

What a Dump! Rapid Abandonment as Seen from the Perspective of Nonrapid, Impermanent Abandonment at Tula, Hidalgo

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ABSTRACT

In their introductory remarks, Inomata and Sheets propose evaluating situations of rapid abandonment from the perspective of cause rather than effect, in order to avoid the circular argument that rapid abandonment produces rich assemblages, hence sites with rich assemblages must have been rapidly abandoned. Data from residential structures at the Early Postclassic city of Tula which show no evidence of rapid abandonment suggest that, indeed, an overemphasis upon assemblage richness runs the risk of oversimplifying the differences between rapidly and gradually abandoned households, in part because the latter may have richer assemblages than might be imagined. However, the most distinctive characteristics of the Tula households are the result of reoccupation, looting, scavenging, refuse dumping, and other post-abandonment processes that have far less to do with the slowness of abandonment than its impermanence, a distinction that may be lost when dealing with catastrophic situations that not only cause rapid abandonment of sites but also entomb them.

Key words: Tula, México, household, abandonment

RESUMEN

En su comentario introductorio, Inomata y Sheets proponen evaluar situaciones de abandono rápido desde la perspectiva de causa más que de efecto, para evitar el argumento circular de que el abandono rápido produce ricas acumulaciones culturales, de ahí que los sitios con abundantes hallazgos deben haber sido abandonados rápidamente. Datos del Postclásico Temprano procedentes de estructuras residenciales en la ciudad de Tula que no muestran evidencia de un abandono rápido sugieren que, en realidad, haciendo un énfasis excesivo sobre la riqueza de las acumulaciones de material se corre el riesgo de simplificar excesivamente las diferencias entre conjuntos habita-

cionales abandonados rápidamente y gradualmente, en parte a causa de que lo segundo puede tener más ricos hallazgos de lo que uno podría imaginar. Sin embargo, las características más distintivas de los conjuntos habitacionales de Tula son resultado de reocupación, saqueo, escarvado, vertido de basuras y otros procesos post-abandono que tienen menos que ver con la lentitud del abandono que con su carácter transitorio, una distinción que puede perderse cuando nos encontramos con situaciones catastróficas que no solo causan un rápido abandono de los sitios sino que también los entierra.

Palabras clave: Tula, México, conjunto habitacional, abandono.

By its very nature, the phenomenon of rapid abandonment is an anomaly, as is certainly indicated by relatively small number of cases of rapid abandonment presented in this volume. As notable as their small number, however, is their diversity, not only in terms of time period and sociocultural complexity, but also the situations that caused rapid abandonment to occur. Indeed, the specific characteristics shared by this small number of rather diverse situations may be better appreciated by comparison to situations of nonrapid or *gradual* abandonment that are the rule. This paper is concerned with one such situation from the Early Postclassic city of Tula in Central Mexico (Inomata and Sheets in this issue: Figure 1), which provides a useful point of comparison which may help to place the phenomenon of rapid abandonment in better perspective.

Tula is located in southern Hidalgo, some 70 km north of Mexico City. Ethnohistorical research by Jimenez Moreno (1941) and excavations by Acosta (1956-1957) provided evidence that linked the site to Aztec accounts of Tollan, legendary capital of the Toltecs, though this view is not without its share of controversy. Regardless of Tula's status concerning the legendary Tollan, however, recent archaeological

research has confirmed the site's urban character, which at its height encompassed a densely-occupied area covering ca. 12-16 km² (Healan 1989; Mastache and Crespo 1982). Ceramic and chronometric data (Cobean and Mastache 1989) indicate that Tula emerged as a modest settlement in Epiclassic times and attained its maximum size during the Early Postclassic Tollan Phase (ca. A.D. 900-1150/1200).

Relatively little is known about the demise of Tula, which appears to have occurred at the end of the Tollan phase. Acosta encountered evidence of destruction and burning of some of the principal buildings of Tula Grande, the city's civic/ceremonial center, in association with Aztec II pottery, a transitional Early/Late Postclassic ceramic complex in the southern Basin of Mexico. Outside of Tula Grande, however, Aztec II pottery is quite uncommon in the ancient city, and excavations of residential structures at more than ten separate localities within Tula over the last 30 years show no evidence of sudden termination of occupation, and

suggest instead a pattern of gradual abandonment that is presumed to have been city wide.

Recent investigations at Tula by the University of Missouri included excavation that exposed remains of residential structures at two separate localities in the northeastern section of the ancient city (Healan 1989). At one of these, designated the Canal Locality, excavation completely exposed two juxtaposed residential compounds or *house groups* and part of another that contained a small temple platform. The two completely excavated house groups, depicted in Figure 1, are the subject of this paper.

Each house group consisted of three or more free-standing, multi-room houses constructed of stone and adobe and grouped around a central courtyard containing a small altar. In both house groups the juxtaposed houses and use of free-standing walls on open sides create a closed, inward-facing configuration with access tightly controlled via a single, baffled entranceway along the south and northwest sides, respectively

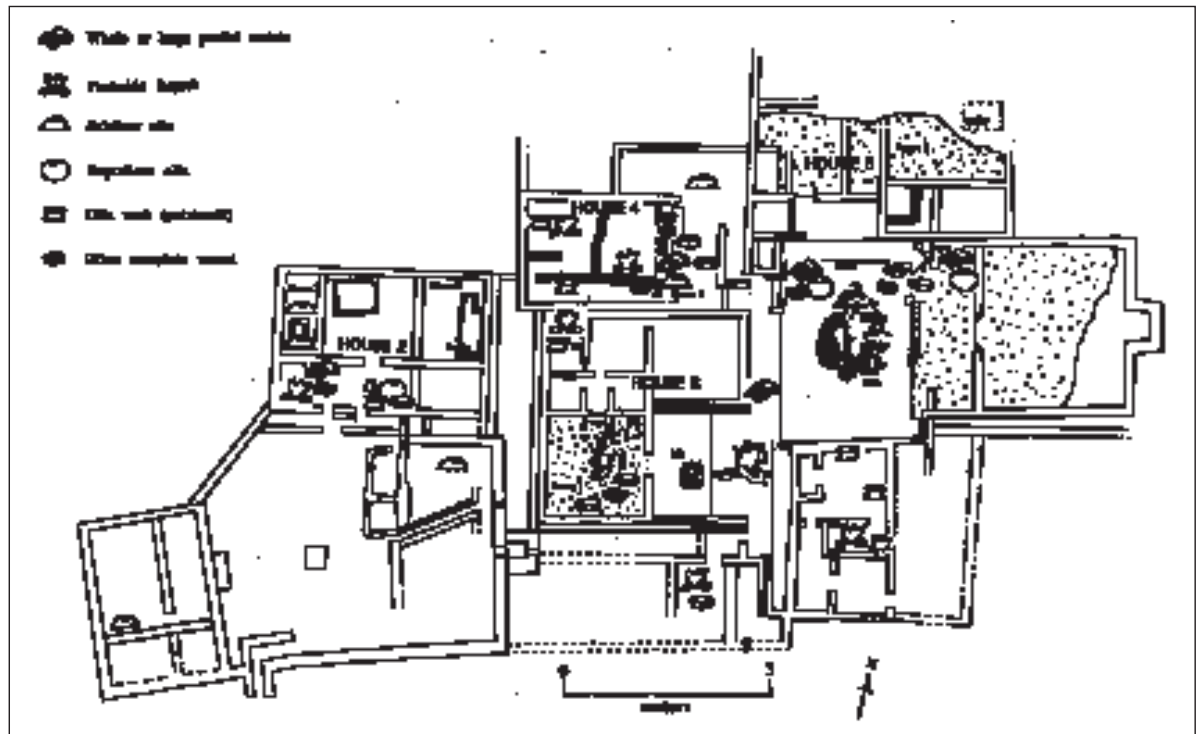


Figure 1. Structural remains of house groups encountered in the Canal Locality, Tula, identifying objects and features and rooms and houses described in text.

vely, of the two house groups. The house groups were connected by a closed system of passageways, and remains of a cobblestone pavement were encountered along their southern margin.

In many respects the Canal Locality house groups closely resemble other residential compounds described in this volume, especially those of the other two Central Mexican sites, Xochicalco and Tetimpa. Unlike the other residential sites described in this volume, however, there is no evidence of catastrophic environmental or human events at the Canal Locality or Tula in general that would have caused rapid abandonment. Indeed, the archaeological record of the Canal Locality exhibits a number of characteristics distinct from rapidly abandoned households, and not just in the absence of large amounts of de facto refuse. Rather, the extant remains of the Canal Locality appear to be the product of several different processes that acted at various points in time, each of which is discussed below.

INITIAL ABANDONMENT

It seems reasonable to assume, as do Inomata and Sheets in their introductory remarks, that abandonment of a less rapid and thus more systematic nature would result in the removal of a much greater part of a household assemblage than would abandonment under more urgent circumstances. Before considering the effects of initial abandonment on the households of the Canal Locality, however, it must be noted that many of these houses appear to have been subjected to considerable post-abandonment refuse dumping, as described below, leaving extremely large quantities of refuse, mostly sherds and other fragments of countless discarded broken objects, overlying the house floors. Aside from obvious refuse, the artifact assemblage from these houses is indeed relatively impoverished compared to the wealth of useful objects typical of many of the rapidly abandoned households described elsewhere in this volume.

Nevertheless, the assemblage does include a number of whole or broken in situ artifacts. To be sure, the most common of these are small, easily misplaced objects of relatively low value, principally ceramic spindle whorls, obsidian trilobal eccentrics (Stocker and Spence 1973), and obsidian unifacial tools, that one might expect to find even in gradually abandoned households. There were also, however, a number of larger objects left behind, including the following:

— **Ceramic vessels:** Some 20 whole or broken in situ ceramic vessels, mostly shallow bowls and jars, were recovered from floors in the two house groups. As seen in Figure 1, many of the vessels formed clusters with other artifacts and features that appear to define distinct activity areas associated with food preparation and storage, most of which are presumed to date to the original occupation (but see discussion below). That these are all plain, rather simple utilitarian vessels may have made them less valuable and thus more likely to have been left behind.

— **Metates:** No less than four whole basalt *metates* were found inside houses or in adjacent patios or courtyards (Figure 1), two of them in association with whole, cigar-shaped *manos*. All four were found in association with other whole objects and features, usually one or more ceramic vessels and, in some cases, storage facilities and hearths. All four were rather large and heavy, which may account for their having been left behind.

— **Subfloor ollas:** Six large (up to nearly a meter in height) *ollas* were found embedded in house or patio floors with only their neck or uppermost portion protruding, presumably storage facilities. In room 3, House 2, two such *ollas* were associated with a subfloor pit, and in room 4, House 4, a subfloor-*olla* was found beneath an overturned *metate*. That such vessels remained behind is probably not surprising, given the time and effort that would have been required to remove and transport them.

— **Vessel caches:** One of the most surprising finds was a cache of whole, exotic pottery that included five Tohil plumbate vessels and four Nicoya or Papagayo polychrome vessels found in a corner at the bottom of a large (roughly 1 x 3 x 0.8 m) adobe-lined subfloor pit in room 5, House 2. Diehl *et al.* (1974) suggest that the cache had been concealed beneath a false floor, and was forgotten or overlooked at abandonment. A similar subfloor pit containing two whole utilitarian bowls was encountered in room 9, House 5.

— **Ceramic kiln:** A kiln apparently used to fire ceramic drain tubes (Healan 1989: 254) situated immediately east of room 1, House 8 (Figure 1) had been abandoned with a load of fired tubes apparently left inside.

POST-ABANDONMENT ACTIVITY

Besides a gradual rather than rapid pattern of abandonment, there is at least one other way in which the Canal Locality households differ from most of the ot-

her households described in this volume. Specifically, the Canal Locality did not remain abandoned, but instead was subject to several different kinds of post-abandonment activity that appear to have followed initial abandonment rather closely in time. Each of these activities is discussed below, although it must be noted that each may subsume a number of distinct episodes, and the specific temporal order of these various activities is not known.

Reoccupation

There is evidence of limited reoccupation of the Canal Locality that occurred while the houses were still standing. Perhaps the best evidence comes from House 8, where a crude fire enclosure was built directly over the plaster floor of room 1. The enclosure was constructed of basalt cobbles and large *metate* fragments that formed three parallel walls enclosing an ashy fill, perhaps used as a hearth or grill. This makeshift enclosure is almost certainly an intrusive feature in this large, spacious front room which had a plaster-covered floor and walls and a shrine or altar at one end. Evidence of repeated burning indicated that the feature was used more than once, and several broken in situ vessels found nearby may be contemporaneous. The makeshift nature of the construction and the lack of functional continuity with other features of the room suggest the type of temporary and limited reoccupation commonly associated with «squatters», a term that aptly connotes selective, unsystematic, and highly idiosyncratic reoccupation. Other features that could also have been the product of such reoccupation include at least some of the clusters of ceramic vessels and other objects, described above, that were found in and around some of the other houses and are presumed to have dated from the original occupation.

Scavenging and Looting

There is also evidence of the disturbance and/or removal of preexisting features that is indicative of scavenging and looting. In room 1 of House 8, a prominent niche in the north wall framed with a step or bench and flanking posts, perhaps a shrine or similar feature, was partially destroyed, and the plaster floor in front of the feature ripped up. At perhaps the same time the ceramic tube kiln immediately outside room 1 was partially dismantled, its rubble strewn around it, and the six ceramic tubes that had apparently been left inside of it removed and stacked on top of the kiln. It

seems likely that the disturbance of both of these features is associated with whoever built the fire enclosure in room 1, described above.

Perhaps the most notable evidence of probable looting was the altar in the Central Group courtyard which, when excavated, was found partially dismantled and pitted, with its decorative facade and interior fill lying in a pile of rubble that partially encircled the altar (Figure 1). The presence of human teeth in the undisturbed matrix suggests the altar had contained a burial that was perhaps the target of its partial destruction. A similar altar in the West Group courtyard was too badly destroyed by erosion to determine whether or not it too had been looted.

Refuse Dumping

Evidence of refuse dumping is apparent in the extremely large quantities of artifacts, chiefly pottery sherds, found overlying the house floors, often exceeding 100 sherds per square meter in the first 10 cm overlying the occupation surface. It is important to note that these high frequencies respected the integrity of house and often room boundaries, indicating that dumping had begun prior to structural collapse. This is particularly evident in House 5, where heavy refuse concentrations occur only in certain rooms, often with barricaded doorways or interior partitions, while adjacent rooms were relatively refuse-free, suggesting that refuse dumping may have occurred while some areas of the house were occupied or reoccupied. A pattern of high sherd concentrations running along the edges of the Central Group courtyard (Healan 1989: Figure 9.1) evokes an image of individuals standing along the adjacent passageways while dumping loads of refuse into the courtyard.

Though presented here in the context of post-abandonment activities, the restriction of refuse to only certain houses or even certain rooms within houses suggest that at least some of this dumping may have occurred while portions of the house groups were still occupied. At the same time, a substantial amount of refuse appears to have been deposited after structural collapse, presumably at the hands of others living in the immediate vicinity.

DISCUSSION

While it is certainly true that the Canal Locality assemblage was quite impoverished compared to most of the other household assemblages considered in

this volume, the assemblage did retain a significant number of usable objects, perhaps more so than might be expected under conditions of gradual abandonment. As noted, most of these can probably be explained in terms of one or more factors that include low replacement value, lack of portability, high removal and transport costs, and perhaps pure accident, but the fact remains that the Canal Locality household assemblages were by no means devoid of usable artifacts. Indeed, many of the clusters of objects that possibly identify various activity areas have the appearance of *de facto* refuse (Figure 1). An obvious implication is that the assemblages of rapidly abandoned and gradually abandoned households differ by degree rather than kind, and one must avoid exaggerating or oversimplifying these differences.

While much of the emphasis of this volume has been on abandonment under rapid, usually urgent circumstances, this is in fact only one of *two* conditions that occurred to create the kind of assemblages seen in most of the other case studies presented in this volume. Specifically, abandonment was not only rapid but *permanent*, so that what became *de facto* refuse remained so without being disturbed prior to excavation. It is true that rapid and permanent abandonment will commonly co-occur in certain situations such as volcanic eruptions, landslides, or similar catastrophic events that literally entomb sites, but these special circumstances

should not obscure the fact that these are two distinct and independent processes that do not necessarily co-occur, indeed, probably do not under most circumstances. Thus, households rapidly abandoned as a result of fire or warfare usually lack such protection from post-abandonment reoccupation, scavenging, or looting which, if carried out, may reduce and otherwise modify the rich assemblage of rapid abandonment to the point of resembling the relatively impoverished assemblages of gradually abandoned households.

Finally, the distinction between rapid and permanent abandonment brings up what is one of the most salient differences between the Canal Locality assemblage and those of the other households in this volume. Specifically, discussions of rapid versus gradual abandonment that emphasize subtractive processes at work in the latter, i.e., removal of usable objects, may overlook a major *additive* process, namely refuse dumping, that often occurs at sites that are not entombed or otherwise protected. The confounding effect of post-abandonment refuse has been and continues to be a major obstacle to the study of archaeological households. Indeed, it created virtually insurmountable problems in attempting to reconstruct activities based on what was presumed, often simplistically, to be primary refuse in the heyday of the New Archaeology, and even today the dumping of refuse in vacant areas is a well known and troublesome problem in urban areas.

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