

Mesoamerican Households Viewed from Rapidly Abandoned Sites: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Rapidly abandoned structures present extraordinary occasions for archaeologists to study household organization and domestic activities. In this issue, the contributors address household archaeology through the analysis of data from some of the most intensively excavated Mesoamerican sites that were rapidly abandoned. They also discuss potential contributions to the interpretation of data from gradually abandoned structures in Mesoamerica and elsewhere.

Key words: Mesoamerica, households archaeology, rapidly abandoned sites.

RESUMEN

Las estructuras abandonadas rápidamente proporcionan a los arqueólogos oportunidades extraordinarias para estudiar la organización de la casa y las actividades domésticas. En este número, los investigadores tratan la arqueología de la casa a través de los datos de algunos sitios mesoamericanos que fueron rápidamente abandonados y que más intensivamente han sido excavados. También se discuten posibles contribuciones a la interpretación de datos a partir de estructuras abandonadas gradualmente tanto en Mesoamérica como en otros lugares.

Palabras clave: Mesoamérica, arqueología de conjuntos habitacionales, sitios abandonados rápidamente.

Rapidly abandoned sites usually contain large amounts of de facto refuse—objects left in the context of use or storage, which are typically still usable (Schiffer 1976: 14)—providing rich information about past societies. Household archaeology is one of the areas in which data from rapidly abandoned sites can make particularly significant contributions. The study of household organization and domestic activities re-

quires the recovery of detailed, contextual information. Rapidly abandoned sites present ideal situations for this kind of study. This mode of abandonment, however, is rare in Mesoamerica, as well as in other parts of the world. Recently, substantial excavations at rapidly abandoned sites have begun to provide important data on Mesoamerican households. Given the recent theoretical developments in household archaeology and the increased number of excavations at rapidly abandoned sites, we deem it particularly promising to bring together data from sites rich in de facto refuse for the purpose of addressing the issue of Mesoamerican households. We organized a forum at the 65th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in April, 2000 with the theme of Mesoamerican households viewed from rapidly abandoned sites. In this special issue of *Mayab*, we present the collection of papers developed from this forum.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Before we discuss the contributions of data from rapidly abandoned sites, it is necessary to briefly review concepts and theoretical frameworks related to the archaeological study of households. Most scholars agree that there are no cross-culturally applicable definitions of household. Yet, households generally refer to the basic socioeconomic groups that collaborate in a significant portion of domestic activities, and may be co-residential, while families are groups based on kinship relations and ideology (Rapp 1991; Wilk and Netting 1984; Yanagisako 1979). Although both households and families are important for the study of past societies, archaeological inquiries tend to focus more on households, which are easier to address through the analysis of material remains. The studies presented here follow this general trend, though we do not exclude other forms of domestic groups from our scope of inquiry.

Households are the most basic socio-economic units in the majority of known human societies. Interactions within and among these groups form a basis for social, economic, and political relations in wider arenas. Households react sensitively to changes in social, economic, and ecological conditions, by adjusting aspects of their organization and activities (Netting *et al.* 1984; Wilk and Netting 1984). Thus, the examination of these groups is considered to be critical for understanding various aspects of human societies and behavior, such as divisions of labor, demography, socio-economic change, and inequality in power, wealth, and prestige (Laslett and Wall 1972; Netting *et al.* 1984; Yanagisako 1979). In addition, recent developments in gender archaeology have encouraged scholars to view households as political arenas and to examine power relations and negotiations within these groups (Hendon 1996; Sweeley 1998; Tringham 1991, 1995; see also Hart 1992; Moore 1992).

MODES OF ABANDONMENT

Mesoamerican archaeologists have been active in household archaeology and have made important contributions to its development (Haviland 1985; Manzanilla 1987; McAnany 1995; Santley and Hirth 1993; Smith 1987; Tourtellot 1988; Webster 1989; Wilk and Ashmore 1988; Wilk and Rathje 1982). Despite strong interest among scholars, our understanding of Mesoamerican households is still limited. The difficulty of understanding households derives partly from patterns of gradual abandonment at most Mesoamerican sites. In such processes of abandonment, the residents usually carry away a large portion of their possessions to the next residences (Cameron and Tomka 1993; Schiffer 1987; Stevenson 1982). Items left by the inhabitants may include large pieces of refuse temporarily kept in and around the residences for future discard (Deal 1985; Hayden and Cannon 1983). In addition, before abandonment, the occupants may relax the standard of cleaning and may allow refuse to accumulate in areas that would have been kept clean. When a building is deserted before others, the remaining occupants of the settlement may scavenge the abandoned structure for usable objects or may use the structure as a refuse dump (Schiffer 1987). Thus, the archaeological record formed through gradual abandonment is significantly or dramatically different from the original inventory and distribution of objects used and stored by the residents before abandonment. This makes the recons-

truction of household organization and domestic activities difficult. The study of intra-household relations is particularly problematic under such conditions, despite a recent surge of interest in this area.

In this regard, rapidly abandoned sites provide ideal opportunities for the archaeological study of domestic groups. In rapid, unplanned abandonment, the residents often do not have enough time to carry away much of their belongings. Many usable objects may be left in their locations of use or storage. In such cases, the distribution of objects may closely reflect the use of space by the household members. These data lead to a better understanding of the composition of the household, relations among their members, and activities carried out by them. These data also contribute to our understanding of how households relate to each other, helping us understand broader patterns of political and economic interactions. In addition, rapidly abandoned buildings may contain durable and valuable objects, which rarely end up in middens and are usually carried away to the next residences in the case of gradual abandonment. Artifact assemblages from rapidly abandoned sites present pictures akin to frozen moments of past life.

The «photographic instant» aspect of suddenly abandoned sites has obvious advantages but it does raise certain concerns as well. Even at the most rapidly abandoned sites, such as Pompeii, the residents usually appear to have removed certain items (Allison 1992). At Cerén residents could have removed some valuable items, but many small valuable items such as jade beads remained (Sheets 1992). Thus, we still need to be aware of simplistic «Pompeii premises»-conscious or unconscious assumptions that all floor assemblages straightforwardly reflect the organization of groups, differences among groups and individuals, and patterns of activities (Schiffer 1985). The assessment of abandonment processes is still necessary at «rapidly abandoned sites.» Cameron (1998) warns us that the recognition of rapid abandonment in archaeological studies potentially involves a circular logic: in rapid abandonment a large number of complete or reconstructible objects are left behind; rapid abandonment is recognized archaeologically through a large number of complete or reconstructible objects. Thus, the notion of rapid abandonment is a heuristic one that should be reevaluated constantly. One means of breaking this circularity in reasoning is in exploring evidence for the causes of rapid abandonment such as explosive volcanism, warfare, flooding, or other cultural/natural stresses.

In the analysis of abandonment processes, one needs to specify the scale of abandonment, ranging from the abandonment of activity areas and of structures to that of settlements and regions (Cameron 1993). In the case of Aguateca and Caracol, for example, only certain sectors of the sites exhibit the pattern of rapid abandonment, while other areas do not (Inomata and Stiver 1998). Likewise, the study at Agua Tibia refers to the abandonment of one structure rather than the entire site. In such cases, abandonment patterns of the entire settlement is complex, and the formation processes at «rapidly abandoned» areas or structures should be examined within larger contexts. Researchers also need to pay attention to possible ideological factors involved in abandonment behavior. Usable objects may be left in structures even during gradual abandonment due to religious beliefs and cultural customs (see Kent 1984:140 for the example of the Navajo). Archaeological investigations at various Mesoamerican sites have identified «termination rituals,» in which numerous objects were deposited and buildings were ritually destroyed (Mock 1998). Artifact remains derived from such rituals may be misidentified as those resulting from rapid abandonment.

Another problem is that the inventory and distribution of de facto refuse mainly reflect patterns of activities at the last moment of occupation and lack chronological depth. Thus, the study of de facto refuse assemblages needs to be complemented with more conventional studies of burials, construction sequences, and midden materials. Moreover, the residents often sense approaching disasters, such as volcanic eruptions and enemy attacks, and may try to prepare for them, thus modifying their ways of life. In such cases, the organization and activities reflected in the archaeological record may deviate from common practices in peaceful times.

OBJECTIVES OF THE JOURNAL ISSUE

The goal of this journal issue is to explore the contributions of the specific study of rapidly abandoned sites to the understanding of the more general issue of Mesoamerican households. The contributors focus on two main questions. The first question is the implications of findings from rapidly abandoned sites for the study of Mesoamerican households in general. We do not mean to make simplistic generalizations based on data from a few sites. Yet, evidence presented in this journal issue is still unique and important, and we

should make the maximum use of these data. Rapidly abandoned sites present compelling test cases, with which to examine various aspects of domestic groups in a depth and detail that are inaccessible in gradually abandoned sites. Such studies should provide critical insights into the organization, activities, and meanings of domestic groups.

The second question is how rich data from rapidly abandoned sites contribute to the study of households at gradually abandoned sites. Some of the contributors to this journal issue are involved with developing geophysical exploration techniques that can assist in the discovery and electronic exploration of rapidly abandoned sites (Conyers 1995; Sheets 1992). Yet, rapidly abandoned sites will probably remain rare. As looting continues to debilitate the archaeological record at exposed sites, the importance of rapidly abandoned and well preserved sites increases. Data from rapidly abandoned sites become truly valuable if we can demonstrate specific ways in which they help the study of gradually abandoned sites that are far more common. The in-depth understanding of domestic groups at rapidly abandoned sites may assist the design of research at gradually abandoned sites, providing hypotheses and questions to be addressed. Moreover, rich assemblages of de facto refuse help to refine our interpretation of commonly available data at gradually abandoned sites. For example, how do burial offerings reflect the original inventory of belongings? How do midden materials correlate with the material possessions of the household? What relationships between artifact assemblages and architectural characteristics at rapidly abandoned sites could assist in interpretations of human behavior in sites where the artifact record is largely depleted but architecture remains? These are some of the questions effectively addressed through the analysis of data from rapidly abandoned sites. Scholars have often used ethnoarchaeological data in examining such questions. Although data from rapidly abandoned sites still do not match the rich understanding gained from ethnographic observations, they are more directly applicable to other archaeological cases that functioned in similar cultural and historical contexts.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES DISCUSSED IN THE JOURNAL ISSUE

As we were preparing the SAA forum and this *Mayab* issue, we tried to include as many rapidly abando-

ned sites in Mesoamerica as possible. We regret that we were not able to include data from Postclassic Highland Maya centers and other cases of rapidly abandoned structures (Fauvet-Berthelot 1986). The sites discussed here, nevertheless, represent some of the most intensively studied cases of rapid abandonment. The list of the sites discussed in this issue is a result of catastrophic events in the past and of fortuitous findings in the present. Readers should be aware of the bias inherent in our data set. Yet, the journal issue still presents a relatively good coverage both in terms of geographical range (Figure 1) and in socio-political scale. In southern Mesoamerica, Cerén (Brown and Sheets; Woodward) and Agua Tibia (Ciudad) provide examples of small rural settlements of commoners. Aguateca (Inomata and Triadan; Triadan) and Caracol (Chase and Chase), on the other hand, were large political and economic centers with elite occupants. In central Mexico, Tetimpa (Plunket and Uruñuela) was a farming vi-

llage, while Xochicalco (Webb and Hirth) was a fortified center. They also vary in terms of the cause of abandonment. Cerén and Tetimpa were destroyed by volcanic eruptions, while the cause of rapid abandonment of some structures at Aguateca and Caracol appears to have been violent conflict. The structure at Agua Tibia discussed by Ciudad was probably abandoned as a result of an accidental fire.

In addition to these rapidly abandoned sites, Healan presents a useful comparative case of gradual abandonment at Tula. In the last article, Ashmore, as a leading scholar in the field of household archaeology, provides a commentary.

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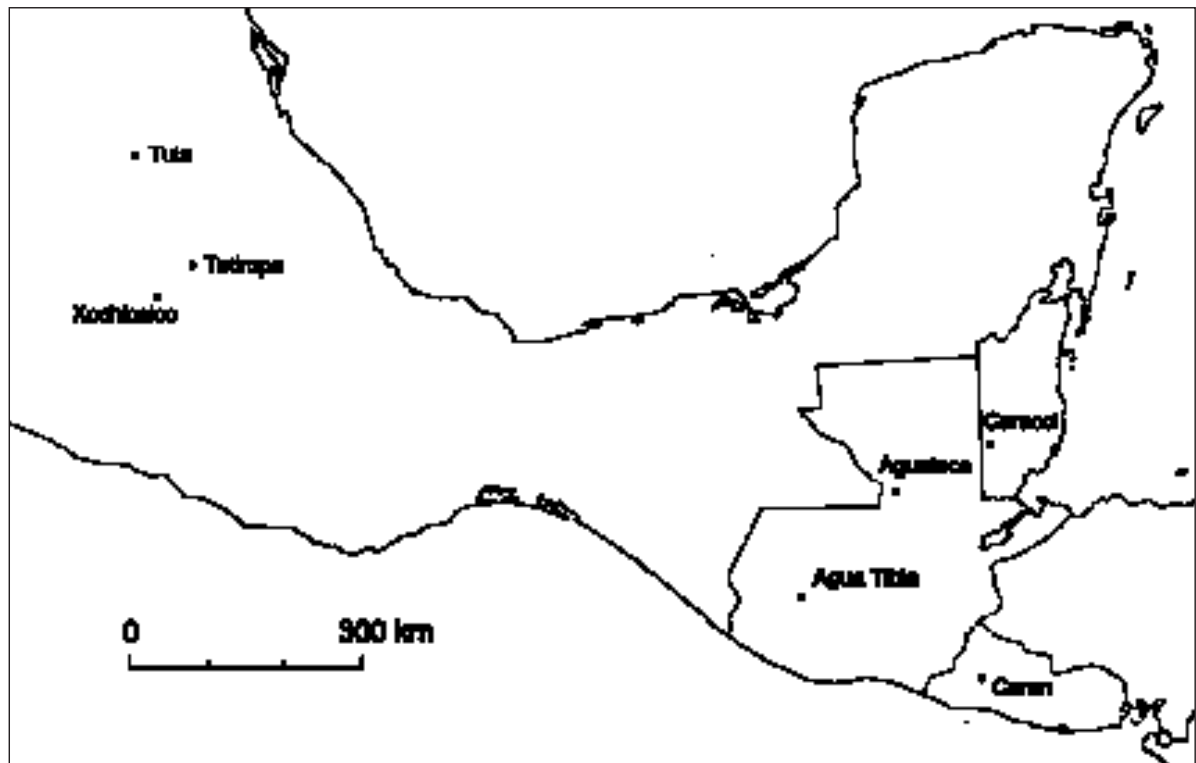


Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica showing the archaeological sites discussed in this issue.

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