

New Perspectives on Household Archaeology

Edited by

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Introduction: Household Archaeology in the Near East and Beyond

Catherine P. Foster and Bradley J. Parker

Thirty years ago, Richard Wilk and William Rathje coined the phrase “household archaeology” in their seminal issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* (Wilk and Rathje 1982). Since that time, household archaeology has become a subfield as diverse in theoretical underpinnings as it is in practical applications. Even the definition of household archaeology can be outlined in several ways: (1) a subdivision of settlement archaeology specializing in the study of spatial patterning at the household level; (2) a development from social archaeology presenting more humanized reconstructions of the past; or (3) simply as the study of household-based behaviors and relationships. All of these approaches to what is widely considered a basic unit of society are represented in this volume, which serves as the latest incarnation of household studies based on a long intellectual development. Although more detailed discussions of the history of household archaeology are available elsewhere (Allison 1999; Ashmore and Wilk 1988; Steadman 1996; Tringham 2001, this volume), we find it useful to summarize key aspects of this development here to better situate contributions by Near Eastern archaeologists within the wider field.

Scholarly interest in domestic groups has deep roots in the cultural and anthropological studies of family and kinship systems dominant in the early 20th century. In seeking to define the universality of the family or residence rules for the generation of household units, early anthropologists assumed that household forms were not the result of variable patterns of behavior but were instead the outcome of systems of marriage and residence rules (Netting et al. 1984: xvi). To move beyond this conceptualization, many anthropologists and archaeologists began to envision the household as a nonstatic entity whose structure was affected by many interlocking factors. The earliest example of this is the “developmental cycle of domestic groups,” a theoretical framework that likened household forms to the growth cycle of living organisms (Fortes 1958). While this theory highlighted the social, economic, and morphological transformations each household group undergoes during its lifecycle, its emphasis on uniformity and generalization limited its applicability. A similar disconnect existed in early archaeological categorizations of household groups in

which scholars, largely influenced by ethnographic research, favored narrow conceptualizations of households based on kin-based family structures. In a defining move, some anthropological archaeologists chose to separate the family as a self-identified kinship entity from households, which they saw as co-residential groups. Thus, households came to be understood as groups of individuals who share both a habitation space and sets of activities centered on the day-to-day necessities of living (Bender 1967).

With the advent of the processual archaeology movement in North America, the archaeological study of households began to develop formally. Material culture came to be seen not as traits to be listed and categorized but as evidence of human behavior. At this time, archaeologists also sought ways to augment their approaches to the material record by integrating various scales of analysis in their research designs. Scholars increasingly focused their attention on the inner-workings of societies by examining the variation within and between households and by theorizing how various internal and external processes affected the composition of domestic groups (Clarke 1972; Rapoport 1969; Whiting and Ayres 1968). These approaches were collectively exemplified by Kent Flannery's (1976) edited volume on the origins of village life and Formative Period households in the Valley of Oaxaca. In this book, Flannery and contributing authors explored house structure, specialized and gender-specific activity areas, and exchange on local and regional scales. Following this trend, Wilk and Rathje (1982) and several others (Ashmore and Wilk 1988; Wilk and Netting 1984) addressed the problems inherent in attempting to derive the morphology of household groups from the archaeological record by emphasizing the functional aspects of household activities and behaviors. In so doing, they focused attention on what households do and how they interact in their individual sociocultural environments. In these studies, ethnographic analogy and ethnoarchaeology were championed as tools for relating intangible behavior patterns to their material traces (Ashmore and Wilk 1988: 12), a view promoted in later ethnoarchaeological and activity-area research (Blanton 1994; Horne 1994; Kent 1990; Kramer 1982b; Watson 1979).

The innovative work of Wilk, Rathje, Ashmore and others gave promise that households could serve as linking agents between theories of social change and material culture—a key principle upon which the discipline of household archaeology is now largely based. However, these scholars also conceded that, far from being standardized and static agents, households were dynamic in function, form, and behavioral activities that could vary from place to place and through time (Ashmore and Wilk 1988: 3; Wilk and Rathje 1982: 621). Instead of leading toward a unified approach to the study of ancient households, this ambiguity has precipitated the diversification of the subfield. Household archaeology has since transformed into a variety of approaches incorporating economic models of the domestic mode of production (Donham 1981; Sahlins 1972; Wilk 1989) and various Marxist ideas pertaining to social inequality, ideology, and power (Rathje and McGuire 1982). Post-processual or interpretive archaeologies have also had a significant effect on the exploration of household social practice and embodied spaces (Bourdieu 1977; Hendon 2004; Hillier and Hanson 1984; Hodder 1990), feminist anthropology, and gendered places (Brumfiel 1991; Costin 1996; McGaw 1996; Meyers 2005; Moore 1988; Tringham 1991, 1994).

It could rightfully be argued that the maturity of household archaeology as a subfield has since derived from the extensive work of archaeologists researching in Europe and the Americas, Mesoamerica in particular.¹ But this volume and others can attest to the groundbreaking work being carried out in Southwest Asia, especially in the area of household methodology. In particular, the Neolithic and 'Ubaid Periods in the Near East have garnered great interest by scholars studying the adoption of sedentary agricultural practices, the effect of agriculture on cultural systems, and, in turn, how this is manifest in architectural remains. Work at sites like 'Ain Ghazal, Çatalhöyük, Çayönü, and Tell Mudhūr have, for example, highlighted the relationships among social crowding, the construction of physical boundaries, the life-histories of individual house structures, and the development of a concept of "home" (Banning 2003; Byrd 2000; Chesson 2003; Hodder and Cessford 2004; Kuijt 2000; Roaf 1989; Tringham and Stevanovic 2012; Verhoeven 1999; Watkins 1990). Scholars investigating early and developed urbanism often look to the Near East, where the study of households has been used to explore social developments within neighborhoods in Mesopotamian cities and towns of the fourth through second millennia (Brusco 1999–2000; Pfälzner 1996; Pollock et al. 1996; Stone 1996; Wattenmaker 1998). There is also a long history of archaeologists working in the southern Levant, and their analyses of architectural forms, domestic economies, and written documentation have shed enormous light on the composition of families and daily lives of peoples living in this region (Daviau 1993; Ilan 2001; King and Stager 2001). Finally, practitioners of household archaeology in the Near East are developing an array of innovative analytical techniques including microdebris analysis, microstratigraphy, soil characterization, and digital visualization (Matthews et al. 1997; Rainville 2005; Rosen 1986, 1989; Tringham et al. 2007). When combined with newly invigorated approaches to ethnoarchaeology and activity-area research (Kamp 2000; Parker 2011), these methods are allowing unprecedented access to the residue of activities carried out by members of ancient households.

In spite of the fact that household archaeology has become integral to archaeological practice, this brief discussion shows that it remains a diffuse subfield with few unified conceptual or practical approaches. The application of a household archaeological approach to specific case studies and larger social questions from the ancient Near East has also yet to be comprehensively addressed. This is especially true for preliterate societies that, despite a previous critique (Veenhof 1996), can offer a rich narrative of social lives as reflected and enacted through the household. The primary goal of the 2009 conference upon which this volume is based was to address these issues by bringing together scholars from around the world whose research interests focus on some aspect of the theory, method, and practice of household archaeology. More specifically, participants revisited conceptualizations of the household in both past and present societies, evaluated the place of household archaeology within the wider field of anthropological and archaeological research, and discussed the newest technical advances implementing a household archaeological framework. This

1. Some of many examples include: Bermann 1994; Ciolek-Torrello 1986; Flannery and Marcus 2005; Hastorf and D'Altroy 2001; Janusek 2004; Manzanilla and Barba 1990; Robin 2003; Sobel et al. 2006; Stanley and Hirth 1993; Tringham and Krstić 1990; Tringham et al. 1985; Wendt 2005; Ashmore and Wilk 1988.

meeting also provided a unique opportunity for engagement between junior and senior scholars who have been on the forefront of household archaeology in the Near East, Mediterranean basin, and South Asia for many years.

The conference was held over the course of three days at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. In accord with its title, "Household Archaeology in the Middle East and Beyond: Theory, Method, and Practice," the meeting was divided into three major sessions that advanced the theoretical foundations of household archaeology, considered new or developing methodologies for studying the household archaeologically, or presented the results of fieldwork focused on ancient households. Not surprisingly, many of the papers overlapped with multiple session themes. Thus, the chapters in this volume have been reorganized from the original presentation schedule into subject groupings, with the result, we hope, of being more useful to the reader. Beyond the plenary sessions, participants were treated on two separate evenings to enlightening talks by keynote speaker Ruth Tringham on her personal journey through the practice of household archaeology (Chapter 3) and J. Mark Kenoyer on the most recent work with households and neighborhoods from the Indus civilizations (Chapter 14). In addition, large quantities of coffee, food, and stimulating conversation were enjoyed by all during the many session breaks, lunches, dinners, and the conference banquet. A formal roundtable was graciously organized by Roger Matthews to provide a final venue for discussion at the close of the conference (Chapter 20). During this final session, many issues were expansively discussed, including the intersection of theory and data, consistency of approach, and the next phases in the development of household archaeology. The incorporation of recombinant narratives and the use of imagination to move from studying activities to interpreting behaviors were two of the most highly contentious debates.

Despite a variety of opinions from conference participants about definitions and approaches to household archaeology that have naturally materialized in this volume, two general concepts were generally embraced by all. First, participants agreed that households, however they are composed, are the basic socioeconomic unit of societies. Households are the dynamic loci of repetitive actions where personal identities and economic, social, and ideological interests of family or co-habitant groups intersect with and shape the trajectory of communities. Domestic material culture patterns are also produced through, and are therefore a reflection of, dialectic interactions between local groups and larger regional processes. By tracking and comparing domestic assemblages, such as discrete patterns of ceramics, flora, fauna, tools, and architectural elements, archaeologists can discern how households harness or diffuse opportunities for distinction and social differentiation within a community based on changes in modes of production, access to resources, and patterns of consumption visible in the material record.

Second, participants also agreed that the concepts of *households* and *houses* are distinct despite the occurrence of households inhabiting structures frequently referred to as "houses" (see especially Chesson, Rainville, and Rosen in this volume). A house is a physical structure that can serve myriad functions, including basic shelter, location of daily activities, a boundary between public and private spheres of society, and focal point for family life (such as childrearing, education, and enculturation). Houses are not static entities but dynamic extensions of people that both serve as the primary socializing agent (in the Bourdieuan sense of *habitus*) and share similar

cycles of birth, aging, and dying (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 39). Households, on the other hand, are an ethnographic phenomenon (Allison 1999: 2) embodying people, who live as distinct social units, and the relationships among and between such groups. These relationships are conceptualized through kinship, economy, ritual, or any other aspect of human engagement that ties these groups together. Because the concept of household is nuanced and often fluid, we have delegated responsibility to the individual authors to offer their own definitions and uses of the terms “house” and “household.” This is in part to provide transparency to our archaeological endeavors but also to underscore the very dynamic character of ancient social groups and to highlight the reality that universal definitions of these terms are likely unachievable and perhaps even undesirable.² The level at which households are investigated was also determined by each author, resulting in multiscalar approaches to this entity’s physical (individual households, house groups, neighborhoods) and conceptual (individual agents, collective or corporate groups) manifestations.

Building upon these two general concepts, the contributors to this volume address numerous theoretical and methodological issues in household archaeology. Their contributions, which represent substantially revised versions of papers presented in Salt Lake City, are grouped into five sections. Section 1 presents some of the theoretical debates currently driving research on ancient households. Though many field archaeologists still follow Wilk and Rathje’s effort to isolate household activities pertaining to production, distribution, transmission, and reproduction, postprocessual theory now dares us to go beyond these functional categories to see, or even imagine, households as productive units responsible for the constant creation and recreation of societies. For example, Stella Souvatzi (Chapter 1) problematizes the study of ancient households by suggesting that they should be envisioned not as static entities but as dynamic processes within wider social environments. She argues that households are constructed by constantly shifting sets of relationships within and between household groups and likewise between these groups and the wider social contexts in which they are embedded. In her examination of the home-making process, Meredith Chesson (Chapter 2) argues that the concept of “home” allows scholars to apply a more social-oriented framework to archaeological practice by combining standard archaeological techniques with agency and landscape theory. Finally, having experienced firsthand the genesis and growth of household archaeology, Ruth Tringham (Chapter 3) narrates a personal account of her application of this approach at numerous points throughout her career. With this background, she goes on to describe the role digital technologies can play in the study, presentation, and even future interaction with ancient households in the present.

Section 2 focuses on recent methodological advances in household archaeology. In the last two decades, a number of scholars, many of whom are working in the Near East, have developed a battery of new techniques for studying the use of space within domestic and other contexts. These include microdebris or microrefuse analysis, microstratigraphy, soil chemistry characterization, and microfloral studies.

2. Indeed some have previously argued that the very term “household” is not useful (Wilk and Netting 1984) or that domestic groups in general are not productive units of analysis (Hammel 1984; Smith 1992; Wong 1984). The contributions in this volume stand in opposition to these arguments.

In spite of their promise, there has yet to be a comprehensive treatment of either the theoretical or the methodological foundations for these new techniques as they apply to Near Eastern contexts—a lacuna addressed by authors in this section. In particular, Isaac Ullah (Chapter 4) uses his microarchaeological study at the site of Tabaqat al-Buma in Jordan to plot the densities of microartifacts and ecofacts from floors within a Neolithic dwelling using open-source Geographic Information System (GIS) software. The result is an unusually detailed reconstruction of how ancient household members utilized space. Both this and the study by Lynn Rainville (Chapter 5) give detailed descriptions of the procedures used in microrefuse analysis that will likely prove useful to archaeologists attempting to implement microarchaeological studies at other sites. Instead of a Neolithic hamlet, however, Rainville focuses on an Assyrian city to discuss a number of practical and terminological issues pertinent to the advancement of microartifact analysis. From here, we turn to the truly microscopic in separate studies that utilize microflora and microstratigraphy. Performing phytolith analysis at three Natufian sites in the southern Levant, Arlene Rosen (Chapter 6) convincingly shows the great potential that microbotanical data has for identifying the remains of perishable materials. She also highlights the promise this type of analysis has for reconstructing ancient environments. Finally, Wendy Matthews (Chapter 7) approaches households in the Iranian Zagros through microstratigraphic sequences, detailing the potential of this technique to isolate specific “life histories” of both houses and households.

Section 3 discusses food, which is fast becoming a topic of great interest in many anthropological and archaeological circles. Though scholars of the ancient Near East have long been interested in subsistence patterns, most traditional studies embrace topics such as domestication and resource exploitation without considering the social aspects of procuring, producing, and eating food. The chapters in this section favor the latter approach, highlighting the sociocultural engagements people have with food both in its preparation and consumption. In their examination of household foodways at the Halafian site of Fıstıklı Höyük in Turkey, Marie Hopwood and Siddhartha Mitra (Chapter 8) analyze use-alteration and organic residues from coarse-ware ceramics to make inferences about changes in food preparation that played a dynamic role in community cohesion. Similarly, Philip Graham and Alexia Smith (Chapter 9) examine the social aspects of plant use to create a framework for investigating household agricultural practice at Kenan Tepe, Turkey. Chantel White and Nicholas Wolff (Chapter 10) take the analysis of archaeobotanical remains a step further by examining the socio-technical aspects of barley cultivation at the Jordanian site of el-Hemmeh during the Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B. They argue that the annual activities associated with agricultural production provided opportunities for the communication, transmission, and reproduction of complex bodies of knowledge about the agricultural cycle. The final contribution in this section by Bradley Parker (Chapter 11) combines numerous datasets from an ‘Ubaid Period household at Kenan Tepe to offer a unique view of domestic modes of subsistence and production. His study explores the interface between local and regional trends, framing this household within larger issues of subsistence strategies, social integration, and increasing social complexity.

The subject of urban households is undertaken by the authors in Section 4. The Near East is famous for its cities. In fact, beyond the advent of agriculture, the

urban revolution is seen as one of the most important transitions in Mesopotamian history. The chapters in this section thus exhibit how social change associated with city life is well reflected by urban households. For example, Rana Özbal (Chapter 12) uses microarchaeological analysis and soil chemistry characterization to address both the problem of identifying households in the archaeological record and distinguish many aspects of daily life at Tell Kurdu in the Turkish Hatay. Similarly, Yoko Nishimura (Chapter 13) combines data from excavations and remote-sensing surveys to illuminate the lifeways not just of a few households but the majority of the inhabitants of Titriş Höyük, the site of an ancient third-millennium city. The *longue durée* of pre-urban and urban households is also considered in this section. J. Mark Kenoyer (Chapter 14) in particular explores long-term trends in the organization of households and neighborhoods in the Indus Tradition as more inhabitants of the region immigrated to cities. Sarit Paz (Chapter 15) also addresses the urbanization of household groups, in this case focusing on the Early Bronze at Tel Bet Yerah in the southern Levant. Instead of seeing patterns of urban living as an elaboration of earlier village-based life, Paz suggests that urbanism in fact created brand new lifeways that reoriented patterns of household subsistence and production.

Section Five presents a synthetic household approach that moves beyond specific datasets to connect micro-household histories with issues on a macro-scale. For example, Catherine Foster (Chapter 16) links changes in household production to interregional networks of exchange in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia through a close examination of Late Chalcolithic house lots at Kenan Tepe, Turkey. She considers the domestic economy both as a structuring agent for labor and a reflection of household decision-making. David Frankel and Jennifer Webb (Chapter 17) examine sequences of occupation spanning nearly 500 years at Early Bronze Age Marki in central Cyprus, during which time cycles of household growth, development, and decline are clearly discernible. Their detailed reconstruction of the history of this site promotes their analysis beyond simple description to an examination of social processes. Similarly, Jeffrey Chadwick and Aren Maeir (Chapter 18) link episodes of growth and destruction at the southern Levantine site of Tell es-Safi with references to Judean and Philistine sites mentioned in Assyrian annals. Finally, James Hardin (Chapter 19) concludes this section by successfully combining multifaceted evidence from a single household at Tell Halif, Israel. Hardin examines not only use of domestic space by the ancient inhabitants but also pinpoints the integration of this and presumably other households at Tell Halif into local and regional networks of socio-cultural interaction. The volume concludes with an afterword by Roger Matthews, which includes his personal reflections on the Utah conference, the application of household archaeology for answering broad questions about our ancient human history, and the future of this approach within the discipline of archaeology.

The goal of this conference and resulting publication is to exhibit the breadth and depth of household archaeological studies currently being undertaken by archaeologists in the Near East and eastern Mediterranean. More than simply reflecting the “state of the field,” the following chapters underscore the significant contributions scholars of the ancient Near East are making to advance the study of households and to apply this information to larger questions of sociocultural importance. The contributors also address and grapple with some of the questions posed by Richard Wilk some 20 years ago: what is a household? How does a household group handle

its resources? How are household decisions made or authority realized (Wilk 1991: 10)? We believe that these questions still resonate today, as is evident in the following pages where the multifaceted aspects of households are questioned, investigated, and celebrated.

We stated at the beginning of this introduction that household archaeology is a diffuse subfield with no unified definitions, theoretical underpinnings, or methodological techniques. This may appear to some as a shortcoming on the part of archaeologists who undertake this avenue of research. However, we see this diversity as a reflection of the very essence of houses and households as dynamic, fluid, and adaptable entities. In a way, the skirting of canonization in household archaeology assures that household studies will always be on the cutting edge of archaeological research, constantly evolving to explore more refined and deeper questions about life in the ancient and historic past. It is our hope that this volume and the important contributions it contains reflect the current progressive state of household archaeology, while looking to its future development and wider application in Near Eastern archaeology and beyond.

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