

# Chapter 15

## Closely Observed Layers: Storytelling and the Heart



Ruth Tringham

### At Çatalhöyük .....

I have had a professional lifetime of heartfelt experiences as an archaeologist, especially on excavation projects. This chapter is about my most recent stories and experiences during the excavation of a 9000-year-old Neolithic house (Building 3) at the settlement mound of Çatalhöyük in west-central Turkey (Tringham and Stevanovic 2012). All the houses at Çatalhöyük were built of sun-dried mud brick whose wall surfaces and clay floors were repeatedly plastered in white clay. The walls of the houses had no openings for windows or doors (or so it seems), and access to the interior was by ladder from a hole in the flat roof (Hodder 2006: chapter 5).<sup>1</sup>

Inside the house, the layers of the dead/past/ancestors and – above them – the layers of the living are not separated from each other but are closely woven together as part of the same labyrinth. The portal from one to the other and the key to understanding their connection are the lids with which the burial pits are closed. We archaeologists understood this from the moment that we identified the lid of the final burial of Building 3, a young boy of 3–4 years old in a basket (Feature 617); for us who came to excavate their history, this was our first Neolithic burial (Figs. 15.1 and 15.2).

RET Diary entry August 17, 1999: “I had an earthquake dream last night. I woke to find out that there had been a huge earthquake in Istanbul many thousands of miles to the north .....Mira started work on the burial (F.617) today, starting with the white plaster lid that we recognized two days ago by its plaster-but-not-plaster floor appearance.”

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<sup>1</sup>This is a video of Mirjana Stevanovic leading a tour of Building 3 as if she were its proud resident:  
<https://vimeo.com/337032483>

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**Fig. 15.1** Photo of the burial lid of F.617. A demonstration of how difficult it is to recognize a burial lid at Çatalhöyük. Note the red-painted wall next to the lid. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)



**Fig. 15.2** Mirjana Stevanovic removing the lid of Feature 617 on August 17, 1999. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)

## Hunting the Burial Lids

The Neolithic custom of burial at Çatalhöyük is to dig a pit, often over a meter deep, through the layers of plaster and clay floors of the living house. The pit is narrower at the top than lower down; the deceased is laid at the bottom of the pit, which is then filled in with soft dark earth to the level of the plaster floor from which it was cut. After tamping down the soil of the fill, the top of the pit is then covered with a 5 cm layer of clay plaster that is very close to the consistency and color of the floor plaster itself, but it is not identical. This is the lid. The join is smoothed over so that it is very difficult – unless you know or remember – to tell where the burial opening is (Figs. 15.3 and 15.4).<sup>2</sup>

As archaeologists, who poke and probe into these secrets, we want to know where the burial opening is. But we don't want to wait to come across it by accident, plunging through the unrecognized lid into the grave pit, because the lid holds the key to much more than the discovery of the resting place of the residents. It tells us about the sequence of their dying, and it tells us about their death becoming a trigger for events in the life of the living house. From a burial lid, we can track the new



**Fig. 15.3** The cross-sectioned lid of Feature 631 built up to be level with the bottom of floor 2 on the northeast platform. On the right (south) edge of the pit, the boundary between the lid and the floor #2 plaster layer can be clearly seen. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)

<sup>2</sup>This video is a discussion of Ruth Tringham with Mirjana Stevanovic about the burial lids and the red-painted walls surrounding some of the burials: <https://vimeo.com/336739527>



**Fig. 15.4** Ruth Tringham, Lori Hager, and Basak Boz working out the sequence of the lids of burial pits cutting through the platform Feature 162 in 2000. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)

plaster that is laid over the lid and its surrounding platform floor, as it creates a new floor surface over the rest of the house; we can track new configurations within the living house – new walls, new oven locations – that are created on that new floor after specific burials. The interpretation of such sequences and associations is full of ambiguity, which can be expressed in a wonderful multitude of small stories. But it provides a way of connecting the living house with the passing history of its occupants (Fig. 15.5).

## Closely Observed Layers

I cannot escape the ambivalence I feel as I carry out my research in this 9000-year-old building that is also the resting place of its residents. I am excavating – revealing – layers that have hidden this place from prying eyes for 9000 years. By the time I and my team have finished the project, we have not only revealed their hiding places but we have displaced them. Worse still, that place that we revealed has almost been forgotten by the archaeologists themselves. That is a very big responsibility of destruction.

A partial exoneration of my heartlessness in this respect is provided by the heartfelt care with which we carried out the destruction. James Mellaart first excavated at the Çatalhöyük East Mound during four field seasons (1961–1963, 1965), a total



**Fig. 15.5** Aerial photo of Building 3 in 2001, where the continuous white floor can be seen from burial platforms on the right to the “kitchen” on the left (south). Jason Quinlan is suspended from the roof of the BACH shelter. Michael Ashley, perching even higher, is taking this photo. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)

of 226 working days in which his team excavated close on 200 buildings, a rate of almost 1 a day (Balter 2005:26–27). By contrast, our BACH (Berkeley Archaeologists @ Çatalhöyük) project completed the entire excavation of Building 3 in seven 6-week seasons (1997–2003) and a further 10-year preparation of the materials for publication (Tringham and Stevanovic 2012). This is considered very slow, by most standards. But we were not to be hurried for the sake of “efficiency”; we had a very ambitious aim that demanded a slow pace.

Our work proceeded by the definition and excavation of “units,” each one identified and recorded as a unique depositional event, perhaps a layer, perhaps a pit edge, perhaps a human skeleton, each one contributing to a massive two-dimensional scheme of the stratigraphy and history of Building 3 – its Harris matrix.<sup>3</sup>

Our project was based on the premise that a building was constantly being modified throughout its occupation by the practices and rhythms of its occupants as well as by the vagaries of weather and entropy (Stevanovic 2012, Hodder 2006:16–17), just as Stewart Brand (1994) has described for modern residential buildings. Our aim in analyzing the architectural features and identifying the sequence of

<sup>3</sup>This video uses the north-central platform (Feature 162) and the final burial (Feature 617) of Building 3 at Çatalhöyük to explain how single-context excavation and the Harris matrix work: <https://vimeo.com/337158036>

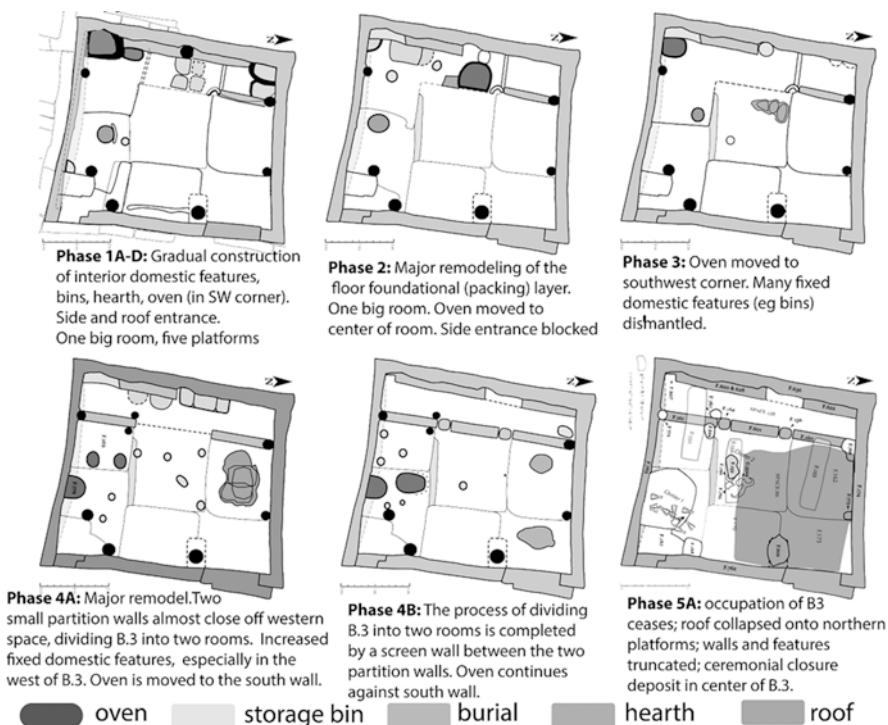


**Fig. 15.6** Micromorphological section of floor plaster layers in 2002. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)

depositional events was to construct the history of Building 3 in order to lay the groundwork for creating the stories about the lives of its residents. The key to tracking the history of the houses, as in any archaeological situation, is the observation of the stratigraphic sequence of layers of deposition; in the case of Building 3 (Fig. 15.6), as in all Çatalhöyük houses, this means observations of the very thin layers created by the residents in their regular (annual?) re-plastering of walls and floors that was a necessity to keep the house alive.

The floor of Building 3 was re-plastered as a single event, in most cases one that was not associated with significant changes. But sometimes, it would involve major changes such as adding or removing a raised platform or reconfiguring its shape and boundary on the new floor, removing a relief sculpture on the wall, adding or taking down a partition wall, blocking and/or removing old storage bins and creating new ones on their stubs, and – significantly – changing the location of the house oven. We defined such major remodeling associations on a floor as “phases” in the history of the house. And we wondered whether such “phase events” were triggered by the death and burial of a resident of the house (Stevanovic 2012:77). A minor but significant event almost definitely associated with some of the burial events of the north-central platform (F.162) was the repeated painting of the walls in red that surround them (Stevanovic 2012:92).

We identified eight phases in the occupation of Building 3 and at least two phases of its gradual abandonment and collapse in the Neolithic (Fig. 15.7), covering a period of perhaps 60 years, 9000 years ago (Stevanovic 2012:51–56). The Neolithic occupation was followed by a 7000-year “rest” with a subsequent short-lived



**Fig. 15.7** The life history of Building 3 in six concentrated layers. (Copyright 2019 Ruth Tringham and Mirjana Stevanovic)

reopening in a series of first-third century AD burial events. Then Building 3 fell into another deep sleep, until – 2000 years later – its exhumation and annihilation in the name of post-processual knowledge of the past.

## Heartfelt Archaeology

Such tracking demanded very slow and detailed excavation, starting with the scraping of the layers of plaster flooring and the thin layer of clay “packing” that lay beneath each one; it demanded corresponding slow and detailed visual and alphanumeric documentation of every event (aided immensely by digital technology).

This detail of field practice resonates with Bill Caraher’s (2013, 2016) “Slow Archaeology”:

Slow archaeology evokes the practice of archaeology as a craft. It prioritizes an embodied attentiveness to the entire process of fieldwork as a challenge to the fragmented perspectives offered by workflows influenced by our own efficient, industrialized age. While recognizing that craft and industrial approaches to archaeology are not mutually exclusive in the dirty realities of fieldwork, the last eighty years of archaeological scholarship and practice have tended to celebrate the potential of industrial technology in archaeological practice at the expense of more integrated approaches associated with pre-industrial, craft production. (Caraher 2013:45–46)

Shawn Graham in his Electric Archaeology blog has suggested – and I agree – that Slow Archaeology is not the prerogative of field archaeology but applies also to the digital work that goes into field and post-field archaeology.

To get the digital stuff to work involves a constant cycle of feedback and productive failure. ‘Digital archaeology’ is sometimes the slowest archaeology around. There’s nothing inherent in the craft aspect of ‘slow’ archaeology that isn’t also true of digital work. Digital work is inefficient in my view – it never works the first time. That’s its strength. It allows us to fail faster, and that’s where the illusion of ‘efficiency’ comes from.....’.<sup>4</sup>

Eric Kansa, writing from the viewpoint of digital data collection and archiving, emphasizes the ethical need for *careful curation*:

The most important value of research data does not center on its scale, efficient collection, or even efficient interoperability. Rather, a slow data approach can highlight how data collection, management, and dissemination practices need to be considered integral to the larger ethical and professional conduct of research.....Slow archaeology captures the notion that we as a professional community should emphasize excellence in the research process, including taking time for thoughtful consideration, not simply high-throughput and efficient production of tangible research outcomes. Slow data is basically the digitized aspects of slow archaeology. (Kansa 2016:466)

All of these authors are promoting an archaeological practice that is organized more along craft lines than the specialized, standardized, assembly-line factory workflow of industrialization. Such practice is not dependent on size of project, nor whether it is paperless or paperful, but on care, attention, and detail of work. None of these authors explicitly mentions whether or not such a practice is more heartfelt or affective, although Shawn Graham approaches with the *quasi haiku* at the end of his blog:

‘Go slow, go with care,  
make through thinking and think through making,  
employ a method of hope,  
engage in the art of inquiry.  
Play.’<sup>5</sup> (RET: I have re-arranged the line breaks)

What they write, however, does resonate with the original inspiration for this chapter – George Saunders, who finds the heart in the specifics of people’s stories and the careful versioning of “slow writing.” One morning in July 2016, I was woken as usual by “Morning Edition” on our public broadcasting station KQED. I was barely awake and trying to block out the dramas of the presidential campaign, when I heard a fragment of an interview with George Saunders – fiction and non-fiction writer, essayist – about an article he had just written for the *New Yorker* called “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?”(Saunders 2016). This is the fragment that inspired me:

You know, as a fiction writer, one of the things you learn is God lives in specificity. You know, human kindness is increased as we pursue specificity... as you revise you always are making it better by being specific and by observing more closely. ....In the process, the piece gets more big-hearted, more fair, it includes more things and more people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Shawn Graham’s blog post is published at: <https://electricarchaeology.ca/2017/03/20/slow-archaeology/>(accessed 5/1/2019).

<sup>5</sup><https://electricarchaeology.ca/2017/03/20/slow-archaeology/>

<sup>6</sup>The text and recording of the complete broadcast can be accessed at: <http://www.npr.org/2016/07/09/485356110/in-search-for-answers-author-george-saunders-covers-trump-campaign>

## The Zen of Excavating

I think that George Saunders' idea of specifics and versioning applies to the way in which we scrape through the layers of dead people's life and death debris at Çatalhöyük.<sup>7</sup> Some of the team, especially Lori Hager and Mirjana Stevanovic, are more skilled and experienced than others. However, at first, when our team from UC Berkeley started the project in 1997, none of us had excavated in mud brick and plaster. We were all trained on wattle-and-daub architectural remains in very different contexts (Tringham and Stevanovic 2012). I swallowed my pride and learned like a nervous apprentice, watching others more experienced than I and trying it out for myself (Fig. 15.8).



**Fig. 15.8** The zen of excavating at Çatalhöyük in 2001: (a) Ruth Tringham. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license), (b) Ruth Tringham and Tish Prouse. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license), (c) the BACH team. (Unless otherwise stated, these images are all copyrighted to members of the Çatalhöyük Research Project, licensed with a Creative Commons 2.5 license)

<sup>7</sup>This video expresses the aura of contemplation and focused concentration that surrounds excavation of layers in Building 3: <https://vimeo.com/336477361>

Then we the apprentices showed the new learners the Zen of excavating that involves both specifics and versioning: if you can't work out the problem, leave it, have a coffee, and come back; or change position and work from another angle; or change hands; ask someone else what they think. Repetition and patience, white on white, no shortcuts, don't look for the immediate solution, don't dig holes, keep it clean and level, and so on. Meanwhile, inside my head, my mind is joyfully busy, making sense of the layers, using all my senses and intuition to plan where my hands-with-trowel should go next, respectfully fearful of the responsibility of the decision. This is how (for me) specificity engenders the heart and passion in archaeological practice.

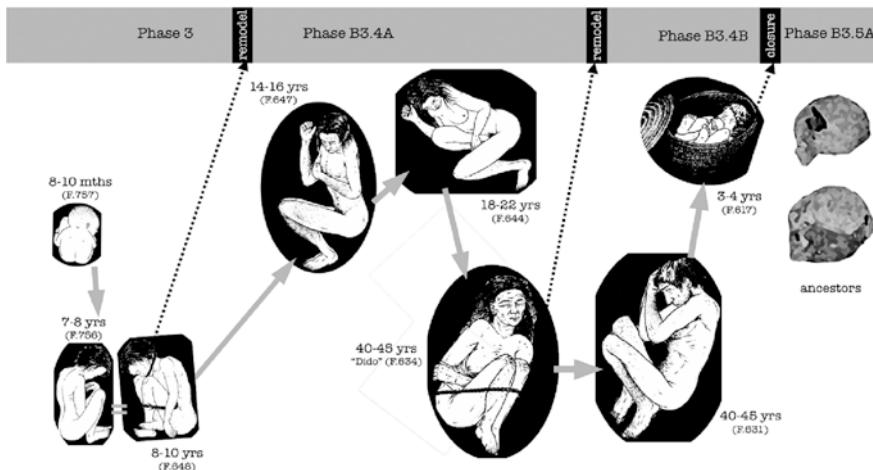
Post-excavation study and publication preparation involves yet more versioning, until, as Saunders writes (2005, 2016, 2017), what emerges (we hope, but do not always succeed in producing) is not a false consensus of "what happened," but a transparent expression of the ambiguity of the past (in our case, the history of Building 3) as represented in the archaeological record (Tringham and Stevanovic 2012). The constrictions of printed publication make this a challenging ambition.

But in the ether of the Cloud and other areas of the Digital World, there are endless opportunities to continue the slow versioning of the interpretation of the source materials of an archaeological project – if they have been curated with care, as Eric Kansa (2016) advises. And, as an example, I end here with just one of the many versions of the life history of Building 3, from the point of view of one of its fictional residents.

## Dido's Life

Unlike the neighboring and slightly later Building 1 that had 55 burials beneath its floors, only 10 people were buried under the floor of Building 3: 2 older adults, 2 teenagers, 3 toddlers, 1 baby, and 2 adult skulls of indeterminate age and sex. Except for the skulls and two toddler boys, each burial was a separate event. The earliest burial occurs in the second half of the history of Building 3 (Phase 3) and is of a baby (Feature 757) in a basket under the central floor of the building. It was followed by the burial of two young boys in the same place. None of these Phase 3 burials are capped by lids. In the subsequent two phases (4A and 4B), however, all the burials were capped by lids. The final burial of a child (Feature 617) triggered (or so we surmise) the closure of Building 3 (Phase 5A) in a ceremony that involved the placement of two skulls on the floor in the center of the building and the partial collapse of its roof to cover the platforms where the burials had occurred (Fig. 15.9).

In Fig. 15.9 I have charted the sequence of burials and noted which ones might (in one scenario) have triggered the remodeling that helps us to distinguish different phases in the history of Building 3. The analysis of human remains, on the basis of which this chart has been created, is published in detail by Lori Hager and Bashak Boz (2012); their chapter is an excellent example of respectful, caring, and careful archaeology. They describe their aim in and the process of "refleshing" the remains (the illustrations were created by John Swogger) as you see them in these charts (Hager and Boz, 2012:300; also see Hawkes and Molleson 2000): "The images



**Fig. 15.9** The sequence of burials in Building 3, noting which ones might have triggered the remodeling that helps us to distinguish different phases. (Copyright 2019 Ruth Tringham)

(reconstructions) represent the principal characters in the story of Building 3, and seeing them as people rather than as skeletons gives us a sense of who they might have been, young or old, male or female. The reconstructions help us see the people who in death, and perhaps in life, were directly linked to Building 3" (Hager and Boz 2012:300).

In this quote, I am reminded of Jane Baxter remarking in her chapter in this book of the strong emotional empathy that archaeologists will have as a response to children's and young people's deaths as "disruptive, transgressive, and outside the expected (or hoped for) natural order of things" (Baxter, Chap. 9, this volume). Even though these burials are many thousands of years prior to those discussed by Jane Baxter, I nevertheless find strong resonance with the emotional affect engendered by the specifics of the archaeological record (including something as mundane as a burial lid) and the careful imagining of details of life and death for which there is little or no tangible evidence.

There is a myriad of small stories that rise up out of the debris of the dead residents in Building 3. I come now to the closely tethered but high-flying flights of imagination that bring light and sound to the silent archaeological remains. I have considered the story of "Dido," the mature 40–45-year-old woman, whose death probably triggered the remodeling of Building 3 in which the active space of the building diminished by closing off access to the western "storage" room, in many versions in many different formats (e.g., Tringham 2015a, b).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The very first version was a 1-minute video of Lori Hager excavating Dido's skull in 2000 which I set to background music of Dido's Lament in Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*, in which Dido sings: "Remember me, but forget my fate." After that, the name Dido for the burial Feature 634 remained.



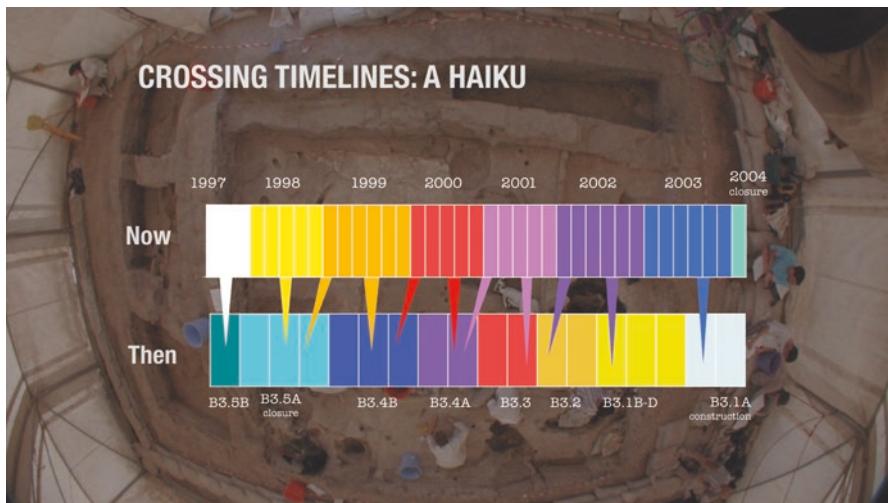
**Fig. 15.10** Dido's life story. (Copyright 2019 Ruth Tringham)

In this version (Fig. 15.10), I pose the possibility that all the dead young people are the offspring of the two older individuals. Working this out brings me face to face with the life of Dido in an uncanny – and quite emotional – way. At the same time, it is a complex algebraic problem to work out the sequence of births and deaths of the Building 3 residents. And there still remains a small mystery of who gave birth to the 3-year-old child (F.617) in the final burial event of Building 3, and who buried him? Dido begins her story: I came here when I was 12. The house I came to live in was not new, but they had made it stronger and more elaborate for us newly betrothed. I have had a long life that I mark by the births and deaths of my loved ones, and a few events in between.....Now read on in the figure.

## Versioning Continues

This version of the story will be frozen by the constrictions of the printing press. But already another version is appearing in an online repository of Dido's story that resides, for the moment, in a temporary collection.<sup>9</sup> The next version may well incorporate an experiment of using emotional nonverbal vocalizations (Tringham 2019). Narratives in the Digital World are never closed or finite. Different versions in different formats online can draw endless, ever richer, more multisensorial narratives from the research base, formats that move, speak, sing, and sigh, that surprise with their juxtapositions, and that enchant the eye (Fig. 15.11). All of these are waiting our heartfelt creativity to get to know the past residents of the earth.

<sup>9</sup>All the media (mostly videos, so far) that are relevant to this chapter are currently gathered together in an online Vimeo Showcase: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/5980186>. Readers should be warned that the videos in this Vimeo Showcase are the only ones in Ruth Tringham's online video archive that are guaranteed not to show images of human remains.



**Fig. 15.11** Crossing Heartfelt Timelines: A Haiku. (Copyright 2019 Ruth Tringham)

### Crossing Timelines Haiku<sup>10</sup>

*Timeline “Now”:* the BACH project from start (1997) to filling in (2004), archaeologists peering back from left to right, into the life history of Building 3.

*Timeline “Then”:* Neolithic residents of the house from construction to closure, living forward from right to left.

At some point, in my mind, these timelines cross;  
*That,*  
 Makes my heart beat faster at its possibilities.

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<sup>10</sup>A more dynamic version of this haiku can be found at <https://vimeo.com/337175758>

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