

SPECIAL SECTION: HOUSEHOLDS MAKE HISTORY IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

## INTRODUCTION

Mesoamerican archaeologists were key innovators in the field of household archaeology (Wilk and Rathje 1982) at its inception in the late 1970s and 1980s (Carballo 2011; Flannery 1976; Manzanilla 1986; Santley and Hirth 1993; Robin 2003; Wilk and Ashmore 1988). Indeed, it is interesting to note that in this journal alone, we have published more than 200 papers that deal directly or indirectly with ancient Mesoamerican households and the activities of their members (for example, Hirth 1995; McAnany and López Varela 1999; Manzanilla and Barba 1990; Moore and Gasco 1990; Paine and Freter 1996; Sheets 1990, 2000; Webster et al. 1997). In addition, a number of books and edited volumes have appeared in recent years on ancient Mesoamerican households, their daily practices, activities, and relations (Gonlin and Lohse 2007; Hendon 2010; Hutson 2010; Lohse and Valdez 2004; Robin 2012, 2013). Thus, it seems reasonable to assert that Mesoamericanists have played a significant role in the development of household archaeology.

How did this development take place? Was it prompted by other, broader developments in Mesoamerican archaeology and archaeology in general? And why did it not begin earlier than the late 1970s and 1980s? To address first the broader developments, since the 1980s many archaeologists have embraced a series of postprocessual or poststructural theoretical concerns developed in the humanities and social sciences. “Postprocessual” refers to these concerns as they relate specifically to archaeological theory, while “poststructural” relates more to general social theory. Postprocessual archaeology may be summarized by three major characteristics discussed by Orser (2002:444):

- (1) Men, women, and children are perceived as actively engaged in their social worlds. More than mere participants in the daily routines of life, people actively construct, structure, and negotiate society’s rules and culture’s established norms.
- (2) Postprocessual archaeologists tend to focus on the individual rather than the broad, behavioral generalizations of processual archaeology. Men and women exercise agency to create actively their own lives on a daily basis.
- (3) Postprocessual archaeologists tend to envision social change as being contingent or contextual, that is, linked to a specific time and place. The general conception is that the past cannot be understood adequately without situating individuals within their social and cultural milieu.

It is important to realize that the postprocessual trend in archaeology today exists alongside processual archaeology and that the latter is a “still-thriving intellectual movement” (Sabloff 2008:43). Gamble (2008:34–37) equates postprocessualism with interpretive

archaeology and identifies five main elements: symbolism, material culture, hermeneutics, narrative, and [poststructural] social theory. Gamble identifies four social theorists who have been especially influential in “framing our debates about the mutualistic character of social life and the need for reflexivity”: Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens. These scholars share a concern with practical consciousness, the notion that most of our social existence is based on habitual, practical action. Transposing these concerns to archaeology as historical social science, as Arthur Joyce (2010:20) has noted, “poststructural social theory endeavors to bring people and cultural meanings into understandings of culture and history.” Rather than function and cultural evolution, which were the focus of processual archaeology, postprocessualism is more comfortable with agency, structure, structuration, practice, and the related concerns of the individual and individual action, the interplay between action and social structures, the construction of social being, intentionality, indeterminacy, the power to act, and domination and resistance.

The term “agency” has been used confusingly and imprecisely in contemporary archaeology with different analysts employing their own (sometimes unique) conception of the term (Dornan 2002: 304; Pauketat 2001:79). Hodder (2000:22) noted that early (meaning early 1980s) uses of the term must be understood in opposition to the term “behavior,” with an emphasis on individual action, intentionality, and indeterminacy as opposed to the behaviorism and structural determinism of the large-scale systems and processes studied by processual archaeology (Binford 1962, 1965). The term “agency” became a code word for dealing with individual action. But by the mid- to late 1980s, it became clear that individuals were difficult, if not impossible, to identify in archaeological contexts, and the emphasis on the individual shifted to a focus on “power to act” based on control of strategic resources such as prestige goods or esoteric knowledge (Hodder 2000: 22–23; see also Johnson 1989:189–191).

Joyce’s account of agency in the founding of Monte Albán, the ancient Zapotec city in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico, at about 500 B.C. provides an excellent illustration of Hodder’s summary:

Agency refers to the actions of individual social actors embedded within a broader sociocultural and ecological setting. ... Individuals have motivation, purpose, and interests while entities like social groups, coalitions, and institutions do not have goals beyond those that are negotiated by their members. ... Agency, however, does not imply a voluntarism in which atomistic individuals are driven solely by personal motivations.

Agency cannot be considered apart from its structural context. Structure consists of principles and resources that both enable and constrain agency such as religious beliefs or prestige goods. Principles include symbols and meanings as well as rules for behavior that are learned, both directly and indirectly, from the people with whom one interacts. (Joyce 2000:71–72)

This passage encompasses the full range of significations of “agency” to which Hodder (2000:22–23) alludes. Note the qualifier that “agency cannot be considered apart from its structural context,” reminding one of Giddens’ (1979) duality of structure and Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) transcendence of the false polarity of agency and structure. This is a point well worth remembering but one that tends to be forgotten or ignored by those who prefer to emphasize agency over structure. “Agency is implied by the existence of structures,” as Sewell (1992:20) reminds us, and it would be impossible for agency to exist in the absence of the structures within which agents operate, act, and react. “Structure” refers to the aspects of social context over which individuals have no direct control. Some structures appear quite obvious, even tangible, others seem much more difficult to perceive or identify.

Agency and structure are mediated through social practice, defined as established ways of doing things in social life, routines of behavior that become characteristic of a particular society, “inscribed into people’s behaviour a bit like well-trodden footpaths in the countryside” (Ransome 2010:iii). According to Ortner (1984:149), one of the leading voices of contemporary practice theory in anthropology, practice is “anything people do,” but “the most significant forms of practice are those with intentional or unintentional political implications.” Pauketat (2001:73), who follows Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Ortner (1984), defines social

This Special Section is intended to highlight Mesoamerican archaeology’s current role in demonstrating the importance of households in the shaping of society. We take as our point of departure that Mesoamerican archaeologists have long established the household as a critical unit of analysis in ancient society and build forward to situate the active role played by the diverse constellation of actors who inhabited ancient Mesoamerican households in relation to the constitution of society.

Research on the practices and experiences of ancient Mesoamerican farmers, fishers, cooks, and crafters does more than fill in details about what life was like beyond palaces, temples, and civic centers. The decisions made and actions taken by these agents can impact broader social structures and even change the course of society. Thus, an archaeology of everyday life forms part of an ambitious social archaeology, that engages both households and societies and the actors and actions that constituted them. There has been a long history of research on how central authorities affect the populace, but less attention has been paid to exploring how a heterogeneous populace can affect the formation and exercise of authority. The articles in this Special Section present theoretically informed, empirically grounded case studies from across Mesoamerica that document the myriad ways in which household strategies can condition or transform the historical contexts of their reproduction. Rather than replace top-down approaches with bottom-up approaches, the authors of the articles that follow seek to develop a relational archaeology that focuses on how actors and social structures operating at a

practice in an archaeological context as “what people did and how they negotiated their views of others and of their own pasts.” This understanding of social practice as relational and political is an important corrective to the top-down bias of earlier, processual analyses.

It should be clear now why a true focus on households did not come into archaeology until the 1980s ushered in a concern with the individual, agency-structure, and practice. The emphasis on cultural evolution, complexity, and hierarchy in processual archaeology obscured the importance of the household and individual action. With settlement archaeology as the dominant approach for studying regional social and political organization, trade, interaction, and complexity, individual households and action seemed quite trifling. Within this context, with a focus on ecological, systemic, and functionalist concerns, individual sites and, thus, individual households as well, could not be regarded as important objects of study (Trigger 2006:377). The individual structure representing an archaeological household was always, in theory at least, a basic unit of analysis of settlement archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s (Trigger 1967). But studies of individual structures representing households were undertaken primarily for the purpose of seeking a larger pattern and were seldom, if ever, seen as windows on individual or household agency. Today many archaeologists would argue that those larger patterns, such as indicators of social, economic, or ethnic distinctions, remain compelling and important, but also that analysis at the scale of the household offers the intriguing possibility of exploring agency and action at that level.

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variety of scales (micro, meso, and macro) mutually constitute one another.

An assumed binary opposition between household life and political life (mis)characterizes households as a lesser opposite of power and politics in society. From this viewpoint households represent places devoid of political interaction as power and the generation of hierarchy are seen as the purview of powerful actors and processes developed in civic centers. Dominant actors impose their power on less powerful actors whose only options are to resist or accept domination. The articles herein challenge this formulation by demonstrating that households are important arenas of social, political, economic, and religious life that can exert their own force on history and society. Household excavations often show that politics is not a matter of imposition from above. The actions and interactions of household members have political dimensions which may be manifest through domestic ritual practices, feasts, production, identity formation, gender relations, and so on. The social relationships that household residents develop through productive activities or ritual life create potent networks that residents can draw upon in the negotiation of authority. As households do not exist in isolation, community affiliations created by household members can develop strength in numbers that gives leverage in political negotiations. The ideas and ideologies developed in households may inform the structures of authority that states develop. While a major focus of research into the operation of the tributary states common across Mesoamerica has been on how power brokers extract tribute from households, Mesoamerican ethnohistorical evidence indicates that

households can play a role in negotiating tribute demands and that at times tribute was even voluntary. This observation demands that archaeologists explore the role that activities in households may have played in structuring extractive relationships.

In showing how households can actively shape the broader structures of power, status, and authority in society, the articles that follow underscore the central importance of the lives and strategies of the diverse constellations of actors that inhabited ancient Mesoamerica. In the first paper, **Cynthia Robin, Laura Kosakowsky, Angela Keller, and James Meierhoff** examine the households of leaders, farmers, and crafters at the Maya farming community of Chan in Belize to illustrate how daily life within households can have political dimensions and effect social organization. Robin and colleagues look across Chan's 2,000-year history (800 B.C.–A.D. 1200) to provide the time depth to demonstrate how novel forms of political practices can arise through household interaction. Community leaders and household residents across the community crafted community-focused political practices that were distinctive from the normative, individual-focused political practices of the Classic Maya kings, and may have influenced the later development of more diverse political strategies in the Maya area in the Postclassic period.

In the second paper, **Arthur Joyce, Marc Levine, Stacie King, Jessica Hedgepeth Balkin, and Sarah Barber** illustrate how the everyday practices of commoners in the lower Río Verde Valley on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca, Mexico, contributed to social change and negotiations between elites and commoners which shape new political dynamics. Drawing upon residential excavations, Joyce and colleagues identify that in the Early Postclassic period (A.D. 800–1100), following the collapse of Classic polities and ruling dynasties, commoners took advantage of the absence of regional authority to gain greater political and economic autonomy. When the lower Verde was dominated by powerful rulers from the city of Tututepec in the subsequent Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1100–1522), their political power needed to be crafted through negotiations between leaders and the more autonomous commoners. Joyce and colleagues demonstrate that power does not just exist beyond the household and in the hands of elites, but is mutually constituted through negotiations between leaders and commoners.

**Rosemary Joyce, Julia Hendon, and Jeanne Lopiparo** take the perspective of the crafter to explore pottery production between A.D. 500 and 1000 in the lower Ulua Valley, Honduras. Through a discussion of the variation in clay sources and kilns documented in the Ulua Valley, Joyce and colleagues show the complexity of the knowledge and experience possessed by potters. Given the wide variety of clay products documented archaeologically, learning required communities of practice in which more experienced potters allow beginners to contribute actively with simple but important tasks. This perspective not only sheds new light on why molds were used in the absence of mass production, it highlights internal complexity within households. Communities of practice existed within households but were not isomorphic with the household.

**Scott Hutson and Jacob Welch** in the fourth paper discuss power relations between Uci, a small center in northwest Yucatan, and households in Uci's hinterland during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic (300 B.C.–A.D. 600). They find that hinterland households worked to build sacred landscapes that ensured a degree of ritual autonomy from Uci. In discussing the fact that builders of humble houses and builders of monumental architecture both used the same megalithic construction style, Hutson and Welch

explore a variety of models that explain the sharing of this style and highlight the agency of actors in all contexts.

**Kristin De Lucia and Lisa Overholtzer's** attention in the following paper to the everyday actions of ordinary people living in households at the regional center of Xaltocan in the northern Basin of Mexico illustrates the mutually constituting relationship between households and broader social, political, and economic institutions. Through the analysis of long-term change at a range of households at Xaltocan, De Lucia and Overholtzer document that the actions of ordinary commoners founded Xaltocan, contributed to its rise in power, and may have helped contribute to its downfall. From its founding in A.D. 900 to its conquest by the Tepanecs in A.D. 1395, the decisions made by residents of Xaltocan's households affected, in intended and unintended ways, broader social institutions. De Lucia and Overholtzer's study demonstrates that households are not just influenced by broader society, but they also influence society in intended and unintended ways.

Finally, **David Carballo, Jennifer Carballo, and Richard Lesure** follow with data from serving vessels and personal adornment in Formative period (900 B.C.–A.D. 100) Tlaxcala to comment on the emergence of status- and age-based identities. They find that from the Middle Formative to the Late Formative, decorated ceramic serving vessels decrease while the proportion of serving vessels to storage and cooking vessels increases. At the same time, the presence of beads and ear adornments increases. As events involving food service within the household clearly became important venues for social interaction, the increase in stylistic adornment linked to specific individuals (earplugs/flares and beads) as opposed to the broader household (decorations on pots) might imply a closer focus on individual identity.

The articles in this Special Section share the notion that polity and household are indivisible. Households are the contexts in which all agents, from monarchs to *milperos*, become legitimate, intelligible selves through their daily accommodation with cultural conventions. The articles show that it is within households that actors learn, often nondiscursively, appropriate ways of wearing ornaments, preparing food, building houses, and shaping clay. Households not only shape people into subjects who will be taken seriously by others, they also provide the symbolic and material resources that authorize and empower them to act on the political scene. These articles also demonstrate that households are part of such a scene and do not merely respond to it. Daily practices in households generate political innovations and create the conditions for the possibility of political action. Forty years of household archaeology in Mesoamerica have positioned us to see households not just as units of analysis but as relations whose tendrils touch upon a formidable array of institutions and processes. If mapping and conceptualizing this array takes another forty years, the articles presented here should be recognized as significant mileposts.

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