During the 25-year-long excavation project at the Neolithic central Anatolian site of Çatalhöyük, Ian Hodder has been able to confront archaeological data with extraordinary innovation, giving life to data through a detailed reconstruction based on complex theoretical approaches. In particular, the relationship between material culture and religion in the process of reconstructing ancient spiritualities has been a pivotal subject tackled by Hodder and the members of his research team during recent years. Thus, this book represents another extraordinary dowel in his research plan to reconstruct forms of religiosity of communities of early settlers in the Neolithic Near East. More specifically, the contributions to this edited volume aim at establishing a framework for a better understanding of the concept of “history making.”

In the introductory chapter Hodder clearly explains this concept, which is based on memory construction created as a result of the continual repetition of social practices and commemorative behaviors by the members of a given community. In so doing, Hodder merges Bourdieu’s practice theory and Connerton’s social memories into a well-constructed theoretical tenet that makes “commemorative history making” a fundamental social practice. This is especially true for Neolithic communities, which, due to the socio-economic transformation involved with agriculture and animal breeding, made residency a fundamental element in finding their communal identity. It is the case at Çatalhöyük, where the continuous reconstruction of buildings and the presence of relics of ritual practices create a continuum of habitual behaviors. For example, in Buildings 59 and 60 “there is an example of an obsidian projectile point kept/owned in a house for the duration of fourteen wall re-plasterings” (p. 7). Thus, according to Hodder (p. 8), “history making refers to continuities produced both by habituated practices and by commemorative links to the past.”

Drawing on these theoretical premises, the following ten chapters tackle diverse archaeological correlates of history making in the Neolithic Near East:

Chapter 1 by Shults and Wildman tries to answer a general hypothesis based on the ontological value of religion in transitioning to sedentarization. In so doing, the authors use an interesting combination of a theoretical approach (i.e., religious entanglement) with agent-based computer modeling. The resultant charts are based on variables assigned to domesticated plants and animals that can entangle agro-pastoral activities with religious behavior. Even though the challenge is fascinating, I found it difficult to follow their charts and the codes assigned to the variables in relationship with a human-thing nexus. Probably a clearer presentation of the agent-based model would have helped the reader.

The relationship between the origins of early agriculture, settled life, history and place making, and ritual practices during the Neolithic is the subject of Chapter 2, written by Wendy Matthews. In her contribution, she decides to focus on three key questions: 1) the timing of the emergence of history making at particular places and if there is any correlation between agricultural intensification, population increase, and social competition; 2) the relationship between repetitive building and cosmological patterning in creating (and sustaining) durable historical ties to places, ancestors, and long-term social relationships that are typical of delayed-return agricultural systems; 3) indication of differences between the Zagros and the rest of the Near East in terms of ritual practices. The author faces these three pivotal themes using macro- and micro-archaeological analyses of contexts from the Zagros and Çatalhöyük. In particular, micro-stratigraphic and micro-morphological analyses allow researchers to clearly identify a detailed sequence of surfaces and deposits that can be useful in interpreting how given communities created historical ties with places through forms of continuity in settled life. Through a detailed analysis of a high number of thin sections of surfaces, the author suggests that: 1) with
the increase in settled life, “deposition was much more rapid and repeated, indicating greater investment in place making and history making” (p. 89); 2) it is possible to identify a relationship between repetitive reconstruction of buildings and cosmological patterning due to an extraordinary continuity in the resurfacing of the floors of the buildings, the layout of settlements and buildings, and burial of the dead; 3) the archaeological contexts in the Zagros demonstrate no differences in ritual practices as compared to other Near Eastern regions.

Chapter 3 by Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen moves geographically further west to observe the importance of “shared history construction” and long-term memories among the communities inhabiting the southern Levant during the Epipaleolithic. As highlighted by the authors, such an investigation focuses on pre-sedentary or semi-sedentary societies that differed from settled communities and, as a consequence, requires the identification of different archaeological evidences of shared history. One of the clear elements of shared continuity among these communities is the one related to the treatment of the dead recognizable since the Natufian period. Skull removal and decoration is a typical trait of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic in the Levant and, according to the authors (p. 107), “the skulls ‘lost’ their individuality as persons and became a group symbol of ‘the ancestors’ or ‘parent figures’” and, thus, “they clearly indicate a continuum, bridging the living members of the group with those who had passed away.”

Chapter 4 (by Clare, Dietrich, Notroff, and Sönmez) analyzes the late-tenth-millennium BCE monumental stone circular buildings with T-shaped decorated monoliths, brought to light at the southeastern Turkish site of Göbekli Tepe by an international team of archaeologists directed until his death by Klaus Schmidt (to whom the whole volume is dedicated). The Schmidt’s research highlighted the importance of the enclosures as part of a process of history making that, through repetitive building, “could have been used to encourage group identity and to promote a sense of belonging to a common ‘cultic community’” (p. 115). In order to demonstrate such a statement, the authors utilize a biographical approach based on three fundamental stages of life—erection, modification, and burial—of the enclosures. In addition, their monumentality, the feasting associated with the ceremonial activities performed during their use, and the incorporation of recycled and curated pillars in new buildings appear as possible elements “to legitimize claims of ancestral descent” (p. 115), thus validating their role in history making in the process of Neolithization in southeastern Turkey.

In Chapter 5 (by Benz, Alt, Erdal, Şahin, and Özkaya), we find ourselves in a similar geographical and chronological context. However, the case study of Körtik Tepe represents a small-sized (ca. 1.5 hectare) example of an early settled community near the Tigris River in which no signs of monumentality are present. Instead, the settlement is marked by the presence of a continued use and reuse of circular buildings characterized by the location of human burials under the floor. In the houses, the combination of communal practices, i.e., daily activities of a proto-Neolithic village, with the presence of ancestral figures buried underneath the floor clearly represents a palimpsest for structuring the present with the continual presence of memories of the past represented by the buried bodies. In addition, the relationship between the members of the community was mediated by the use of highly-decorated stone objects (especially chlorite vessels and ritual objects) representing a complex domain of symbolic meanings that aimed at a ritual dimension, similar to the one recognizable at Göbekli Tepe that was focused on enhancing the sense of belonging to a given community. Thus, I agree with the authors (p. 153) that at Körtik Tepe “the built environment and the enhanced use of symbols in stone during the early Holocene contributed to an objectification and permanence of memories and concepts.”

The importance of creating symbols collectively in order to establish a sense of community is a topic also tackled by Güneş Duru in Chapter 6. According to the author (p. 171), “the material culture woven with rituals and stories should have sped up the formation of a regional cosmology” as is the case of the previously mentioned stone buildings of Göbekli Tepe. In addition, “after the first thousand years of sedentism, the symbolic elements that kept communities
together likely transformed into a doctrinal belief system, forming an almost ‘public’ administration/organization.” 

This stimulating contribution is based on the case study of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Aşılık Höyük in central Anatolia and especially on the continual reuse of the public buildings there (as is the case of Building T). Duru brings to the reader food for thought about the creation and use of a “common symbolic ideological world” (p. 176) by the communities of the Neolithic as part of a communal strategy for the reification of an “upper identity” linked to the sense of belonging to a specific community by the involved individuals. Using such a perspective, the system of symbols will create “pressure on the individuals in the form of increasing regulation of public behavior, and individuals isolate this stress in their own private spaces: the houses” (p. 179).

In Chapter 7 Mark Anspach not only transitions the reader from the site of Aşılık Höyük to Çatalhöyük, but also moves our attention from “communal/ritual buildings,” typical of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, to a more domestic dimension that will become a marker of the ceramic Neolithic. In following this path, the author considers the burning hearth fire as the central element in the inclusive force that will bring religion from special (or ritual) buildings into the house. The hearth will thus become “a sacred marker of ancestral attachment to place” (p. 186). Thus, in comparing Aşılık Höyük with Çatalhöyük, Anspach tries to assign a sacred value to hearths that moves from public/ceremonial buildings into houses, but then he states that “when every house is a temple, a temple is no longer what it once was” (p. 206). I believe that it is quite dangerous to assign such a heuristic value to only one element; only a set of archaeological correlates can allow archaeologists to interpret a context as a locale of potential religious practices.

The last three chapters are dedicated to Çatalhöyük and I have found Rosemary Joyce’s contribution (Chapter 8) of great interest in reaching the aim traced by Hodder in his introduction, that is, defining history making through the use of archaeological correlates. In this case, Joyce uses pottery production and consumption at Çatalhöyük as a useful nexus for defining the reproduction of continuity that is at the base of the process of history making. In particular, I have found the author’s approach to knowledge very stimulating (i.e., knowledge of material sources, technological knowledge, ceremonial knowledge) as an immaterial property that is central for the creation of a sense of continuity for a community. Knowledge is in fact transmitted through a generation and in a context of early settled societies, as is the case of Çatalhöyük: the technological knowledge of pottery making is one of the key elements in the process of creating history making.

It is also the combination of the knowledge of ritual acts with daily practices that is a key element in establishing history making at Çatalhöyük. This is the subject tackled by Christina Tsoraki in Chapter 9. In particular, her attention turns towards investigating the relationship between “the identities of the house and the social entities tied to it” (p. 253). In so doing, she follows the path laid down by Joyce in the previous chapter in regards to the importance of immaterial property in ceremonial contexts. Accordingly, it is difficult to distinguish between functional and ritual aspects of a community’s life, because they are part of the same process of memory construction that is enacted through social practices. Interestingly, at Çatalhöyük fragments of objects were kept together to become part of the process of remembrance and commemoration of ritualized practices that served the purpose of consolidating identities.

The last chapter (10) is devoted to the 3D reconstruction of a house at Çatalhöyük created by Nicola Lercari (the author of the contribution). Through this reconstruction it is possible to experience the tri-dimensional perception ancient inhabitants had of things that were involved in the religious and social practices.

In conclusion, this volume is a great journey through the Near Eastern Neolithic period that helps the reader understand the relationship between religiosity and daily practices. In particular, it gives us an interesting transformative perspective: In earlier periods, after beginning the process of sedentarization, the history making of the community was centered around communal special buildings; during later periods however, when the process of sedentarization was fully completed, the house with its entanglement between daily and ritual practices becomes the locale for establishing familial history through repetitive behaviors.