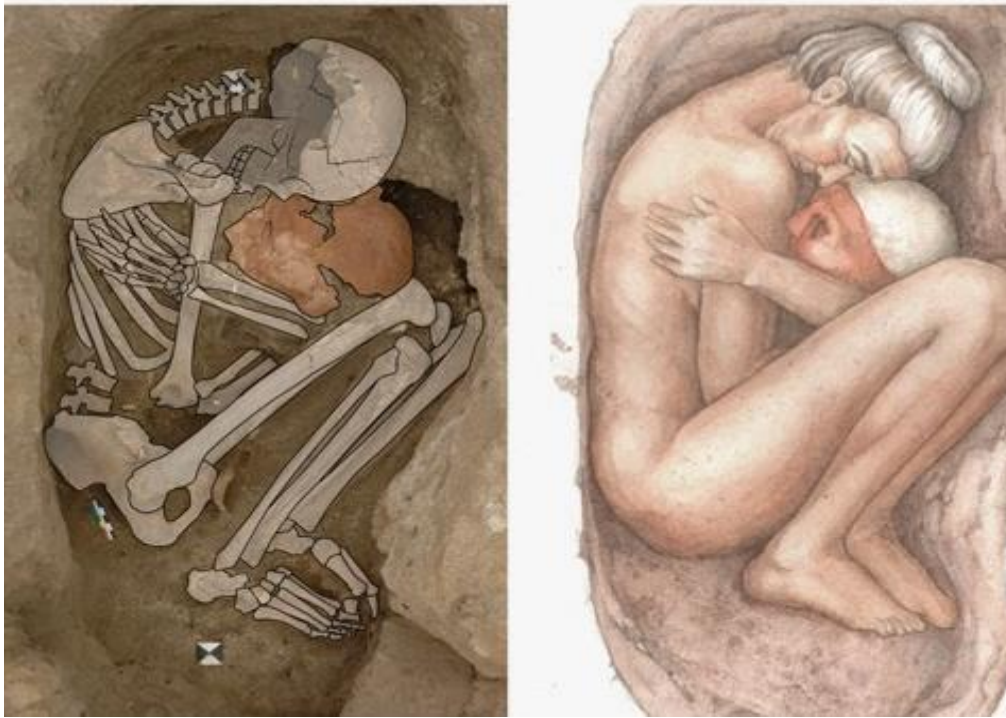


Figure 8 Artist's impression of burial with plastered skull. Source: Kathleen Killackey, Killackeyillustrations.com

3.1 Plaster as the social glue of the Neolithic

Plaster, as a medium, is synonymous with the Middle and Pre-Pottery Neolithic communities of Southern Levant and Anatolia, from the 11th Century BC Natufian period onwards in both domestic and mortuary contexts (Clarke, 2012; Goring-Morris, 2000). Its practicality made it an important component of most domestic structures of that age (Rollefson, 1990). Goring-Morris reports of its 'massive use...for profane construction purposes' (Goring-Morris, 2000, 126). This ubiquitous quality also allowed it to become the medium of choice for more than simply utilitarian or economic needs. According to Balter, (2001, 2279) it became a shared

symbolic expression, the ‘original glue’ that held the settlement together by shared practice (See also: Clarke, 2012). The extent of its use also indicates what may be the first large-scale pyrotechnical production, involving great skill and a heavy investment in labour, either in a clan or a family basis (ibid), though it must be noted that Siddall and Çamurcuoğlu, (2016) doubt that any lime burning took place in Çatalhöyük, being unnecessary. In Çatalhöyük, plaster was in the form of a finely grained calcium carbonate and clay-enriched marl used as a ‘unique plastering material to cover the mudbrick walls,’ once it was mixed with plant matter to prevent shrinkage (Siddall and Çamurcuoğlu, 2016). For Çatalhöyük, its geographical location meant that there was an abundance of lime rich clay that could be used for all its practical needs, whitewashing the interiors of its walls, and covering its floors (Balter, 2001: Doherty, 2020). An in-depth study of the plaster used, shows it was taken from the river which flowed into the Konya Basin, underneath the town where it would likely have been stored in the damp until needed (Siddall and Çamurcuoğlu, 2016). Finer, whiter marl plaster was used for the platforms and walls for painting which did not need the addition of plant matter (ibid). This ‘soft-lime’ was taken from an area about 5 km north of the settlement, indicating that the inhabitants chose it specifically for the properties associated with its higher calcium content.

From a purely practical view, even the lowest grade marl plaster protected the mud bricks from the effects of weather allowing the houses, and within them, the memories, to stand. The higher quality soft lime plaster used on walls and platforms had other benefits. From a chemical perspective, it is an antiseptic, non-toxic material with disinfectant qualities that can resist the growth of moulds and is vapour permeable leading to more pleasant living conditions (Ayres, nd). It protected the household from the noxious smells of the decaying corpses buried underneath their floors. It provided the means with which to carve pathways throughout the houses controlling how the inhabitants moved. Without plaster, the houses, and consequently

the way of life at Çatalhöyük could not have continued in that form. The discovery of how to manipulate lime clay and use it as a medium with which to plaster revolutionised the lives of the PPNB inhabitants in much the same way that the manipulation of Copper, Bronze, Iron and the Silicon have revolutionised their respective Ages.

Using plaster in the way it has been used at Çatalhöyük would have been a skilled operation that also strengthened social bonds as groups. Actually (physically) plastering surfaces, walls, floors, platforms, and skulls, required skill. However, collecting the plaster itself may have been an intergenerational task, or a task for the younger members of the unit, in much the same way as the clay collected for the seasonal replastering of the Great Mosque of Djenné in Mali, known as *crépissage*, is a cultural festival involving the whole town. Each 'quartier' is in charge of a different aspect of the mosque, with women coordinating the collection of water for the clay, men responsible for the plastering (Joy, 2008, 257) and children helping with fetching and carrying.

3.3 Plaster as a means of enchantment

The Neolithic practice of plaster production is an example of is referred to as a 'technology of enchantment' in which the world is seen in an 'enchanted form' (Gell, 1994, 44). This enchantment is possible because the finished products of the Çatalhöyük house - the platforms, the walls, the skull - were entirely dependent upon the technological skill of the artist or artisan in using the material. They were the ultimate embodiment of the possibilities of medium. It was not merely the aesthetic appeal of the finished products that was enchanting but the means necessary to create them. There is little evidence for kiln heated lime clay at the site because

of the abundance of lime rich clay and marl suitable for plastering already near the town (Siddall and Çamurcuoğlu, 2016, 488; Doherty, 2020, 8) but there is no question that the artisan was a highly skilled individual who understood the material to be worked.

Its potency lay in the fact that though it was an everyday material, available to all, it was incorporated into mortuary rituals, transcending the secular world and obscuring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, or living and dead (Clarke, 2012, 181).

For the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük, the enchantment in the use of plaster surrounded and dominated their world, cocooning them, and through its use, provided them with the means to maintain the status quo. Plaster played a key role in the creation of their social cohesion and well-being (Clarke, 2012; Balter, 2001; Hodder 2006), its cultural value extending well beyond its utilitarian expression and natural properties. The Ndembu of Zambia were similarly ‘enchanted’ with the *Mudyi* tree when observed by Victor Turner. Like plaster in Çatalhöyük, it is described as a ‘principle of social organisation’ conferring ‘order and structure on Ndembu social life’ (Turner, 1967, 21). The wood has many practical and secular functions, including bark for clothes; in the hands of an artist, it becomes aesthetically attractive, suitable for making ornaments (*Diplorhynchus condylocarpon*/PlantZAfrica, n.d.), but is also an integral component of numerous rituals, especially in Rites of Passage (Turner, 1967).

Plaster, therefore, is a material which has properties that allowed it to ‘cast a spell’ (Gell, 1994, 44) in Çatalhöyük. It comes in different grades, with different degrees of whiteness or sparkle. The platforms under which the dead were buried were of a whiter, more lime-rich plaster than the plaster floor-covering near the hearth (Hodder, 2006, 60). Crushing gypsum or limestone into the plaster resulted in a greater amount of brilliance (Rollefson, 1990). Although we are unaware of the nature of Neolithic cosmological ideas, various ethnographic accounts indicate

that there is a connection between luminosity and numinosity (Keates, 2002, 120). The residents of Çatalhöyük appear to have deliberately chosen objects which were more luminous. They are known to have cached obsidian in their houses (Hodder, 2006, Carter, 2011), a volcanic glass known not just for its suitability to make spear heads, but also its ability to be polished to a high gloss. Obsidian has been found as grave goods with the dead under the burial platforms (Carter, 2011); an obsidian mirror has been discovered plastered to a wall (Anderson et al., 2014). Obsidian was also used in tiny particles in the red paint on the interior walls of the houses which would act retroreflectively (Anderson et al., 2014, 380), an effect seen nowadays in the road paint, which picks up cars' headlights. In Çatalhöyük, the result would be to make the most of the limited light in the darkened interiors (ibid). With this appreciation of obsidian's power to gleam, it is possible that one of plaster's less tangible, but no less appreciated, attributes was its similar ability to sparkle and shine. This sparkle is one of the properties that allow plaster to be 'construed magically' (Gell, 1994, 46). Its magic is as a result of a positive willingness by the community to be enchanted, aided by the skill, or 'technology' the artist employs to create the work. Used repeatedly to replaster houses and artefacts, plaster became invested with power as a trans-generational material, enchanting its users in the application (literally) of its technological process.

3.2 Plaster as a symbol denoting value

I propose that through attributes such as those outlined above, plaster became a symbol for value itself, similar to later generations' perception of gold. As such, its use simultaneously enhanced the status of a skull, whilst gaining status itself as a material of worth. Plaster had a basic economic value, but also value as a material with intrinsically potent and powerful attributes, perhaps as far as in mediating with the Spirit world. I argue that unlike cultures

which focus on the finished product (see: Drazin and Kuchler, 2015), the people of Çatalhöyük were aware of these properties. In writing about the symbolic nature of gold in religious and magical contexts, Behr (2010) makes assertions about gold that I suggest could be applied to plaster. She suggests it is the combination of image and material that reinforces any desired effect. In the case of gold, this is to strengthen magical or spiritual properties and is seen in gold coins bearing the imperial head which were used as amulets (ibid). A similar effect of a reciprocal transfer of value is seen in the use of jade in Ancient China which from the Chou period onwards, where it was associated with royalty and divinity. Because of these twin associations, its previous value as a polished stone was magnified by its increasing symbolism and it was thus used almost exclusively for magical and ceremonial objects such as funerary jades, astronomical jades and royal insignia such as sceptres (Shafer, 1985, 224-225).

Nakamura suggests that using plaster allowed people to have more control over both the natural world as well as the symbolic, possibly becoming a symbol of creation and abundance, a material that has ‘malleable, reusable ... and transformational qualities’ (2010, 308). This then, I argue, led to a circle of self-perpetuating value-recognition. Plaster was perceived as a valuable practical product, useful in many aspects of everyday life, but gained a symbolic value ‘far beyond the mere utilitarian’ (Goring-Morris, 2000, 126). Because it had acquired a symbolic worth, I suggest it was further used to demonstrate, in a highly visible way, the value of other artefacts. These, in turn, became greater in value because of the veneer or use of plaster, and reciprocated the favour by making it, plaster, synonymous with symbolically valuable artefacts. Plaster was symbolically valuable because it was used for valuable things, which were made even more valuable by using plaster!

This correlation with items of value is evidenced in its use as the modelling material of choice for the statues and figurines throughout the Neolithic. These range from tiny, ritually broken figures discovered in the middens of Çatalhöyük (discussed by Nakamura, 2010) to the metre-high human statues in ‘Ain Ghazal (Fig. 9), among the earliest large-scale statues representing the human form found to date (Grissom, 2000). Schmandt-Besserat (2013), recognising some shared stylistic similarities, suggests that the impact of the ‘new genre’ of plastered skulls led to plaster being chosen as the medium for the large ‘Ain Ghazal statues. But this observation simplifies the lack of plaster as a material in non-human representation. For example, in ‘Ain Ghazal, plaster was used almost exclusively for modelling human sculptures whereas other media are used for non-human depictions (Rollefson, 1990, 48). In Tell Ramad, clay figurines are covered in a layer of plaster and cached (Schmandt-Besserat, 2013). This choice indicates an intimate relationship between the material and the human as subject.

The importance of the subject generally dictated the quality of plaster used (Hodder, 2006: Doherty, 2020, 4), but this was not dependent upon quantity. Thus, lime plaster of a higher percentage was used when decorating skulls than decorating other objects, which Clarke suggests may have rendered them more symbolically and magically potent (Clarke, 2012, 181). This appears to be the case with the plaster used on the Çatalhöyük skull. According to the archaeologist, Scott Haddow, who led the team which found it, the plaster was very white, typical of the final coats on the walls, and likely of similar composition, (Haddow, 19/10/2020 personal comm.) being either a high calcium and magnesium soft lime wash or a clay and calcium-carbonate based marl (Çamurcuoğlu, 2015, 216). Clarke suggests it was not necessary for plaster to be used in large quantities to have this “magical” effect; users were so socialised to its value that only traces were needed for symbolic significance (Clarke, 2012, 181). This

symbolic value became a means of communicating worth, of both itself and the artefact it touched.

The skull could have been exhibited without any adornments, or simply painted; evidence for both these methods of display exist in Anatolia and the Levant (Talalay, 2004; Hodder and Meskell, 2011). It is likely that, by using plaster to cover the skull, the artisan was aware that they were creating a powerfully charged object that was viewed, literally, as highly significant within the community, a significance emphasised by the rarity of the tradition in Çatalhöyük (Boz and Hagar, 2013). I suggest that plastered artefacts, and in particular plastered skulls, transcended their original status by becoming the smoothest, whitest and shiniest of objects due to their state-of-the-art technological manufacture, allowing them to become symbolically equated with Neolithic understandings of a cosmological expression and part of the ritual vocabulary of Çatalhöyük.

There appears to be an intimate correspondence between the use of plaster and the depiction or curation of the human in Anatolia and the Levant. Nakamura quotes the philosopher Gaston Bachelard who wonders:

“Man will wonder endlessly from what *mud*, from what *clay* he is made.
For in order to create, *some form of clay is always needed, ...*”

(Bachelard, 1983, 111; quoted in Nakamura, 2010, 308, my emphasis).

This correlation between plaster and human life, especially in its symbolic representation of flesh, is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Plaster as Flesh

In this chapter, I will discuss what could be described as the “life enhancing” properties of plaster, through the haptic properties of the material. I argue that plaster may be equated both with the living and the dead and as such, an appropriate material with which to decorate a skull, not merely for its practical characteristics, but also for its symbolic attributes. I suggest that plaster was used in a way that blurred the boundaries between flesh and skeleton, rendering fragile bone durable by the application of repeated layers to create an idealised or flawless version of the person being memorialised.

In the first section I approach the idea that plaster is a force for life by exploring the relationship that modern artists have with the material, who refer to its qualities in anthropomorphic terms.

The second section explores the mutually dynamic relationship between the artist and the plaster. Vital matter is exchanged when creating with plaster, with imprints by the artists being left in the surface of the material, just as the plaster works its way into their nails and hair. I argue that this aspect of creation blurs the boundaries between artefact and artist and arguably, may do likewise with the boundary between life and non-life.

In the final section I look at the use of plaster as means to conquer mortality. Adding plaster to a skull could be described as a symbol of regeneration; fleshing out the skull in a flawless coat of plaster is an act of control, asserting life over death.

4.1 Plaster, the medium, as a force for life in the hands of modern artists

“Plaster” is used here, as in all the chapters, as an umbrella term incorporating both kiln dried plaster and clay or marl plaster which does not require a kiln. Attitudes to it as a modelling and artistic medium may not be the same today as they were in Çatalhöyük, but if it is worthwhile to look at more contemporary ethnographies regarding the creation and curation of skulls, then there is also arguably benefit from exploring some of the views that modern artists hold on plaster. Advances in technology since those early days, however, have allowed plaster to develop from a material which was originally used as a layer upon either a hard surface or wooden and straw frame, to pre-formed blocks from which a modern artist can carve out a figure or shape. This method is seen in the metre high ‘Ain Ghazal statuary (Fig 8) mentioned in Chapter 3.2. There is a different feel to a block of plaster as a medium than the more fluid clay or marl, but both media inspire passion in the artists who work with them.

According to Alex Burchmore, ‘ceramics, more than any other art form, are inextricably tied to the body’ (Burchmore, 2016). He describes the technology as ‘inseparable’ from the flesh (ibid), which, he suggests, accounts for the link between the medium and creation in mythology. Henry Moore found plaster a useful medium because of its ability to be both modelled and then once set, carved or chiselled into shape like stone or wood (Feldman, 2015). Though he was using the medium many millennia after the skull-plasterer of Çatalhöyük, some of his beliefs about plaster may be of relevance allowing an insight into the haptic experience of the material. He found that plaster was able to convey an immediacy that other media lacked (Feldman, 2015). This made it an exciting and liberating material with which to work, allowing him to stretch the limits of his art, making some works in that medium only rather than casting them in the traditional bronze. Moore believed that plaster had a “ghost-like unreality” (Henry

Moore: Plasters, 2016). The fragility of the plaster enabled him as an artist to portray the vulnerabilities of the subjects, to bring an intense or disturbing quality to his work (Feldman, 2015). Unlike Moore, Spleth, a contemporary ceramic artist, prefers to work in clay rather than plaster block, although he concedes that plaster reacts beautifully to light and has the air of immateriality (Spleth, 2003). He describes clay plaster as being responsive and having a 'personality' with which one can form a relationship (Spleth, 2003, 72). It is a material that is sensuous and plastic, and a material that 'can be reborn to new life' (Spleth, 2003, 76). Hugh Lorigan considers it to be an 'elemental' material of 'richness and immediacy' which allows for 'permanency' (Coakley and Lorigan, 1999).



Figure 9 Metre high 'Ain Ghazal' statue. Source: Worldhistory.org. Photo: Osama Shukir Mohammed Amin

4.2 Plaster and the body in a mutually dynamic relationship

Such comments as described above imply the relationship made between the artist and the material, plaster, is dynamic and reciprocal, each acting as an agent upon the other. Malafouris discusses how hands do not simply manipulate an external object but are one of the ‘main perturbatory channels through which the world touches us’ emphasising the impact of ‘bodily sensorimotor experiences’ on our cognition (Malafouris, 2008, 116). To plaster anything, especially as it was done in Çatalhöyük, is a hands-on activity, a tactile experience. For the clay or ceramic artist, the dominant sense used is touch (Mathieu, 2003). Pressure is put onto the clay by the fingers and thumbs, which then leave their own impressions on the material. This physical signature is a permanent mark, evidenced by the Neolithic fingerprints embedded in the plaster of the Jericho skull held in the British museum (Fletcher, 2018). Other microscopic biological debris is also passed from the sculptor to the material by way of hair and dirt. This is a mutual exchange. The artist will get covered in plaster. Spleth (2003) refers to the ‘pervading dust’ that gets everywhere, introducing the interesting question of how this residual powder was perceived in Çatalhöyük and whether there was an aspect of permeability between the artist, the plaster and the skull as they were simultaneously enveloped with the material. Govier (2019, 19) contends that ‘vital materials like carbon and cinnabar shaped human bodies’ and serve to confront the life-matter binary with which the West tends to categorise its approach to archaeological analysis. To these, I would add plaster as a vital material, a go-between, connecting the living, fleshed body of the sculptor to the non-living bone of the deceased. As both the sculptor’s hands and the skull itself became increasingly coated in plaster, with fingerprints and other substances being impressed into the very material, a non-binary interpretation of life and death may well have been reinforced. Dirt, human debris, and detritus would all become an intrinsic part of the plaster mix.

It is a truism that artists put their heart and soul into their work – with Van Gogh decrying that he had lost his mind in the process – but in a culture where a permeable notion of personhood is practised this may be more than a linguistic image. In exploring how plaster is representative of flesh, it is also worth considering whether through the action of plastering, the personhood of one living community member was poured into another (non-living) member. If this were the case, it would reinforce the living aspect of the plaster in the mind of the person using it.

4.3 Plaster as means to conquer old age and death

In the Neolithic Levant and Anatolia, the skulls removed from bodies were curated by adding multiple thin layers of plaster to the bone which was then painted (Talalay, 2004, 43: Goren et al, 2001, 673). This could emulate the appearance of living flesh, as well as providing a base layer for further decoration. As discussed above, I contend it also served as, at the very least, a metaphor, if not a symbolic and ritualistic representation of living flesh, but did it also have a further aspect to its symbolism? Could it also be seen as a symbol of regeneration– the antithesis of mortality?



Figure 10 Figurine 12401.X7, showing a fleshed out front and skeletal back. Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project

There is evidence that this might be the case. Throughout the time period of the Neolithic in Anatolia, as one might expect, flesh, and especially fleshiness can be seen as the opposite to death. This is evidenced by the images on the stele of Göbekli Tepe (circa 9000 BCE), where wild beasts are portrayed showing skeletal backs and fully fleshed bellies (Meskell, 2008, 383). A small, carved figure (Fig. 10) found in Çatalhöyük seemingly depicting either a corpulent or pregnant female with large breasts, protruding navel and stomach but skeletal arms, spine and scapulae jutting out at her back. Whether she is fat or pregnant⁴, the aspect depicted on the front is positive, displaying either abundance or fertility and is in stark contrast to the image of death or starvation on the back (Çatalhöyük 2005 Archive Report). Depictions such as these show the intimate connection in the PPNB between life and death, and their close, intertwined relationship. Digging up a skeleton and purposefully removing its skull in order to curate it shows a similar ideology. By its very nature, the “canvas” upon which the artist worked was a representation of death. Using plaster upon it was a way of refreshing the skull and making it alive in some way. The human artist simultaneously facilitated the transformation of the dead to the living whilst at the same time blurring the boundaries between the states in the same way that the intriguing Çatalhöyük figurine described above melded the opposites of life/fertility and death in one piece.

Not only are life and death are juxtaposed in the artistry of a plastered skull, but its state is also rendered permanent. The plaster encased and protected the skull and did so in a repeatable and repairable manner (Hodder, 2006, 148). It was therefore not a “once and once only” experience, but one that could be repeated as often as necessary, in effect rendering the skull permanent.

⁴ This may not be the only interpretation of the statue; it is possible that the figure is showing not a fleshed-out abdomen but one distended by malnutrition. There have been no parallel examples discovered in the European Neolithic (Meskell and Nakamura, 2005). Though conclusions are tentative, the current consensus leans toward it being a hybrid representation of life and death (e.g. See: Çatalhöyük 2005 Archive Report - Figurines, 2005; Hodder, 2006, Meskell, 2007).

Enclosing artefacts in plaster is a feature of Çatalhöyük (Meskell, 2008). Numerous examples⁵ from the site show an interest or commitment to embedding the bony or sharp remains of animals in the plaster of the house, strengthening them and rendering them permanent. This is replicated in the treatment of the human bodies; concealed in the plaster platforms that form the internal geography of the buildings. Meskell and Nakamura ask whether this custom was an attempt to render permanent the subjects' 'iconic and durable elements'(Meskell and Nakamura, 2005, 185). By replacing the impermanent natural material with a cultural one, for example, in plastering a skull, the former self is 'fleshed out' becoming an 'ever-present reminder' (ibid). That the medium is lime based and thus also known for its antiseptic and healing properties (Sutton et al, 2011) adds an extra dimension to the idea of durability and permanence and assertion of life over death.

Plaster in the hands of a sculptor also has the ability to perfect the natural flaws of the human condition. The PPNB plastered skulls display a naturalism that is not seen in previous anthropomorphic art (Schmandt-Besserat, 2013, 218) but it is a naturalism that is an idealised version of the human. Meskell proposes that the use of plaster improved on the fragilities of flesh, creating new types of beings or 'works of translation' (Meskell, 2008, 374). Using plaster allows for a culturally reworked artefact from a natural object. Not only does this collapse the distinction between nature and culture but it also allows for a display of mastery which rendered the impermanent permanent. She argues that plaster is a medium which allows for the refreshing of the dead, thereby facilitating their monumentalism. (Meskell, 377-378). The use of plaster within Çatalhöyük is:

⁵ E.g., Bucrania were inset in walls and horns, teeth and beaks were encased within the plaster of the walls (Hodder, 2006, 2007)

‘testament to a material concern for co-producing and rendering permanent ancestors by improving the frailties of the flesh’ (Meskell, 2008, 382).

By layering a skull with a skin of plaster, a person, once vulnerable to the effects of illness and age is made perfect. Ethnographic data from Oceania also support this theory. Unless the defect was too great, such as a cleft lip, some aesthetic modification of overmodelled skulls was common with the results being a ‘slightly culturally formalized, accurate but not unsightly, version of the deceased’s face’ (Huffman, 2009, 54). For the overmodelled skulls of Southern Malakula, time was vanquished, and death was overcome, overlaid even, by the artistry and skill of the sculptor. In most cases, if not all, the mortuary effigies display a body in its prime, rather than the age it was at death. With the skulls and effigies then going on permanent display in the traditional men’s hut, the frailties of the flesh are perfected for posterity. Old age and physical weakness are overcome by the application of plaster in an act of artistry, simultaneously transforming the impermanent permanent, and defeating the effects of death by human mastery of the medium. Budja describes mortuary rituals as a method by which we try to ‘transform’ a trauma, necessarily imposed from without, into a controlled experience, “pretending that we have a free choice” (2010, 43). By manipulating the skull of the deceased, the trauma that is death is not only controlled but its effects are arrested and even reversed.

The eyes of the Çatalhöyük skull are layered with plaster, suggesting replastering took place many times (Hodder and Farid, 2004; Boz and Hagar, 2004). One layer is used to cover up damage to the right eye (Boz and Hagar, 2004). Similar practices are seen in other plastered skulls found in Anatolia and the Levant (Appendix A). As they often appear to have designed for display, repairing them may simply have been a pragmatic solution to the problem of a chipped or cracked object. However, the act also has symbolic meaning. Kuijt (2008) suggests that plastered skulls may be cultic objects reflecting the regeneration of life. Such regeneration

cults were known to have been practised in the Near East from the 6th millennium BC (Garfinkel, 2014, 153). Both Kuijt (2008) and Goring-Morris (2005) also conceive of plaster as having flesh-like qualities resulting in the skulls symbolically dying when the layers of plaster begin to crack at which point the skulls may have been cached.

However, the skulls are not cached or buried at the first sign of wear and tear. Instead, they are effectively ‘cured’ of the effects of old age, as surface cracks and chips, reminiscent of the wrinkles of old age, were smoothed over with a new layer in the ultimate makeover. In ‘Ain Ghazal, there is evidence that this process also included the actual lifting of the original “mask” (Fig.11), leaving the skull once more a bare canvas (Griffin, Grissom and Rollefson, 1998). Whether these newly bared skulls were then replastered cannot be ascertained as the skulls relating to these “masks” have not been found (Rollefson, Schmandt-Besserat and Rose, 1998) but in general, replastering took place on more than one occasion .

The deterioration and cracking of the plaster on the skull can therefore be interpreted not merely as a generic symbol of death suggested by Kuijt and others but as an accurate, and therefore life-like, reflection of the aging process of humans, whose wrinkled skin is mirrored in the cracks and chips of the aging plaster. But unlike human flesh, the plaster flesh of the skull can be reapplied as necessary, and the skull, and who or what it represents, can be regenerated or reborn, defying the effects of death and time, by human agency.

The next chapter expands on the ideas discussed above: the idea and significance of an idealised person, and the idea of regeneration - how a skull created to defy the effects of old age and death can be used to point not just to the future but also the past as a result of the dynamic action of plaster.

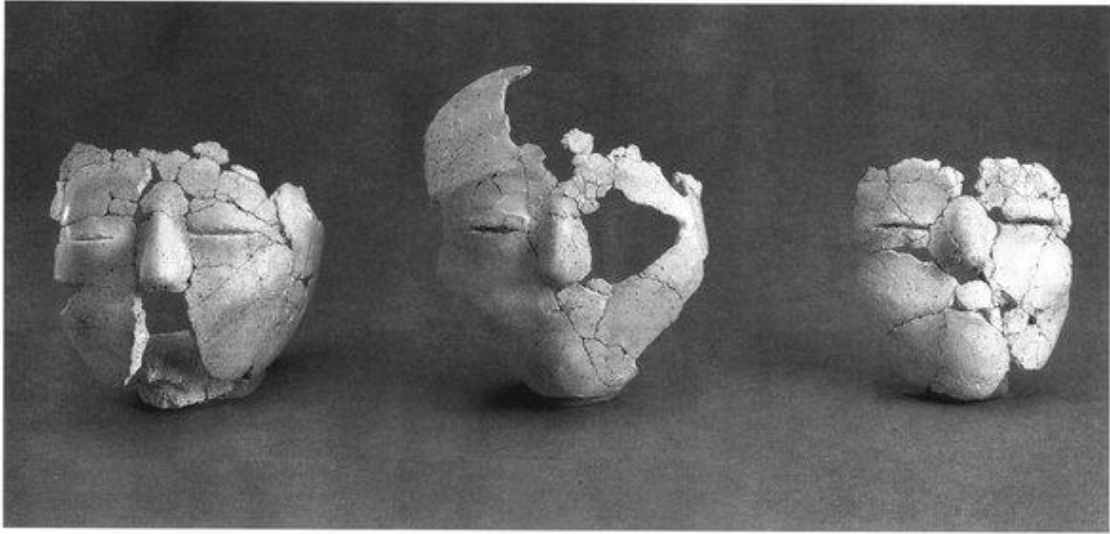


Figure 11 Three plastered masks from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan; the masks were created by plastering the skulls, then removing the faces. Source: J.Tsantes, Smithsonian Institution

Chapter 5 Plaster as *Flow* – the agent of memorialisation

This chapter explores the repeated performativity of plastering a skull, an act that was reiterated many times in the life of the ancestor, creating memories, yet also structurally changing the way in which the person was remembered. Memorialisation necessitates a focus on the past, the present and, through a reiteration of ideologies, the future. In this chapter I will argue that it is the plaster acting as a force upon the skull that is the enabler for this temporal multilocation. This force, which I have termed '*flow*,' is seminal in changing an object from something disposable into something of symbolic importance. It is not limited by chemical makeup but contains within it a rich and multi-faceted symbolism. Plaster acting as a '*flow*' or continuum, links the spacetime of the ancestor, in a visual way that cannot be achieved by an unplastered skull.

In the first section, I will explore the idea that memory is performative. Memories are in a state of constant recall and recreation. They are constantly being reimagined in a dynamic conversation between the parties concerned. Social or Group Memory is therefore socially constructed. It relies on repetition and reiteration but will change over time. The plastered skull provides the focus for the creation of memories, but these memories are not static. Memorialisation is created by people in the present looking simultaneously backwards to the past and forwards to the future.

In the second section I explore the ability of plaster to act as flow, connecting different times, from the historic past and present, to the future and myth time. Minerals, for many in the world, are imbued with the divine (Boivin, 2004, 4) and are seen as animate and living. Earth is the

‘embodiment of a divine, all-encompassing creative force’ (Boivin, 2004, 5). This quality of animation is why I prefer to use the term ‘flow’ in describing the effect of the plaster.

5.1 The performativity of memory



Figure 12 Ramparamp with overmodelled skull as a head. Source: nga.gov.au⁶

⁶ Also written *Rambaramp*

Memory is a performative act. It is a form of narrative and a dynamic act of creation and imagination. Agency is involved. Memory is not a static entity but the product of activity. Nor is it an end in itself. Each newly imagined memory in turn informs the next in a constant recreation. It is more than a spontaneous act. Memories are the result of active processes of remembrance.

It is a performance that is also socially located – becoming a commemorative ceremony in which a collectively-created shared memory is reiterated in order that the “what” of a plastered skull becomes more relevant than the “who.” Plate and Smelik refer to memory as an ‘embodied and localised practice’ involving active labour to re-enact past experience in a present moment (Plate and Smelik, 2013, 5-6). This ensuing recollection of the past is possible only through ritual performances (Connerton, 1989, 4), aided by the use of concrete images. The ceremonies are the agency necessary to convey and sustain the transmission of the past into the present, requiring commitment from those involved. The curated skulls can therefore be interpreted as “codes of ideology,” a code which was then shared collectively⁷. By curating, modifying and circulating the skulls, the skulls acted as an aide to the creation of cognitive memory, ‘bridging the gap between the lived past and the imagined future’ (Plate and Smelik, 2013, 3).

Memory therefore relies on repetition; a ‘more or less invariant sequence of formal acts’ in its performance (Rappaport, 1992, 5). However, it may not achieve this ‘invariant’ repetition as I shall examine below, which allows for a redesigning of collective experience. The creation of memory requires actors and performers, rather than spectators. To witness is to play an active role in which one is fully present (Nelson-Becker and Sangster, 2018). This does not imply that

⁷ This collective aspect of commemoration also serves to enhance the memories, although what one remembers may also be dependent upon other factors such as upbringing or gender (Connerton, 1989, 28, Magliocco, 2014, 4).

everyone with an interest in the creation of the memory needs to be involved in every stage of the severing of the head, the gathering of plaster, or the preparation of paint. Anyone involved in the creation of the memory has their role to play and needs to acknowledge its significance. It is an act, a performance, of active engagement in the creation of the memory, providing confirmation or validation for the meaningfulness of the accepted reality. The participants perform within the arena or field of their cultural understanding, choreographing their movements according to their lived experiences, which are reinforced by the reiteration of the performance. The creation of memory, therefore, is an ongoing action, a dynamic and processual engagement between the socially constructed present and the recreated or reimagined past. This active creation and performance of memory is seen in the action of plastering a skull, replastering it as the narrative demands, and interacting with it.

The action of commemoration consists of several deliberate stages, each involving at least one witness or active participant, in a process that possibly began even before the death of the person whose skull is being curated⁸. Huffman's ethnographic data based on a southern Malakulan community in the 1980s demonstrates how the daily repetition and affirmation of remembrance involving effigies and skulls, though the lifestyle of the community, creates an ongoing embodied memory within the group (Huffman, 2009). Here, the *rambaramps* (sacred effigies consisting of overmodelled skulls and fibre limbs, Fig. 12) are placed in the men's hut, facing outwards towards the living who, if initiated, eat, sleep and discuss the affairs of the community under their gaze, in a constant reiterative act of remembrance. Eventually, after the effigy is too fragile to be kept in place, a relative will dispose of the torso in a sacred area and

⁸ For example, with cranial modification, seen both in recent southern Malakulan rituals and in the PPNB skulls from Jericho (see previous chapters).

the skull will be placed on a pole in its stead. These skulls are also moved frequently outside the hut to participate in rituals, being witness to, and being witnessed by, the living⁹.

Skull curation is a multi-coded, multi-agential act. The dead do not bury themselves (Parker Pearson, 1999, 3) so necessarily, more than one agent is involved: the skull, the curator, the media including plaster. It is a social expression. Social memory cannot be created without society. A conversation is taking place, and though its words may be unspoken, a grammar is involved. The layers of plaster on the skull discovered at Çatalhöyük are testament to the reiteration of the memorialisation of its becoming. Its structure and method of construction indicate that it was displayed, the running repairs indicate the longevity of its participation in memory-making. The manner of final interment, nestled in the arms of a woman as a foundational burial under the walls of a house, is in itself a powerful statement, an ultimate performance and act of memorialisation. But though it is no longer a visible object to those who are witnessing its memorialisation, it is still very much a physical presence in the house, the knowledge of which will continue to interact with the lives of those acting above it.

5.2 Flow as the enabler of a trans-dimensional location

Building on Delueze and Guatarri's ideas of assemblages, *affects*, flowing between materialities (Delueze and Guatarri, 1988, 6), Harris describes everything as 'in flow, in a process of becoming' (2018, 89). The use of plaster on a skull is an example that allows for this 'vibrancy of the matter' to take centre-stage and permits the transition from one state to

⁹ There is no perceived difference, other than rank, between the living and the *ramparamp*. Should a man achieve the grades necessary to achieve *Nimangi* during his life (the grade necessary to be allowed to become an effigy), he is understood to have already joined the company of ancestors (Huffman, 2009).

another. I wish to take this term further and say that the plaster on a skull is not part of the flow but is “*flow*” itself, the catalyst that allows the skull to transition from one dimension to another on a spacetime continuum. This flow is not something that can be simply reduced to a chemical description (CaOH) but is an entity enriched by its symbolic, philosophical and ideological associations. Barad suggests that material agency is not simply an attribute but the force that is the constant realignment of the world (Barad, 2003, 818). Plaster, as flow, allows for, and is integral to, this reconfiguration. Without plaster acting as flow, the skull is a symbolic allusion to the past, perhaps of a remembered loved one, perhaps of an anonymous ancestor respected for what it stands for, rather than who it was. But with the plaster, through the action of the flow, the skull becomes an object rooted in a multidimensional universe, simultaneously referencing both the historic past and the future, whilst being located in the real-time of the present. Because of what it represents, the plastered skull has also become part of a wider cosmological time outside of any known social time, a time of myth, mythtime, the time of beginnings and identity.

That the skull looks back to historic time can be ascertained from the fact that a human skull that belonged to an historically located person was used. At some stage, this was likely a person known to the community as an individual. It is highly improbable that a totally random skull was chosen, at least in its first instance, given both the infrequency of the funerary rite and the tendency to mark certain buried skulls or skeletons in some way (see for instance Kuijt 2001: Kuijt 2008: Hodder 2006). That it looks to the future can be deduced from the reapplication of plaster; it is intended for longevity. As a minimum, it acts as a *symbol* of regeneration, but it is reasonable to suggest that it was understood as an actuality. Such an interpretation is seen in the attitudes to the overmodelled skulls which were seen to assist in the planning of potential ventures from their platforms in the sacred huts of Papua New Guinea and Melanesia (Fig. 16).

These skulls are seen and treated as persons in their own right, enriched by their experiences of being from the past, who are prepared to help those in the present plan for the future. Finally, that it is part of a time that exists both in spacetime and mythtime is based on the fact of its very creation. Whether one agrees with Kenyon and considers a plastered skull to be part of an ancestor cult or venerated elder (Kenyon, 1954, 1957), a cult of the family (Nigro, 2017) or whether one prefers terms such as ancestral heirloom (Kuijt 2008), a plastered skull is evidently more than a pretty ornament and as such plays a role in the cosmological expression of the people involved. It is the plaster, in its enriched definition as flow that allows this multi-referencing position to take place, situating, as it does, the skull, in its multi temporal-spatial location.

In the next chapter, the theme of time continues with a focus on regeneration and anonymisation, with a rebuttal of a simplified binary response to experiential knowledge. It continues with an exploration of the idealised ancestor and the creation of an über-ancestor.

Chapter 6 The Creation of the Über-ancestor

This chapter examines how a plastered skull is manipulated to become a new identity. Kuijt (2008) suggests that this being is an anonymised commodity to aid memorialisation. This dissertation denies the suggestion that experiential knowledge of the original being is essential for a personal relationship and goes on to outline why the portrayal of the ancestor may be an idealised version of its essence.

The theme of time, introduced in the previous chapter, continues with a discussion on plaster skulls as vehicles for regeneration, building up social cohesion and strengthening the fabric of the community. Kuijt (2008) suggests that after only a few generations, the person monumentalised as a plastered skull will be forgotten as an individual. At this stage, they become decontextualized and become a commodity which brings in a more flexible identity. This memory is expanded and moves away from the experiential (personal knowledge) to the referential (indirect knowledge) (Hodder 1990).

The second section is a response to this claim. Whilst acknowledging the validity of the argument that the plastered skull is forgotten for who it was, it suggests that the flow of plaster allows the skull to be known as something, or someone, else. This new person may be known at an intimate and deeply personal level, as suggested by the resting place of the Çatalhöyük skull.

The final section discusses how the action of plaster is used to create a socially endorsed idealised person. Although some (e.g. Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 2001) have suggested that a certain physical likeness was the aim, I suggest that the intention was not so much to

replicate any physical attributes, but an idealised essence, exemplified by the depiction of strength within the Çatalhöyük skull.

6.1 Plastered skulls as the vehicle for regeneration

The trans-dimensional ability of flow outlined in the previous chapter allows the plastered skull to become a vehicle of regeneration, becoming the channel by which a community may navigate social identity and memorialisation. The group itself becomes a 'coherent and ordered community based on shared values and goals' (Bell, 1997, 129). The ritual of creating a plastered skull provides the arena in which social, economic, and political bonds of the group can be strengthened, if need be, repairing the fabric of the social cohesion (Chesson, 2001: Bell 1997). This is always more difficult in larger communities, and Fletcher (2018) has noted an association between the creation of plastered skulls and the size of the Neolithic community. Ethnographic data also implies a correlation between increased group size and secondary mortuary rites (Metcalf and Huntingdon, 1991). Such rites, it would seem, are a communal affair ¹⁰ and engagement with these rites allows the community to actively reassert social memories, which may include the renewal, the creation, or the severing of social bonds (Chesson 2001).

¹⁰ The funerals of the Torajans in Indonesia, for instance, can be huge affairs, lasting several weeks and involving many people travelling in from the diaspora. These take place months and often years after the loved one has died, giving all concerned a chance to save up sufficient money to fund the ritual, which includes the slaughter of as many buffalo that the family can afford. The deceased 'lives' in the family home until the day of their funeral, being fed and cared for as a sick person by those still living. This interment, however, is not necessarily the end, and the dead may be brought out and given new clothes for special occasions enjoyed by the whole community. Thus, an event which originally involves just a few grieving family members and friends is expanded to include the whole community and beyond (Bennet, 2016)

Even the most conservative of rituals do not remain unchanged in perpetuity; although actions may remain superficially unaltered, meanings and interpretations change. Evidence shows many of the skulls found have been modified more than once, including the skull found in Çatalhöyük. Layers of plaster or paint have been added, repairs have been made (Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 2001; Kuijt, 2008; Fletcher 2018). With every modification, the collective memory and history has been manipulated. Each action reflects a decision that has been made as result of, and leading to, a redefinition of social cohesion. The plaster on the skull acts as a palimpsest – even if the intention was to recreate the original in its entirety, it can never be exactly the same.

As noted in the Chapter 1.1, Kuijt (2008) suggests that in 2-3 generations the remembered individual that is the skull becomes depersonalised into an anonymised and homogenised collective of ancestors or heirlooms. This may be intentionally done, as in the deliberate mixing of bones (Chénier, 2009), or through the passage of time and death of those who remembered. The skulls have been decontextualised from their immediate situation, becoming instead a commodity, that can be exchanged or circulated according to community needs (Kuijt, 2009, Thomas, 2002). The dead now forgotten as individuals are associated with the living through a newly created corporate identity, empowered by the more flexible identity that anonymity allows (Chénier, 2009). In this way, memory is expanded and transformed, becoming socially sanctioned, moving away from the experiential (personally experienced) to the referential (indirectly experienced) (Hodder, 1990).

With the commoditisation of the plastered skull, a transformation can take place as the community moves through various stages of personal grief and collective commemoration. Kuijt (2008) suggests that this change is a progression from forgetting, to remembering and

forgetting again. Once an anonymous skull is plastered, it can be remembered again as a member of the 'living archive' (Hodder, 2005, 183-4) or 'symbolic collective' (Kuijt, 2008, 177). This interconnecting web of mortuary practice, symbolically rich imagery, and destruction and construction of a new shared memory leads to a reconstituted social identity based on an atemporal memorialisation of the individual.

How long this transition took, and how long a Neolithic plastered skull was used in commemorative practices cannot of course be known. Ethnographic evidence from more recent skull cults indicate that this may be quite a short time; in Southern Malakula, memory is based on personal recollection, and so is limited in duration rites (Huffman, 2009, 46). Once the memory of the deceased effigy or overmodelled skull has faded, there being no more male descendants who remember the person, it is no longer able to serve a ritual purpose. The skull is taken to a sacred area and buried, usually with his bones, which were buried in earlier mortuary rites (ibid). Whether this link with memory was also the case with the plaster skulls of the Neolithic is unclear.

6.2 The challenge of anonymity

However, I suggest by carefully caching plastered skulls (e.g. Jericho, 'Ain Ghazal) or deliberately placing them in symbolically loaded places (e.g. Çatalhöyük) indicates that symbolic power may transcend anonymity. Being forgotten for who they were does not negate their being remembered as someone new. They have become something or someone else, an über-ancestor, a separate category to the unplastered skulls. By this term, I mean an ancestor who is viewed as more important than most, exemplified by the facts of their curation. Neolithic plastered skulls have all been found in distinctive settings; the plaster masks of 'Ain Ghazal

are similarly treated as special. I suggest the idea of experiential knowledge of an individual is limited in outlook. Rather than being restricted to binary divisions based on living relationships, it should be expanded to include relationships beyond the definition of human. Humans are socially driven to anthropomorphise when relating to non-social agents (Scheele et al, 2015). For example, in an experiential workshop where students plastered a skull a gendered personality emerged¹¹ (Steel, 2019, 96). A personal connection is not necessarily based on direct physical experience as religious adherents today can attest. Thérèse of Liseux wrote constantly of a personal love of Jesus (St Therese of Liseux and Clarke, 1996). The Famadihana ritual¹² of Madagascar creates new relationships with ancestors not personally known when alive.

The skull at Çatalhöyük exemplifies this new status: the manner of its final resting place indicates not an anonymous ancestor but one who is known in a new form - and possibly loved (Fig.8). According to Haddow,

“the seemingly tender manner in which the plastered skull is held in the arms of the older female – face to face – makes it easy to imagine some form of emotional attachment involved” (Haddow, 2012).

This is not proof that it is an acknowledged individual lying there in the ‘tender’ arms of the other skeleton, but nor can it be dismissed out of hand. Attitudes to death, and the value of other humans have changed over the millennia, and in different cultures: for example, in New Guinea, where the spearing of prisoners was a respected end, the Sawos fattened up captive children in order to be killed (Huffman, 2009, citing Schindlebeck, 1978,5), and there are

¹¹ Also see Appendix C

¹² Every seven years, the shrouded bodies of Malagasy relations are lifted out of their crypts and become the focus of celebrations, before being wrapped up again and buried. Names are written on the shrouds to aid recognition (Bearak, 2010)

many countries today¹³ outside Europe which have the death penalty for criminals, including those who committed crimes as minors. However, there is also early written evidence that many emotions have remained the same¹⁴. Perhaps an original connection existed between the skeleton and the skull. Perhaps, the anonymised skull came to represent something that was loved and remembered as a person in its own right. They did not bury themselves - an extra unseen relationship is also present. Tension undoubtedly exists between the anonymising layers of plaster and the skull but to deny, as does Kuijt (2008), the individuality of the newly created über-ancestor is to fail to recognise the personhood inherent within the curated skull.

6.3 The idealised ancestor

The über-ancestor is by definition an elite. It is a carefully curated version of what might or should be. By covering a skull in plaster, the artisan is curing the skull its human imperfections. In Chapter 4:3, I argued that this application of plaster was used to defy the effects of aging and death. In this section, I propose that the veneer of plaster is also used to present an idealised version of a human. Such a technique has been noted in the portraiture of Ancient and Pharaonic Egypt (3150 -BCE -30 CE) which sought to idealise the subject in the least abstracted way possible, combining multiple viewpoints, independent of time and space (Brewer and Teeter, 2007, 189-190). Realism was never their goal. Similarly, several Neolithic skulls that have been excavated show a variety of anatomical features that are impossible in real life. Many skulls found, for example in Jericho or 'Ain Ghazal, display an absence of a mandible. (This technically makes them crania rather than skulls, but social convention tends not to differentiate unless necessary for clarification.) This results in a broad, truncated face

¹³ E.g., USA, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan: source: Amnesty International

¹⁴ At 4000 years old: Istanbul #2461, The Love Song for Shu-Sin, discovered in Sumer, is the oldest love poem in the world.

with the nose reconstructed higher than its true position and a mouth formed where the nasal cavity should have been (Kuijt, 2008, Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 2001). Mizoguchi suggests that by shortening the features, the artist is simultaneously creating an infant and an adult, potentially reflecting the cyclical regeneration of life and death (Kuijt, 2008, 190).

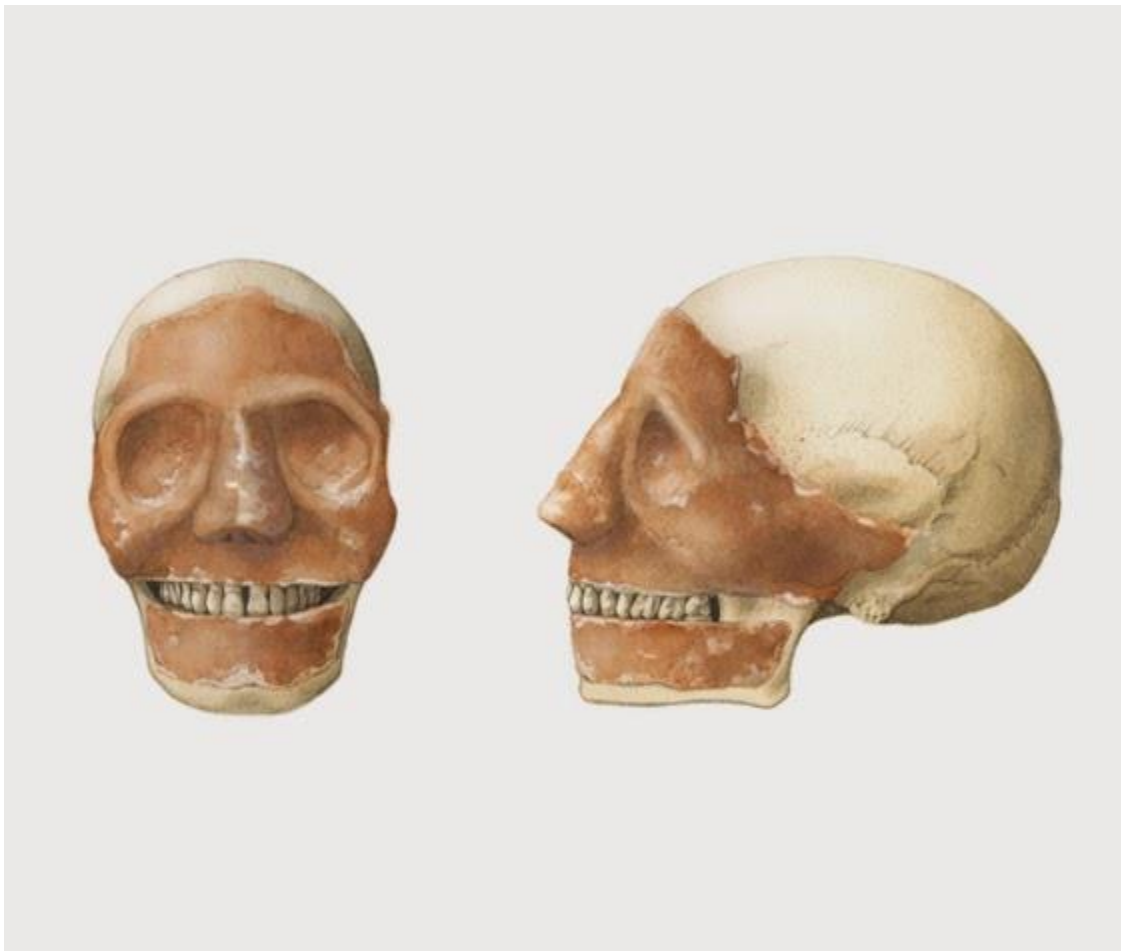


Figure 13 Artist's impression of Skull 1130. Source Kathleen Killackey, Killackeyillustration.com

Goren et al suggest that although it is unlikely that the result was an exact likeness, it is possible that individual features modelled, such as a cleft chin or puffy cheeks, were accurately portrayed (Goren, Goring-Morris and Segal, 2001, 676). Such attention to detail has already been noted in the skulls from Melanesia and Papua New Guinea referred to in Chapter 4:3

(Also see: Appendix B). To the layman's eyes, the Jericho skull in the British Museum does not reflect the appearance of its reconstructed owner (Figs. 4 and 5) but physical accuracy may not be the aim. There is also the question about the nature of what constitutes a "true" portrait and what features the artisan was actually trying to illustrate. There is a presumption that these are the superficial features. It may be that less visible qualities are being represented. Picasso's 'Bust of woman with hat, Dora' (Fig.14) or Adrian Ghenie's 1945 self-portrait (Fig.15) both show aspects of the subject that are "truthful" but not examples of representational art. Henry Moore talks of Mexican stonework being "true and right" with a "truth to its material" (Barassi and Copper, 2015). It may be that the essence of the deceased, rather than physical likeness, is being captured in the plaster (Bonogofsky, 2004). Some skulls are depicted without ears. Eyes are open, closed, painted, plastered, or inlaid with shells. Plaster itself is not used in a uniform manner; it may cover some or most of the skulls. These variations are location specific, and additionally, show a more limited range of 'variation of facial phenotype' than actually existed at that time (Kuijt, 2008, 179).

This implies that they were part of an idealised interpretation of a person, rather than an actualised historical portrayal. The Killackey illustration (Çatalhöyük Research Project, 2011) depicts the Çatalhöyük skull possessing its mandible but no ears (Fig. 13). A mask of red painted plaster covers most of the front; its eyes are plastered hollows; the nose is modelled with plaster and is strong and aquiline, with a broad nasal base and slightly uplifted. There is a distinct slope running from the nose to the forehead, though it is unlikely that cranial modification has taken place (Özbek, personal comm, 15/2/2020). There is no foreshortening, and no suggestion of Mizoguchi's infantilisation (Kuijt 2008, 190). Rather, the combined use of ochre and plaster give the impression of a dynamic strength, compared to which untreated skulls look fragile and friable. There is also an energetic vibrancy about the skull, which is, by

definition, the idealised condition of life. This personal interpretation is endorsed by the artist. Killackey suggests that the thinness of the plaster emphasises the contours of the skull, giving it an angular appearance, suggestive of strength, accentuated by the visible teeth (personal comm,16/4/21). An idealised portrayal of vital strength becomes the means by which the community maintained and promoted socially accepted concepts of personhood, projected upon, and reiterated by, an über-ancestor through the agency of plaster upon a skull.



Figure 14 Woman with a hat, Dora: Picasso. Source: Art-Picasso.com



Figure 15 Adrian Ghenie Self Portrait 1945: Ghenie. Source: Southebys.com

Chapter 7 Conclusion

By focussing on the plastered skull discovered in Çatalhöyük, this dissertation examines the attributes of plaster and its role in transforming the dead into a new being. It proposes that by its use, a skull can be transformed into an über-ancestor, becoming the means by which carefully curated ideals of personhood can be presented to the community. Strength, life, and the power of regeneration are made manifest in the skull through the action of the plaster. Death and old age are defied by the artist by whose skill, the skull, and thereby the ancestor, can be made anew. By foregrounding the medium, this dissertation accepts Kuijt's arguments (2008) that a plastered skull presents an ideal but challenges his proposal that plastering the skull is an act that allows for the anonymisation of the individual. Instead, it asserts the predominance of the plastered skull as a person in whom a different, not an unknown, identity has been created and suggests that a new personal relationship can be made.

Plaster, as a vital material of transformation has been largely ignored by archaeologists in favour of other aspects of skull curation. Whilst these contributions are important, I have sought to move the conversation away from the superficial technical attributes of plaster and explore the symbolic implications of this new technology. With these aims in mind, I have used archaeological and ethnographical evidence to demonstrate that plaster was a matter that matters to Neolithic cosmology. It was both a material and technology, rich in symbolism for the Neolithic mind, as is exemplified by its use in Çatalhöyük and beyond, notably at 'Ain Ghazal, where it was the medium of choice for human statuary (Fig 9). Because of this symbolic resonance with the cosmological outlook of Çatalhöyük, I propose that plaster is the force, the 'animate player in the becoming' (Harris, 2018, 91), that allows this symbolism to be expressed. The force of plaster on the skull, which I term *flow*, allows it to transcend the

boundaries of life and death. It is a 'vital player in the world' (Bennet, 2004, 349) enabling the skull to be placed on a supra-temporal timeline. By plaster's catalytic action, the skull, now the über-ancestor, performs in the present, whilst simultaneously referencing the past, the future and mythtime. Without the plaster, it is reduced to a simple skull.

The development of plaster technology allowed it to be seen as a technology of enchantment (Gell, 1994) whereby an everyday material was able to be incorporated into ritual use by the skill of a craftsman. Such skill with the material may even have been construed as magical. Used for burial platforms, bucrania, hidden objects in the walls, and even the creation of the über-ancestor, this routine material obscured the boundaries between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. It was thus able to 'cast (its) spell' (Gell, 1994, 44) over the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük in a shared symbolic expression binding them together as a society (Balter, 2001, 2279). These attributes allowed plaster to be seen as a material of value, essential for social cohesion, and a means by which the world could be view in its 'enchanted form' (Gell, 1994, 44). I propose that this led to it being used on objects of significance in a reciprocal transaction of value. Consequently, both the value of the skull, and that of the plaster were augmented by their connection to the other.

Plaster is a dynamic material that artists refer to as having a 'personality' (Spleth, 2003). The division between artist and medium is blurred. Based on my own experience (Appendix C), plaster dust soon covers artist and nearby surfaces. Fingerprints left in the plastered surface of the Jericho skull in the British Museum (Fletcher, 2018) demonstrate the intermingling of the artist with the material, the breathing with the non-breathing. Using the evidence from artists who worked with plaster, I suggest that this haptic experience of plaster serves to undermine the binary division of life-matter prevalent in the West. Furthermore, the qualities of plaster

allow it to simulate both flesh and the natural aging of the body. When first applied, plaster is soft and moist. As it ages, plaster hardens and dries. Eventually, wrinkle-like cracks appear in its surface and its biographical experiences show by way of chips and flaws. The Çatalhöyük skull was repaired at least once (Boz and Hagar, 2004). Unlike human flesh, a repaired skull looks once more like new. The plaster skin allows the skull act as a symbol of regeneration in an assertion of life over death. This action is repeatable; humans' mastery over death can be performed as often as necessary and the trauma of death and aging is thereby transformed by an act of will. Under its coat of plaster, the über-ancestor will not succumb to human frailties.

Memorialisation is not static but a dynamic interaction between all actors, including plaster and skull. Kuijt (2008) argues that after 2-3 generations, the memorialised person within a plastered skull becomes anonymous and decontextualized, reduced to a commodity and known only referentially. I disagree. Rather than forgotten as an individual, through the action of flow, the skull is remembered as a different being, the über-ancestor, around whom new relationships and new socially constructed memories can be established. Its influence continues even after interment, not as a grave good in the arms of a woman, but as a being upon whom personhood is conferred. It is a statement of vital energy, an essence, the antithesis of aging and mortality and a reflection of the cosmological concerns of the community for which it was created. Further analysis is needed upon the plastered skull and its guardian to expand our knowledge of ways in which Neolithic personhood was celebrated. Questions remain about the relationship between the skull and the skeleton which technological advances may explain. Further questions arise about its relationship to its place of interment. The conversation is not over. Because the skull was covered in plaster, because of the agency of this material, because of the force, the flow, of the matter involved, the dialogue between the Çatalhöyük skull and the

actors that began all those millennia ago, still continues as new memories and new relationships are forged today.

Appendices



Figure 16 Overmodelled skull from East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea, Late 19th/early 20th Century. Source: nga.gov.au

Appendix A: Comparison of features on plastered skulls in Anatolia and the Levant, and the South Pacific and Papua New Guinea

	Çatalhöyük skull	Levant skulls (Inc Jericho and 'Ain Ghazal)	Kösk Höyük skulls	South Pacific skulls
Sex	F ¹⁵	M and F	M and F	M ¹⁶
Age	Adult	Adults of various ages (and children in 'Ain Ghazal)	Adults of various ages and children	Elderly
Sub-floor burial	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes
Post-mortem decapitation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Evidence of display	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes: but time varies depending on area
Buried after use	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
“Hair” glued to skull	No	Yes in 'Ain Ghazal. Possibly elsewhere	No	Yes
Addition of eyes	No	Yes: with shells or bitumen	Yes: black lines seemingly asleep	Yes: with shells or other materials
Cranially modified	Not analysed	Sometimes	No	Sometimes
Removal of mandible	No	Sometimes	No	No
Several layers of plaster	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Buried in groups	No	Yes	Yes	Not usually ¹⁷ Status and region dependent
Buried in arms of another skeleton	Yes	No	No	No

¹⁵ Subject to further analysis (Haddow, 2012).

¹⁶ One known exception exists (Aufderheide, 2009, 281).

¹⁷ An exception is if the deceased is a great Papua New Guinean warrior when he will be buried in a special group pit in the Men's House (Kocher-Schmid, 2009).

Appendix B: Plastered skulls of the South Pacific (20th Century)

The curation of skulls continued in the south Pacific until the late 20th century in the South Pacific in the 20C. Contemporary skull curation is usually described as ‘overmodelling’ and was practised as a funerary rite until recently in some areas of the South Pacific, including Malekula, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea . Plastering the skull was only one of a series of rituals that a male needed to make in order to pass into the World of the Dead. In Malekula, as recently as the 1980s, areas where skulls were plastered also practised cranial modification, the former being the final act of many performed upon the skull (Aufderheide and Aufderheide, 2009, 27). Huffman (2009) describes the progression through the ritual cycle involving various initiation rites in the following outline. To create the plastered skull, the deceased was decapitated after 10 days, and the head placed in a basket. This could be for up to a year before being put on an anthill for final cleaning. Due to the expense, it could take many years for the final rites, and not every male achieved the status of *rambaramp* (effigy) upon which one’s plastered skull was placed. When plastering, an idealised likeness was sought. The face only was plastered by a relative (Aufderheide, 2009, 269), with hair glued onto the back. Decoration was gendered, with certain patterns for males only.¹⁸ The effigies were used until memory of the deceased faded, after which they were burned and the skull hoisted onto the rafters of the Men’s Hut, the height being dependent upon status. They were intrinsic to rituals such as funerals and seen as participating in the events of the Hut. Social life was a perpetual ritual of showing respect to the elders. However, the skulls were not worshipped but a central focus of traditional rites involving a cult of ancestors (Huffman, 2009, 62).

Papua New Guineans also practised rituals involving plaster skulls (Fig.17). Kocher-Schmid (2009) describes how the deceased was buried under the house. After several years it was dug

¹⁸ At least one female skull exists (Aufderheide, 2009, 281).

up and the head removed. The body was reburied outside the house. The skull was smoked, and care given to remove all traces of the brain. The craft of plastering was exercised by a man known for his skill, rather than a relative, though the family would help by modelling or describing the deceased to achieve a faithful likeness. Cranial openings were blocked, and the face plastered – red clay being a central component. Decoration depended upon gender. Hair cut off by mourners was glued to the skull. It would then be left overnight for the spirit of the deceased to check (Stanek, 1982, 155-156). Once everyone agreed the likeness was accurate, a relative would be informed by the spirit in a dream that the mortuary rites could go ahead. Only then could the skull be painted, in patterns reminiscent of tribal shamans (Kocher-Schmid, 2009, 85-6). After the skull was used in funerary rites for the deceased, it was buried within its own house. Only the greatest of male warriors were buried in the Men's house, in a pit painted with red pigment.

Other communities of the South Pacific also practised similar traditions of decorating skulls with plaster. For the Melanesians, becoming a plastered skull was similarly a stage in a long journey of rites intrinsically linked to ideas of body, soul, life, death and the afterlife (Kocher-Schmid, 2009, 144). It was an indication of status and wealth, allowing one to enter the World of the Dead and have a role in the living. Without these, other rituals could not take place, and the ability to venerate the ancestors in the form of overmodelled skulls was necessary in order to achieve parenthood (Aufderheide, 2009, 269). If displeased, the living risked 'spirit-instigated retribution' (Aufderheide, 2009, 268). Overmodelling was not the final rite; some ancestors' skulls were later elevated in Men's Huts or buried. Skulls were both memorials and apotropaic devices (Kocher-Schmid, 2009, 137) as well as a means of communicating with the ancestral spirits (Aufderheide, 2009, 268). The skulls remain in the Men's sacred house for as long as there is someone who can identify with them in some way. This means they may be

there for several generations, allowing for the construction of relations between the ancestors and the descendants in a society without writing (Kaepler et al, 1997, 276). Sometimes skulls were buried with plants, emphasising fertility connotations (Kocher-Schmid, 2009). Thus, skulls served as a vehicle between the living, the dead and also the future.

Appendix C: Getting ahead in archaeology - a phenomenological experience in plastering a skull

Phenomenological experience is an intentional engagement of the life-world, and full understanding comes only by ‘acknowledging the fundamental role of subjective lived experience’ (Adams, Higgs, Ajjawi, 2009, 115). With this in mind, I have attempted to plaster a skull – or at least a life-size and very realistic replica – in order to experience the haptic qualities of the material and the multi-coded dynamics of the plaster, the skull and myself as the artist.

Because the weather was sunny, I performed each part of the transformation of the skull outside in the garden. I was alone, and the only sound was birdsong and distant traffic, whereas it was likely that when the original skull was curated, if it were created in Çatalhöyük itself, noises would have been heard from other residents nearby. It is possible that the original skull was curated within the dark of the house, rather than on the roof top, and that the area in which the artist worked had cosmological significance (Lewis-Williams, 2004).

I began by sanding the skull with a rough stone. This made a rhythmical sound as the stone took off the top layer creating a base upon which the plaster could hold. It was a therapeutic experience; the roundness of the skull was a comfortable shape to hold, and the action of sanding and the sound of the stone swishing against the bone was one within which one could easily lose oneself. Interestingly, whenever the stone hit any of the cranial fissures, the rhythm would be temporarily broken. This jolt was a reminder that I was sanding the surface of a skull. An aspect I had not considered was that as I sanded the surface, tiny dust motes were flying off and landing on me and the ground, like crumbs off a slice of toast. The skull’s fabric became intermingled with me. It is interesting to consider what the original artists felt about this

mingling of bodies and whether the ancestor's dust was disposed of in a prescribed ritual, or did they simply, as I did, stand up and dust themselves down.

Once the skull was sanded sufficiently for the plaster to take hold, I began the next stage. The first attempt to plaster the skull did not work particularly well. I had mixed a very thin solution of commercial lime putty and using gloves, spread it sparingly over the skull. It covered the skull well but did impose itself as a material upon the skull. The nasal cavity and zygomatic bones were still very prominent; there was nothing fleshed about its appearance. The thought struck me as I was applying this thin veneer that the artist must surely have gained his or her skills by plastering the bucrania. Because the plastered skull is a rare object, and there are abundant bucrania (Hodder, 2006), it is not unreasonable to suppose that the feelings experienced in the creation of the former are different to the latter, perhaps pride or awe. However, the value given to cows in countries such as India may mean that such a difference was minimal.

In the second attempt to plaster the skull I decided to use a thicker lime putty mix, with scarcely any water added other than the water it was already stored in. I used my bare hands, although I knew the mixture was caustic, so that I could fully experience the sensation of the application. It was a completely different to the first attempt. The plaster, which is best described as "gloopy," was initially cool, but not cold, to touch, and very inviting. There was something rather compelling about its appeal that made me want to handle it. It squidged and squirmed through my fingertips, living up to its reputation of a dynamic material. It also very quickly became warmer, more like body temperature. As well as covering the skull, the plaster also covered my hands and arms so that the division between myself and skull were connected as one by the material in a very immediate way. The maxilla and zygomatic bones began to fill

out and I was able to model an aquiline nose which immediately changed the whole thing from a skull to a model of a human. There was something very satisfactory about smoothing down and building up the face, an action which had to be repeated several times in order to create the effect I wanted. It took on a life in front of me (fig. 18).

Throughout this time, I was constantly aware of the feel of the plaster on my hands, not only because it covered me like a glove, but also because I could feel its caustic action drying out and stripping the moisture away from my skin (fig. 19). In a real sense, I was going into the plaster which was going onto the skull. Students included in a similar experiential workshop (Steel,2019, 96) found that their skull had become gendered in the process. I was not overtly aware of a similar result, but if I had to say, I would say that my skull was female, which surprises me as I would have expected a normative male to emerge. Its -her - features were sharp and angular with a delicate nose and fine jawline. This graceful result was as a result of me responding to the shape of the skull and the manner in which the lime putty could be moulded around the bone. It was not intentional on my part, but a result of the interaction of the materials used.

Once the skull was plastered to my satisfaction it was left to dry in an old air raid shelter that I had previously converted into a 'Çatalhöyük' house, and I then cleared up (figs. 20 and 21). Splashes of plaster were around the grass and all over the box which I had used as a surface. I had deliberately worn old clothes, and these too were spotted with plaster. My hands, once the plaster had been washed off, were sore and wrinkled, remaining dehydrated for a couple of days.

It had been an interesting experience. First of all was the unsurprising confirmation that it is a highly skilled artform to create a plastered skull that is smooth, refleshed and dynamic that does not crack. Secondly, I was very interested in the difference the two plaster mixes made - the first thin admix, which created a good base layer but did little in the way of making me feel particularly connected in any way to either it as a medium or the skull – and the second, thick, gloopy mixture that was warm and inviting to work with and very much a material capable of fleshing the skull. Other thoughts which struck me as I worked opened up new ideas, such as the way the rhythm of the sanding was interrupted by the fissures on the skull, as if the deceased were jutting into life; or the way the original artists might have practised their skill. Did they learn by plastering bucrania? And were the feelings whilst doing each comparable? I think the experience proved to be a valuable means of gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of Neolithic plaster skull creation. The practice gave me insights that I would not have otherwise experienced and allowed a glimpse into some of the issues that would have faced the Çatalhöyük artist, though whether their response was similar to mine is a question that cannot be answered.



Figure 17 Plastered skull from practical experiment. Photo: Author's own



Figure 18 Dehydrated hands after working with lime putty. Photo: Author's own



Figure 19 Skull in Çatalhöyük style house 1. Photo: Author's own



Figure 20 Skull in Çatalhöyük style house 2. Photo: Author's own

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