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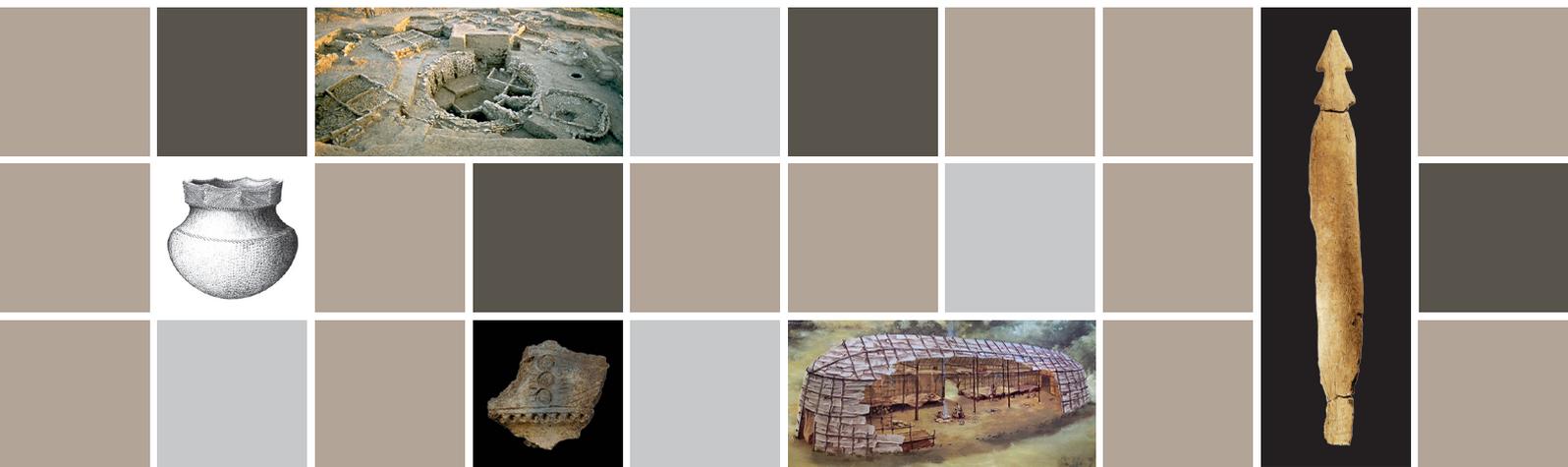
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HOUSEHOLD ARCHAEOLOGY

A Transatlantic Comparative Approach



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HOUSEHOLD ARCHAEOLOGY

A Transatlantic Comparative Approach

Adrian L. BURKE

1 - The conference

The papers in this issue of *P@lethnology* are the product of a conference that was held at the Université de Montréal on October 24 and 25, 2014. The conference was entitled “Household Archaeology: production, ideology and social inequality” and was organized by Claude Chapdelaine and Adrian Burke. A total of eleven papers were presented by fourteen authors from France, Canada and the USA. The conference was set up as a symposium which allowed authors to present more detailed and lengthy presentations (45 minutes), and to allow for more time for questions and discussion among the participants. The primary focus of the conference was the comparison of the archaeological record of Iroquoian longhouses from northeastern North America with Neolithic houses from Western Europe. One additional paper that was not presented orally at the conference is included in this issue (Halperin and Foias) in order to expand the geographic coverage on households to Mesoamerica.

Our motivation to organize this conference arose from two factors. The first factor was and is a primary research theme of our archaeology research team Archéoscience / Archéosociale (As²) based at the Université de Montréal. One of the four main research axes or themes of our As² research team is the archaeology of households; specifically, the social organization of Iroquoian households during the period from 1000 to 1550 CE. This has been a focus of research for our team since its inception in 2009 and reflects the fact that the household represents an ideal focus for archaeological research in that it is, among other things, a physical reflection or manifestation of social organization. The archaeological record of Iroquoian villages and longhouses therefore holds incredible potential for a social archaeology that is based on a solid empirical foundation (cf. Meskell, Preucel 2004).

The second factor that motivated this conference was the long-standing relationship between the archaeologists of the Archéoscience / Archéosociale research team (Département d'anthropologie, Université de Montréal), and the archaeologists of the TRACES research team (UMR 5608, Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès). Our collaborations date back more than a decade, to 2004. Since that time the archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic have organized sessions at international conferences, workshops, and invited lectures. This exchange of professors, researchers and students has been extremely productive and has encouraged the continued collaboration and exchange between these two francophone archaeology research poles. One of the many aspects that underscore our continued collaboration is a shared interest in the comparative approach. This has already led to two specialized publications that include researchers from Montreal and Toulouse (Bon *et al.*, 2011; Bressy *et al.*, 2006). While the comparative approach is not the most popular method of analysis and interpretation in archaeology these days, it is in fact a very useful starting point for a socially oriented archaeology (Trigger, 2003, 2007).

The similarities between Iroquoian longhouses and the Neolithic longhouses of Western Europe seem to naturally invite comparison. As we exchanged data and publications with our colleagues across the Atlantic, it became apparent that both our methods and our research questions were convergent. Moreover, the long term diachronic view from Europe provides much needed time depth to explore questions of continuity / stability or instability / discontinuity in the longhouse social organizational model. On the other hand, the incredibly rich ethnographic and ethnohistoric record of Northern Iroquoians has added a much needed social and political dimension to the archaeological longhouse. In both cases, European and North American, it seems that the data provided by horizontal excavations of longhouses is ideally suited for the kind of questions we wish to ask and for a comparative approach.

2 - The papers

The papers in this issue can be divided into two general groups. The first grouping is primarily descriptive in nature, taking time to describe in detail the empirical data (architecture, hearths / pits, fauna, bone tools, ceramics) related to archaeological households. The spatial analysis of the archaeological data is an important aspect of these papers as might be expected. This group includes five papers that describe the households of Saint Lawrence Iroquoians who occupied the Quebec portion of the Saint Lawrence Valley, and Iroquois (Mohawk) households from Eastern New York (Chapdelaine, Gates St-Pierre *et al.*, Plourde, St. Germain and Courtemanche, and Rieth). All of the sites studied date to the Late Woodland or Late Prehistoric period, between 1000 and 1550 CE. We can add to this first group the paper by Guilaine on Neolithic households around the Mediterranean Basin. His paper is an overview of the evolution of Neolithic households, starting with some of the oldest excavated examples in Cyprus at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, passing through southern Italy, and finishing in France and the end of the Neolithic. Guilaine covers a large time span, from the 9th to the 3rd millennia BCE, in order to give a diachronic perspective on Neolithic households. The usefulness of the household as a unit of analysis is clear in these papers, as is their utility in synchronic and diachronic comparative (cross-cultural or intra-cultural) analyses.

The second group of papers comprises four papers which can be seen as more theoretical in their approach to households and household archaeology (Gernigon, Creese, Birch, and Halperin and Foias). All four papers are firmly grounded in empirical data and spatial analyses such as the variability of Neolithic households across Mediterranean Europe and Anatolia (Gernigon), the architectural remains of Iroquoian villages and longhouses (Creese, Birch) or the refuse disposal patterns within Maya communities (Halperin and Foias). However, the greater preoccupation with theoretical aspects of households, primarily based in anthropological theory, leads to a more dynamic image of these households and the larger community. The changing social and political dimensions of households are apparent in these papers, and all five authors make it clear that households should not be strictly conceptualized as static units of analysis. The relationships between and among households are nonetheless systematically addressed by all of the authors in this issue, but using different types of data recovered from within households and the larger community.

3 - Definitions and uses of the term household

The word household in English is often used as synonymous for both a physical structure, the house, and a social unit, usually the family. As a result it has also become a metaphor for our own conceptions of the typical or iconic social unit living under one roof. It is in fact a standardized

unit of measure for government census takers. Statistics Canada defines the household as “a person or a group of people occupying the same dwelling” (Statistics Canada, 2015). This is essentially the same definition as many English dictionaries which systematically combines a group of people plus a dwelling or house. The question of the family however is not always explicitly included or defined, even though it is often presumed to be the basic social unit and therefore coterminous with the household. The dynamic reality of families and households today and in the past obviously makes this a minimalist and simplistic definition, but it will have to suffice for the time being. In French the equivalent of household is *maisonnée*, or preferably *ménage* according to the Office québécois de la langue française. For the purposes of this publication we have used *maisonnée* since this is the most widely used term among French speaking archaeologists for household. Finally, it is interesting to note that the word hearth (*foyer* in French, *hogar* in Spanish) is often associated with the household, which should provide some comfort to archaeologists.

It should be clear by now that from the outset, the organizers of the conference have treated the household as a valid unit of analysis in anthropology and archaeology. In addition, we believe it is a useful unit of analysis for cross-cultural comparison. The real challenge, both theoretically and methodologically, is how to go from the detailed spatial and artifactual data of *houses* to the social archaeology of *households*. In other words, how can we operationalize the vast theoretical corpus on the social, political and economic organization of households in order to interpret the rich empirical data produced by archaeologists in the field? As a first step, it is important not to simply conflate the family or kin group with the household in terms of analysis (cf. Joyce, Gillespie, 2000). This has been a recurrent theme in Iroquoian archaeology which has often relied on the ethnographic and ethnohistoric record to understand and interpret the social organization of the longhouse. While this direct historical approach may seem reasonable to most Iroquoianists, and even many Mesoamericanists (cf. Wilk, Ashmore, 1988), it cannot be applied to the Neolithic of Europe for example. As a possible solution, Netting, Wilk and Arnould proposed thirty years ago that we should focus on what households *do* (Netting *et al.*, 1984), and most archaeologists seem to have followed suit.

In a recent volume on households in the Americas, Douglass and Gonlin (2012) reiterate the usefulness of the household as an analytical unit and the focus on what households do. They also reprise Wilk and Rathje’s 1982 definition of the household:

“... we can define the *household* as the most common social component of subsistence, the smallest and most abundant activity group. This household is composed of three elements: (1) *social*: the demographic unit, including the number and relationships of the members; (2) *material*: the dwelling, activity areas, and possessions; and (3) *behavioral*: the activities it performs. This total household is the product of a domestic strategy to meet the productive, distributive, and reproductive needs of its members (Wilk, Rathje, 1982: 618, italics in original)”.

Douglass and Gonlin (2012) also return to the five functions of the household as proposed by Wilk and Netting in 1984: production, distribution, transmission, reproduction (includes biological reproduction and cultural / social reproduction), and coresidence (Wilk, Netting, 1984). This focus on what households do, and what the functions of a household are, seems to still be useful for operationalizing the issue of household archaeology. What is perhaps more interesting is that along with some of the more traditional research questions in household archaeology such as craft production (Hirth, 2009), Douglass and Gonlin point out that household archaeology today can and does address many of the issues that are central to social archaeology such as gender, inequality, differentiation, or the social context of production and specialization (Douglass, Gonlin, 2012). The papers in this volume address these issues and others by using diverse datasets that show the analytical value of the household.

Finally, it is perhaps telling that the only case study from northeastern North America in the Douglass and Gonlin volume concerns the archaeology of Iroquois longhouses in late prehistoric New York (Snow, 2012). This points to the basic fact that not all archaeological contexts provide the ideal spatial or architectural data that will enable an archaeologist to excavate both houses and households. In fact, other excellent examples of this type of household archaeology exist in Canada and northern USA (e.g. Ames, 2006). We have been very fortunate in this volume to gather examples from Southern Europe, Anatolia and the Mediterranean, northeastern North America, and Mesoamerica that allow unique insights into households in the past, but also permit a certain level of comparison. We hope that the reader will find these case studies useful as an addition to the growing body of archaeological data on households and that it will encourage further debate and research.

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