

Leaving Home Abruptly

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ABSTRACT

The papers assembled in this issue yield insights on several themes, especially (1) varied circumstances of «rapid abandonment»; (2) evidence of risk acknowledgment and coping; (3) clarity of evidence regarding daily life; and (4) implications for learning about gradually abandoned houses.

Key words: Rapid abandonment, household, Mesoamerica.

RESUMEN

Los trabajos reunidos en este artículo nos ofrecen una mayor comprensión de determinados temas, especialmente los relacionados con (1) la variedad de circunstancias que pueden llevar al abandono súbito; (2) la evidencia del reconocimiento del riesgo y la competición; (3) el valor y la claridad de la evidencia por lo que se refiere a la vida cotidiana y (4) las implicaciones del estudio de las casas abandonadas gradualmente.

Palabras clave: Abandono rápido, conjunto habitacional, Mesoamérica.

When the papers in this collection were commissioned, the two explicit themes authors were asked to address were: «(1) the implications of findings from these (rapidly abandoned) sites for the study of Mesoamerican households in general, and (2) how these rich data contribute to the study of gradually abandoned houses». Quite clearly, all the cases examined enlighten us greatly in both spheres. One of their most important attributes is that despite their rarity in the overall corpus of ancient Mesoamerican houses, the instances described collectively tap varied social and cultural settings, allowing access to households of elite and commoner standing. Indeed, sometimes the latter distinction is crucial in understanding the cause of destruction and departure. Comments here are structured less around individual papers than around four themes that emerge from the papers. These are (1) varied circumstances of «rapid abandonment»; (2) evidence of risk acknowledgment and coping; (3) cla-

rity of evidence regarding daily life; and (4) implications for learning about gradually abandoned houses.

VARIED CIRCUMSTANCES OF RAPID ABANDONMENT

Although archaeologists do generally recognize that households are rarely «abandoned rapidly», there's still considerable need for considering the causes of such occurrences, and just exactly what constitutes «rapidity». For one thing, although cases examined here are all undeniably exceptional in the speed with which their occupants left, they clearly and nevertheless vary in how widespread the exodus was, and in whether people had no time, a little time—perhaps minutes or a few hours— or some more extended period in which to deal with impending disaster (compare Cameron 1993; Schiffer 1987). Moreover, the spatial and social extent of abandonment is clearly important to understanding what Plunket and Uruñuela refer to as the «why» of the archaeological record at these sites. That is, if only one or a few houses were destroyed, as may be true at Agua Tibia and Xochicalco, the fleeing occupants might have had more opportunity to rescue items, including either larger individual items to carry a short distance to neighbors' homes, or greater numbers of items. Even when destruction is limited within a settlement, however, the circumstances may work against these rescue strategies: At besieged Aguateca or epicentral Caracol, for example, there may well have been no safe haven for the once-privileged residents fleeing the fires. Volcanic eruptions rarely discriminate, on social or other grounds: at Ceren and Tetimpa, no household was spared.

The latter raises again the issue of rescue or escape time, and what ranges of speed and duration are embraced by the notion of «rapid». The volcanic eruptions examined here seem to have provided some warning, as evident in the dearth of victims' bodies in the Ceren catastrophe. At Tetimpa, Plunket and Uruñuela identify things pertaining to the «world of the living» and «world of the dead», inferring these as constituting ancient criteria for discriminating what should be carried away and what left behind, making evacuation seem somewhat orderly in the face of di-

saster. In contrast, even Pompeii yielded casts of victims' bodies. The question then remains, as several authors highlight, whether assemblages at «rapidly abandoned» sites are really close to offering snapshots of daily life. I return to that matter in a moment.

There is, of course, also the question of the intentionality of destruction, in being able to distinguish between natural or unplanned events such as earthquakes, landslides, floods (flash or otherwise), volcanic eruptions, or accidental house fires, as opposed to intentional human destruction in the form of ritual termination or violence. We are interested both in what the correct identification of cause tells about rescue and flight options, and in what it can tell us about social conditions at the time. Natural destruction that buries and seals—as in volcanism or earthquakes—may preserve materials, while floods can carry houses and objects away, bury them under flood deposits, or bits of both. But what of social conditions?

Fires can mark accidents, but as we learn all the time from news stories on arson, fires are often set deliberately. Some of these stem from military violence or rebellion, as in Aguateca, epicentral Caracol or Xochicalco. Other fires may represent ritual destruction, as increasingly inferred for southeastern European houses in the Neolithic (e.g., Stepanovic 1997, Tringham 1991). Depending in part on the construction materials involved and the intensity of the fires, such intentional destruction can leave archaeologists rich assemblages, as in the Aguateca case. Alternatively, it can involve ritually swept or specially adorned places, as in building termination rituals (Mock 1998) or places for which bringing the house down was somewhat of a last gasp in a more protracted sociopolitical decline, as in the burning of Copanec royal buildings in Group 10L-2 or the subroyal residence, Str. 9N-82 (Andrews and Fash 1992; Fash 1991). Even when burning can be inferred as deliberate and some materials are still in the house, however, the question re-emerges as to whether what we encounter as archaeologists is truly an idealized «frozen-moment» assemblage (e.g., Stepanovic 1997: 337). Excavations at Str. 81 at Santa Rita Corozal offer sobering reminder that, burnt or not, floor assemblages may not represent short-term contemporaneity.

EVIDENCE OF RISK ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND COPING

The various papers here remind us of what Sheets has elsewhere (e.g., 1992) referred to as risk aversion.

Brown and Sheets refer to location of hearths as avoiding setting thatched roofs on fire. Storage practices at Ceren, Agua Tibia and Xochicalco placed some materials, such as obsidian, in elevated contexts, implicitly to remove them from damage or from harming people (see also Sheets 1992, 1998). At Agua Tibia, however, Ciudad Ruiz also cites apparent risk negligence when he raises the possibility that fire from an adjoining kiln ignited the set of buildings that burned.

These kinds of evidence lead to questions of larger scale risk-aversion strategies, particularly in areas—widespread in Mesoamerica—prone to earthquakes and volcanism. Brown and Sheets cite the use of light, flexible, earthquake-resistant housing materials at Ceren, and at Quirigua, buttressed masonry buildings such as Str. 1B-3 suggest attempts at earthquake preparedness (Bevan and Sharer 1983: 112). People living in such risk-prone areas are usually aware of the intermittent dangers. But protecting life and property is not always possible, as evident in the catastrophic roof collapse of Copan's masonry Str. 9N8-110B: when the roof fell, it sealed extraordinary remains of ritual-shell craft production by specialists attached to the subroyal elite household (Webster *et al.* 1993).

CLARITY OF EVIDENCE REGARDING DAILY LIFE

Perhaps the central interpretive issue of these papers concerns the completeness of artifact, ecofact, and architectural assemblages in relation to what actually was used and available in ancient daily life. Aspects of this have been cited above. Several authors comment on the relation of storage to use locations for objects encountered, and remind us forcefully that even in rapidly abandoned houses, (a) the majority of objects encountered may be in storage rather than use contexts, and (b) inventories may lack items withdrawn for temporary or extended use outside the house. Plunket and Uruñuela suggest some new ways of recognizing vessels and metates in storage. As Ciudad Ruiz puts it nicely, objects are in «their *habitual/customary locations* more than in their locations of use at the moment of collapse» (translation mine; emphasis added). Inomata and Triadan go on to note that examination of refuse deposits for rapidly abandoned houses points to an order of magnitude by which these under-represent the activities, in this case scribal and other craft production, that took place within the houses.

Household diet is addressed, from different perspectives, by Triadan and Woodward. And they do so in

a manner that does potentially reflect customary, as opposed to momentary household capacities and strategies. Both Triadan's vessel counts and Woodward's botanical analyses begin to sketch baselines for considering dietary security and household provisioning.

Several authors treat issues in identifying structure function, using architectural and artifactual evidence, and several also discuss implications for organization of domestic space, both indoors and outdoors. Although all seem generally optimistic about the ability of gradually abandoned sites to yield sufficient criteria for functional identification, they do provide cautions about the reliability of traditional indicators, especially as regards distinguishing household-residential from specialized, communal ritual structures. The cautions call for more critical justification of individual criteria, such as *tablero-talud* profiles (Plunket and Uruñuela) and for reconsidering the number of indicators deemed sufficient to identify ritual structures (Brown and Sheets). What all certainly recognize, although often not explicitly here, is the probable multi-function, multi-activity nature of most buildings (compare Ingold 1993), and the likely occurrence of rituals, including communal feasting, in complementary household and special-structure settings (e.g., Robin 1999; Yaeger 2000). The latter point returns us to the issue of how much of a settlement—how many houses and what range of structure types—was subject to both rapid abandonment and subsequent archaeological study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING ABOUT GRADUALLY ABANDONED HOUSES

Two of the foregoing relate to evaluating how studying rapidly abandoned houses can better inform the study of the great majority of gradually abandoned houses. One direct comparison of this sort is contained in an important article, by Webster, Gonlin and Sheets (1997), relating data from Ceren and the large corpus of household remains from both urban and rural portions of Copan. As those authors conclude:

«The most obvious lesson of our comparative exercise is that Ceren's superb archaeological record does not automatically render that from Copan's household sites more intelligible, nor, perhaps, should we expect it to. One reason is the disparate nature of the samples, both in character and in scale. Other constraints derive from the logic of conservation at Ceren, which dictates minimal disturbance of material culture

frozen in time by the eruption. Until Ceren buildings are trenched for burials, caches, and construction phasing, important comparisons are impossible.

Ceren's biggest methodological payoff will be eventual explication of the dynamics of the transformation between the in-use household artifact inventory and the discard sample. The substantive payoff is the superb documentation at Ceren of the range of material objects and where and how they were used and stored at a particular instant in time. *Such patterns are most useful not as direct comparisons, but as sources of hypotheses and testable implications about where similar activities took place at other sites such as Copan»* (Webster *et al.* 1997: 59, emphasis added).

One could say that the papers in this collection pick up from those remarks, tackling directly the formulation of such hypotheses. They draw explicit comparisons between their data and those from gradually abandoned sites, specifically highlighting distinctions in assemblage content and structure. Brown and Sheets also simulate the formation processes that would have transformed the time-capsule array to the sort more commonly encountered.

These are crucial approaches for relating the nearly unique to the far more common corpus, as Woodward and others point out. They complement the growing battery of methods available for wringing detail out of the evidence more usually available. Such techniques range from ethnoarchaeological studies and bioarchaeological analyses, now well established, to growing use of soil chemistry and microstratigraphic analyses. Paleopathology and bone chemistry studies will continue, importantly, to complement approaches like Woodward's and Triadan's in study of diet and household-level provisioning (e.g., Whittington 1998). And while, as Woodward rightly reminds us, we may not be able to «see the kitchen garden at gradually abandoned sites», we can increasingly estimate where the garden was by broadening soil chemistry studies, as exemplified at Sayil, Teotihuacan, or Xunantunich and its environs (e.g., Braswell 1998; Killion *et al.* 1989; Manzanilla and Barba 1990; Robin 1999). And just as Inomata and Triadan encourage us to use soil chemistry studies innovatively to recover traces of pigments and other craft materials from plaster floors, research by Wendy Matthews and her colleagues (1997) at Çatalhöyük has also shown the capacity for microstratigraphic floor thin-sections to reveal what was trampled, minutely, into seemingly well-swept surfaces.

My point here is that, while the insights gained from these studies included here are all invaluable

contributions to our understanding of Mesoamerican households and of gradually abandoned sites, they can never be the complete answer. The continued critical consideration of such rare instances will expand our understanding greatly, to be sure. They take even more importance, however, as part of a growing body of technical and theoretical means by which we can triangulate on study of Mesoamerican and other households, and of ancient society more generally.

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