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Household Archaeology and Reconstructing Social Organization in Ancient Complex Societies: A Consideration of Models and Concepts Based on Study of the Prehispanic Maya

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Abstract

Studies of the settlement pattern in the Copan Valley, Honduras, indicate that a House society model provides the best way to understand the social organization of the Late Classic period Maya. The House society model, based on Levi-Strauss's original work but since modified by anthropologists and archaeologists, does not replace household archaeology. Instead, the model allows archaeologists to discuss the continuation of social identity over time.

Household Archaeology and Reconstructing Social Organization

in Ancient Complex Societies: A Consideration of Models

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Abstract: Archaeologists have long proposed that social organization and settlement pattern should be linked based on the patterned arrangement of visible archaeological remains. For the Classic period Maya, this proposition has lead first to attempts to reconstruct kinship systems and second to a focus on the household. The household as a social institution has proved to be a useful alternative to the search for mentalist social structures. However, much household archaeology has not come to grips with issues of practice and agency. Household archaeology leaves unaddressed how members of society constructed identities for themselves and affiliated themselves with groups larger than or different from the household. Using the Copan Valley, Honduras, as a case study, I consider the strengths and limitations of the household as an analytical concept and discuss the advantages of incorporating a "house societies" model into our reconstructions of Classic period Maya society, not as a replacement for the household but as an additional focus of social identity and action. Such a model, which builds on the original concept of Claude Lévi-Strauss, foregrounds archaeologically visible phenomena, the social negotiation of continuity and the material symbolization of stability.

People in Mesoamerica were (and are) part of multiple social groups, some overlapping, some nested. The identities created by membership in these groups were crosscut and informed by concepts of gender, age, rank (or "class"), and kinship, ties to particular places, and shared beliefs and values. The identities created by these affiliations have political consequences and economic purpose. Study of Prehispanic Maya society from an anthropological perspective has long considered the definition, role, and import of such groupings to be an important focus of research. Among the groups most often discussed in Maya studies are household, community, nation, class, and descent group (lineage, clan, etc.). Due in part to the presence of discrete and visible mounds arranged in patterned ways on the landscape, in part to the connection noted by researchers between post-conquest Maya social organization and the disposition of houses on the landscape (e.g., Ricketson 1937; Wauchope 1938; Vogt 1969), and in part to the early introduction of settlement pattern research into the field (Willey et al. 1965, although anticipated by Ricketson and Wauchope), Maya archaeology has developed a set of physical equivalencies for at least some of these social groupings: the house, the patio group (a set of houses arranged around a courtyard), the cluster of patio groups, the site, and the regional settlement system (see Ashmore 1981; Willey and Bullard 1965). (For purposes of this discussion, I leave to one side the important issues of non-mound occupation and of the degree of fit between the above-surface remains mapped during survey and the population of Prehispanic structures [see Hendon 1992b; Pyburn 1989]). Of these physical equivalencies, the site and the regional settlement system, although their boundaries are not always easy to define on the ground, have the most stable conceptual association with social and political organization, with the site being equated with the community and the settlement system with the nation (or "polity").

How to determine the social organization embodied in the house, patio group, and cluster

of patio groups has been a more vexed question for two reasons: first, what is the correct description of Maya social organization and second, how to "see" such organization archaeologically? Archaeologists agree that there should be some correlation between spatial layout and social organization but have disagreed on the nature of that organization and the correlation (see Bullard 1964; Fash 1983; Haviland 1968, Hendon 1991; Hopkins 1988; Joyce 1981; Kurjack 1974; Sanders 1981, 1989; Sharer 1993; Thompson 1982; Witschey 1991). A common feature of analyses of social organization, however, has been the framework within which they have operated. The majority of attempts to discuss Maya social organization started from the assumption that kinship should be its organizing principle, over which one might see a secondary, class-based structure. Although such research drew its inspiration, and its particular models, from ethnographic studies of 20th-century Maya, such as Evon Vogt's (1969) study of Zinacantan, it should be noted that it operated within a larger anthropological framework that assumed the reality, nature, and function of kinship in premodern societies. Not generally reflected in the study of Classic Maya kinship is the critique of the anthropological study of kinship that has led to a rethinking of the validity of such studies (Schneider 1984; Yanagisako and Collier 1987; see also Gillespie 2000d; Hendon and Joyce 2001).

The introduction of the "household" into Maya archaeology by Richard Wilk and William Rathje (1982) provided an alternative way to move from physical remains to social formations that, judging by the rapid adoption of both the term and the rubric, "household archaeology", has been very useful to archaeologists (see Santley and Hirth 1993; Sheets et al. 1990; Wilk and Ashmore 1988) The household has become ubiquitous in research focused on issues of social or economic organization. Most Mesoamerican research on the household traces its roots to Wilk and Rathje's 1982 article published in a special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* (see also

Ashmore and Wilk 1988). In that article, Wilk and Rathje provided archaeologists with a convenient and effective definition of the household as "the most common social component of subsistence, the smallest and most abundant activity group" (Wilk and Rathje 1982:618) that has four main functions: transmission, reproduction, distribution, and production. By emphasizing that a household can be understood in terms of its social and economic functions and the tasks it performs, this definition provided archaeologists with one relatively easy to operationalize and address with archaeological data. It was also in alignment with the dominant ecological and systems models of the time. This definition, or variants thereof, continue to appear in archaeological writings on the household although the range of activities and social relations encompassed in Wilk and Rathje's four functions has not been fully explored.

Bringing the household forward as an institution worthy of study gave new legitimacy in Maya archaeology to the study of "the rest of society" or the "non-elite" (Robin 1999; Webster and Gonlin 1988), an area of study conventionally addressed through survey and frequently seen, even by its supporters, as the poor relation of the research on the monumental architecture and art of the politico-religious centers. In fact, household archaeology built on an earlier division of labor in Maya studies between excavation and survey, where the latter would allow study of "the peasant segment of society, represented archaeologically by modest ruin mounds of domestic houses" (Willey and Bullard 1965:360) as a counterpart to excavations in the (presumed) empty politico-religious centers. As the dominant model of Maya society has shifted away from the idea of empty centers and priests towards city states, rulers, and factional competition (Becker 1976; Marcus 1993; Pohl and Pohl 1994), "domestic houses" have become even more interesting as sources of information on craft production and social structure, particularly differences in social status or wealth (Abrams 1994; Ashmore and Wilk 1988; Carmean 1991; Gonlin 1993; Hendon

1991, 1992a; Inomata and Stiver 1998; Kintz 1983; Lucero 1994; Tourtellot et al. 1992).

Despite the undoubted contribution of the introduction of the household as a meaningful unit of analysis, there are nevertheless certain limitations to its usefulness which can be traced narrowly to its initial definition and more broadly, to the theoretical framework implicit in that definition. It is unfortunately the case that a strict adherence to the concept of the household as a functional unit limits one's ability to address issues of power, practice, and agency. Such processes operate in households as much as in other areas of society. Blanton (1995) has argued convincingly that inequality, and its ideological justification, start with the household. Viewing the household as an institution whose primary function is to be an adaptive mechanism becomes less and less tenable (Hendon 1996; Pauketat 2001). Defining the household as the smallest activity group or social unit provides no way to address the internal diversity of households, which are made up, at the least, of individuals of different genders and ages. Taking the household as the lowest common denominator makes it difficult to consider how economic and social relations are created and infused with meaning through the actions of agents who are not necessarily of one mind (Clark 2000; Hart 1992; Hendon 1996). At the same time, households are neither interchangeable entities nor seamlessly integrated into a functional system of nested settlement units. They are part of larger communities and household-level organization and action are relevant to understanding the social development of the larger aggregate. Furthermore, in complex societies, where inequality has been institutionalized and materialized, one size does not fit all, either in the sense of the households themselves or their imprint on the social landscape.

Understanding the political consequences of people's actions has been poorly developed in household archaeology and especially in the Maya area where political actors are often

assumed to be only those holding formal political office or named in hieroglyphic texts. In my

own research, I have tried to address the political import of the development by high status

people of a distinct social identity that is based physically and ideologically in living areas and

reproduced through ritual, gendered economic action, and use of space, drawing primarily on the

rich body of data from the Copan valley (see Hendon 1991, 1997, 1999, n.d.a, n.d.c). In the

process, I have become aware of the limitations of the concept of the household. I believe that the

household is still useful if defined with greater attention to issues of practice and agency (see

Allison 1999; Hendon 1996, n.d.b; Pauketat 2001; Tringham 1991). However, it should not be

the only social institution in our analytical toolkit.

It seems time for another set of concepts and a new model with which to make sense of

those concepts, a model which helps explain unequal social relations while emphasizing practice,

gender, and materiality. The concept of the House, derived from Lévi-Strauss' original

formulation but refined through subsequent analysis (see Gillespie 2000a, 2000b) presents

archaeologists with an alternative analytical approach that is archaeologically visible, better

suited to the study of certain interesting anthropological questions, and explains Maya social

organization more satisfactorily than a lineage model. The House may be defined as a

perpetuating collective social entity which transcends individuals or even individual genealogies,

encompasses not only people but also land, tangible and intangible resources, and is embodied in

material culture. Unlike traditional models of kinship, Houses are not corporate and do not rely

on a notion of blood relationship to define membership, although such a notion may be used as

one way of incorporating individuals into a House (see Chance 2000; Gillespie 2000c, 2000d;

Gillespie and Joyce 1997; Hendon n.d.a, n.d.c; Hendon and Joyce 2001; Joyce 2000; Sandstrom

2000) for some recent applications of this model to Mesoamerican societies). In complex

societies, the significance and material signature of House organization may be most marked for high-ranking House members or for high-ranking Houses. Nevertheless, as Tringham (2000) has argued, a strong sense of continuity and place may be manifest in less powerful social groups or in less stratified societies. The concept of enduring, collective social identities provides a useful alternative to a purely functional definition of the household and overcomes the atomism inherent in the concept of household.

The House model enriches our understanding of the physical houses found archaeologically. These houses can be seen as embodying a House-focused identity and forming part of a socially constructed and meaningful landscape. The physical house in Mesoamerica, defined broadly here to include interior and exterior space of the patio group that is lived in and used as part of daily life, and is the setting of the most intimate forms of day-to-day interaction, is the locale where House members can most directly inscribe on the landscape their idea of an enduring and stable social formation that is reproduced and changed over time through social action (Connerton 1991; Giddens 1993). It is through the differences in intimacy, visibility, and scale created by the combination of the architectural form of the residential space and the actions carried out within those spaces that people create and contest their sense of group identity (Hendon and Joyce 2001; Joyce and Hendon 2000). Elite Houses in the Copan valley created a setting which facilitated their use of access, knowledge, and memory to define themselves as separate from one another and from the institutionalized rulers (Hendon 2000).

Although group identity may be explained as a set of normative rules based on kinship and descent, it is through practice that group identity is really formed and maintained. Practice, or the assigning of value to action (Bourdieu 1977), is both pragmatic and symbolic, expressing the group's interdependence through complementary economic roles and shared rituals. Susan

McKinnon (1991), writing on the Tanimbar Islands, defines a "House" as a spatial, economic, and psychological entity to which people belong. A Tanimbar House has a physical representation in the long-house occupied by men and unmarried women who claim a shared descent. But it is the activities that the residents undertake to ensure the group's survival and reproduction on both the practical and spiritual levels that bind them together in their own minds and set their House apart from the others in a village. Gillespie and Joyce (1997) have demonstrated that marriage alliances among elite and royal Maya Houses became real through the exchange of gendered goods. Heirlooms, symbolic of the continuity of group identity over generations, also played a role in the maintenance of the enduring collective social identity we call the House (Joyce 2000), an entity perpetuated by the objects, by the act of situating them in particular contexts, and by the memory of those acts (Hendon 2000).

In the Copan River valley, a centralized polity dominated by a dynasty of paramount rulers developed during the Classic period. Settlement in the Copan Valley during the Late Classic period (ca. AD 650-800), revolves around the Main Group, a collection of monuments and massive religious, governmental, and residential buildings built for and used mainly by the rulers of the Copan polity. Surrounding the Main Group is a densely settled ring of elite residential compounds, occupation of which continues to at least AD 1000, continuing after the end of centralized rule (Viel 1993; Webster and Freter 1990; Willey et al. 1994). It is this area that I have studied most intensively. The rest of the valley is home to more dispersed settlement, much of it occupied by lower status members of the society.

The elite residential compounds take the common plan of Maya residences and expand upon it. The smallest unit is the patio group, made up of buildings, including residences, temples, and storage and work areas, that face inward onto a paved patio. In some cases, this is the sum

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total of the compound. But in many cases, the compounds consist of multiple patio groups that have attached themselves to one another or that have grown up around a central core over time. Because each patio group maintains its inward orientation, even in the largest compounds, the sense is that of a set of separate units joined together but retaining their own internal cohesion, both spatially and functionally. Nevertheless, there are signs of cooperation such as the construction of stairs, the shared use of space between structures to deposit trash, and the use of one building to define the edges of two compounds.

Of the different models advanced to connect patio groups to social organization, I have found the House model the most useful because of its ability to accommodate different ways of defining group membership and differences in status coupled with its ability to explain the role of material culture. If we start from the idea that the patio compounds are the physical manifestations of the estate of the Houses which inhabited them, then the presence of multiple residential patios, each the locus of a similar range of domestic activities in the multi-patio compounds, indicates that many of the Houses had a multi-level sense of social cohesion. Understanding and explaining the importance of this sense of cohesion cannot be encompassed adequately under the notion of the household. At the same time, spatially distinct compounds may also be linked together by social ties as smaller Houses allied themselves with larger ones (see Hendon n.d.a). Differences in social status among compounds, suggested by variation in burials, building construction, and the distribution of status markers such as jewelry and other body ornaments, are not unexpected under any model of Maya social organization that admits of social hierarchy (see Gonlin 1994; Hendon 1991; Sanders 1989 for a discussion of such differences). Differences in social status appear within the larger compounds as well, however, in two ways. One is evident when comparing patios in the same compound to one another in terms

of material markers of status. The other is seen when carrying out the same comparison within a

patio. Such differences have been explained as due to the presence of servants or disenfranchised

individuals (Haviland 1968; Leventhal 1981; McAnany 1993). Yet the treatment of such people

after death shows them to have been fully integrated into the social group living in the

compound. When first considering Maya social organization, I argued that these individuals were

lower-ranking members of an internally ranked lineage which, following Irving Goldman's

analysis of Polynesian sociopolitical organization (1970), I called a status lineage (Hendon

1991). Goldman's concept of a status lineage is, in fact, a variant of a House model (Hendon and

Joyce 2001). Seeing the social entity as a House, rather than a lineage relieves us of the need to

assume that there was only one way of determining membership in the group while maintaining a

basis for the definition of hierarchy.

The fact that the model of a house society argues that Houses are defined as much by their

"estate" as by their individual members or a particular kinship pattern opens up new

interpretative avenues for understanding the significance and role of material culture and the built

environment. The physical houses, the group-owned ritual paraphernalia, the regalia, and the

wealth are property and heirlooms of the overarching social entity, not the individuals who make

up the living members of the House at any given point in time. The presence of multiple burials

within compounds, usually below the patio floor or within the buildings themselves, some of

which contain objects of value, such as jade or shell jewelry, or finely made pottery vessels,

speaks to the connection between living and dead House members. The deposition of caches and

the rebuilding of structures gives the compound a multi-generational life history. In most patios,

one structure stands out in terms of its better construction, more regular design, and decoration,

which may include paint and large-scale sculpture (Hendon 1991, 1992a, n.d.a). These

"dominant structures", while still residential, are clearly associated with important members of the social group in residence and thus were a particular focus of events and interactions aimed at creating and maintaining House identity and prestige.

Copan settlement has been viewed by its recent excavators as having three parts, the Main Group, the elite residential area, and the rest of the valley with its dispersed rural settlement (see Fash 1983; Webster 1999). The Main Group and the elite residential area seem very integrated physically, by proximity, by means of raised walkways extending east and north, and, as I have suggested elsewhere, by the surveillance made possible by the height and location of the Acropolis (Hendon n.d.c). Such physical integration argues for a set of close, although not necessarily uncontested, social ties and interactions, an argument further supported by the shared set of architectural techniques and iconographic symbols used for similar, but competing purposes -- to embody and reinforce group identity and social status.

Study of the kinds of things people did in these elaborated and enclosed compounds adds to this sense of competing but ultimately interdependent Houses. Despite the emphasis in text and image (in the Main Group) on royalty's ritual action and the use of the Main Group as a stage for such action (see Baudez 1991), elite Houses and rural households engage in their own ritual observances, continuing a pattern of defining group identity through shared ritual that has deep roots in Maya civilization as it does in Mesoamerica as a whole (Hendon 1999). Most elite Houses have their own special building to serve as a focus of religious practices but the abundance and distribution of figurines, incense burners, and bloodletting tools argue that such practices were deeply embedded in daily life throughout the compounds (Hendon 1991).

House identity is also solidified through the use of gendered symbols to give meaning to economic and ritual activities. Evidence for craft production in the elite residential area includes

textile production, a set of skills and tasks consistently associated with women in indigenous Mesoamerican societies (see Hendon 1997). Such textiles were crucial to the exchange relationships between Houses which created alliances and obligations (Gillespie and Joyce 1997).

"Domestic houses", as represented by the elite compounds at Copan, are more than just reflections of a social organization that exists primarily in people's minds or consists mainly of idealized rules. These residential spaces are integral to the definition of a social identity, the House, distinct from identity as members of a community or of a single political system, and created through practice and embodied in material culture. Settlement in the rest of the valley would benefit from a re-examination from the perspective of the House model, an enterprise beyond the scope of this paper. It is clear from research to date that these rural households are by no means irrelevant to the discussions of power relations so central to elite practice. Rural households are concerned to maintain their social identity through ritual and productive practice in ways that parallel the practices of elite Houses on a smaller scale (Freter 1996, 2000; Gonlin 1993, 1994).

Given the importance of economic and ritual action, the residential space where these actions occur becomes the physical manifestation of a House's identity. Action and location are inextricable, suggesting that a consideration of social identity in ancient Mesoamerica must deal with, at least in part, the question of the House and its physical form, the residential compound. As noted above, that the occupants of such residential compounds considered themselves to be members of a group has long been recognized in Maya studies but most discussions of the issue focus either on identifying the prescriptive norms of affiliation that defined membership or on the functional role of the household. The House model, however, ask us to focus on social identity as

a fluid and polyvalent set of beliefs capable of multiple and contested interpretations (McKinnon 1991). As such, we should look at the practices situated in the shared space of the residential compound to understand the kind of social identity being built up. The choices made in designing and constructing the built space of the compound, the kinds of economic and ritual activities carried out, and the use of symbols on material culture, understood as referents of a culturally-shared ideology, reflect how members of Maya society forged ways to negotiate economic, social, and political relations.

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