

HOUSEHOLD STUDIES IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Miriam Müller

The ninth annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Post-doctoral Seminar, with the title “Household Studies in Complex Societies: (Micro) Archaeological and Textual Approaches,” organized by Miriam Müller, was held on Friday, March 15, and Saturday, March 16, 2013, in Breasted Hall. Over two days, the papers and discussions focused on household archaeology, a topic that has generated considerable interest in recent years, particularly for the region of the Near East. Well implemented in New World archaeology, the subdiscipline still lacks the recognition and definition in Near Eastern archaeology. With an equal integration of texts and new scientific analyses, so-called microarchaeology, the Oriental Institute with its wide range of research interests covering the entire Near East seemed to be the best place for tackling household archaeology in an interdisciplinary approach. Since a major part of research in this field is currently being undertaken in Europe, this year’s conference had an exceptionally high number of international scholars, from Austria, Egypt, England, Germany, Italy, and the United States.

Household archaeology is a relatively recent development that was introduced in the 1970s as a potentially new subfield in archaeology. With the advent of processual archaeology in the late 1950s, an integration of cultural anthropology and archaeology, and a stronger



Pictured, from bottom, left to right: (row 1) Miriam Müller, Felix Arnold, Lynn Rainville, Cynthia Robin, Paolo Brusasco, David Schloen; (row 2): Peter Miglus, Peter Pfälzner, Kristin De Lucia, Nicholas Picardo, Aaron Brody; (row 3) Kate Spence, Lisa Nevett, Nadine Moeller, Heather Baker, Elizabeth Stone, Jens-Arne Dickmann; (row 4) Adelheid Otto, Neal Spencer. Photo by Craig Tews

HOUSEHOLD STUDIES IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

emphasis on the individual and individual behavior, scholarly interest consequently turned toward the concept of households. This new bottom-up approach promised to serve as a link between theories of social change and material culture and could thus also have the potential to lead to a better understanding of wider social processes. Mesoamerican scholars led the field in the 1970s and defined first principles in the 1980s. Over the past three decades, various theories, models, and techniques have been introduced to explore households, such as the use of ethnographic data, economic models, gender theory, and microarchaeology. By initiating the Oriental Institute seminar on (micro) archaeological and textual approaches toward households, it was hoped that an integrated interdisciplinary exchange would lead to a better understanding of households in the ancient Near East and beyond.

The conference was structured in six sessions thematically divided into the topics “Method and Theory,” “Activity-area Analysis,” “Social Stratification,” “Ethnicity and Identity,” “Private and Political Economy,” and “Urban–Rural and Core–Periphery Relations.” Scholars of different disciplines, dealing with different time periods and regions, were thus encouraged to discuss their various approaches to the topics, critically reflect methodologies, and find inspiration in each other’s research strategies. Each session was followed by a podium discussion with the speakers. In an assessment of all the papers, three respondents summarized important points and presented their own research and perspective on household archaeology. The conference was concluded with a roundtable discussion.

After a preamble by Christopher Woods and my own introduction to the topic, we started off the first day of the conference with an overview on theoretical and methodological discussions in household archaeology. The first and second sessions were chaired by Yorke Rowan. Our first speaker, Adelheid Otto (University of Mainz), presented in an exemplary approach what can be done by the integration of archaeological, historical, and scientific sources for the interpretation of households at Tall Bazi, a site of the second millennium BC in northern Syria. She was able to not only show different activity areas in the typical houses and give an insight in the inhabitants’ diet, but also draw conclusions on the societal structure. Her examination was based on the differentiation of inventory types following Michael Schiffer’s seminal work on site formation processes. However, Tall Bazi presents a very favorable example, since the city was burnt in a violent attack. Otto’s discussion of the influences of pre- and post-abandonment processes on the archaeological record and in particular artifact assemblages in the houses led over to the second paper of the morning session, by Kate Spence (University of Cambridge, UK). Spence’s presentation of ancient Egyptian architecture at the New Kingdom site Amarna, its conceptualization, and interpretation revealed the striking patterning of ancient Egyptian houses focused on the head of the household and his interaction with visitors and family members. Spence advocated a close examination of the household’s physical frame, the house, and challenged the idea of functional spaces as the primary conceptual structure of a house. The last speaker of this session, Paolo Brusasco (University of Genoa), addressed the interaction of texts and archaeology in the definition of family composition in second-millennium BC Mesopotamia. He analyzed family archives from Ur and Nippur and compared changes in the family structure to alterations in the house layout. Brusasco could convincingly show that households’ life cycles are reflected in the houses’ networks and thus underline the importance of text studies for understanding households.

After a brief coffee break we returned for the second session of the day, which was devoted to activity-area analysis. Peter Pfälzner (University of Tübingen) started the session with a detailed introduction into possibilities and constraints of activity-area research

based on the important work by Susan Kent. He used two examples of third-millennium BC household contexts at Tell Bderi and tomb contexts at Qatna, both in Syria, to clarify different types of deposits and artifact assemblages. He proposed an integrated approach of a functional, economic, social, diachronic, symbolic, and architectural analysis. The second speaker of this session, Lynn Rainville (Sweet Briar College), then gave a presentation on her meticulous work at the Assyrian site Ziyaret Tepe in southeastern Turkey, using so-called micro debris or micro refuse analysis. By taking samples of floor levels and midden deposits and floating them to retrieve miniscule objects, a more reliable picture can be gained about the objects that were used in the city's houses. Rainville was able to show that it is essential to compare macro and micro artifacts and also use ethnographic data to infer activities that were carried out at a certain place. Felix Arnold (German Archaeological Institute, Cairo) then looked at second-millennium BC and first-millennium BC houses on the island of Elephantine in southern Egypt to investigate the specific aspect of waste disposal in a diachronic perspective. He concisely traced the development from a less obvious distinction between clean and unclean space in the Middle Kingdom houses to a growing separation in the Late Period houses. He was able to show a clear partition between inside and outside space, maybe depicting a greater distinction of public and private space. The wish for cleanness and purity as an ideal state of comfort is also reflected in contemporaneous texts. Lisa Nevett (University of Michigan) completed the session with an assessment of the current state of household archaeology in classical antiquity and outlined that especially classical archaeology in Greece is considerably behind the developments in neighboring disciplines. While the abundance of available texts has always played a major role in understanding households, the investigation of artifact assemblages significantly lags behind, also as a result of the available data-sets. First steps in the direction of a less architecturally and text based approach have already revised a number of aspects that seemed to be overtly dominant household themes, such as a strong gendered perspective. Nevett advocated the integration of micro archaeological techniques such as micromorphology and microartifact studies to open up new perspectives on Greek domestic contexts.

After the lunch break, everyone reconvened for the third session of the day, on social stratification. Both afternoon sessions were chaired by Jack Green. My own contribution dealt with a residential area of the second-millennium BC site of Tell el-Dab'a in the eastern Nile delta in an attempt to characterize the population and possibly determine class. This was achieved by a multiscalar approach combining data from estate, house, and tomb contexts, by analyzing architecture, artifact assemblages, skeletal material, and texts. The example could shed light on the so far only poorly attested part of the ancient Egyptian society that I would like to call a *middle class*. Since the considerable wealth that is displayed in the neighborhood under investigation does not seem to come as a state reward for fulfilling a governmental position, the term *elite* does not seem to apply for the inhabitants of this neighborhood. The session was concluded with a presentation by Heather Baker (University of Vienna) determining household cycles in first-millennium BC Mesopotamia. By tracing the development and changes of a family over four generations, Baker was able to show how difficult it is to understand internal modifications in a house without the help of texts.

After the last coffee break of the day, the final session dealt with the concepts of identity and ethnicity. Nicholas Picardo (Harvard University) presented the example of a highly institutionalized household model in Middle Kingdom Egypt. As part of one of the typical pyramid or temple settlements, rigidly state-planned cities with an orthogonal grid and standardized

HOUSEHOLD STUDIES IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

houses, Picardo discussed one of the large mansions that feature private quarters, but also official suites and a highly controlled access network. By analyzing seal impressions from the house, he tried to demonstrate shifting identities related to changing masters of the household with their specific positions in the bureaucratic landscape. Aaron Brody (Pacific School of Religion, and Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology Berkeley), our last speaker of the day, then concluded with a paper on ethnic markers in the archaeological record of Iron Age Tell en-Nasbeh in Israel. He investigated modes of diet, ritual, language, dress, and habitation as well as the effects of empire on local identity constructions and the notions of boundaries. Brody was able to show how, for example, local Judean traditions persist in the domestic realm, particularly in the food-preparing process. Drinking sets, and thus objects used for representation, however, depict the influence of the Assyrian empire by their imitated form. We ended the day with a very welcome reception in the museum galleries. Afterwards, the conference participants enjoyed a school-bus ride to Chinatown, where we were rewarded with excellent food and drinks.

The second day of the conference comprised two sessions chaired by Donald Whitcomb. Two speakers presented their research in the first session of the day on private and political economy. Jens-Arne Dickmann (University of Freiburg) started with a presentation of the organization and economy of the Casa del Menandro at Pompeii. It became immediately clear how well defined a Roman house is already on the basis of the textual evidence and specific installations designating different room types and associated activities. Since the Casa del Menandro is the largest urban household at Pompeii, it is possible to distinguish several subunits that belonged to different members of the household — slave families, the porter, the majordomos, and the master and his family — that essentially formed separate households within the large mansion. Dickmann stressed the difficulty in assigning objects to specific activities and instead used written evidence, graffiti on the walls, as one example to locate areas where servants fulfilled their daily duties. Kristin De Lucia (University of Wisconsin) focused in her paper on household economy in pre-Aztec Xaltocan in Mexico. By using microartifact and soil chemistry analyses combined with ethnographic data, she was able to show how much information can be gained with these methods when houses bear literally no installations or macroartifacts to determine activities therein. De Lucia could not only demonstrate multicrafting households, but also labor division and market exchange.

The final session of the conference was devoted to urban-rural and core-periphery relations. Peter Miglus (University of Heidelberg) documented in his paper how a household on the periphery of the Mesopotamian heartland in Bakr Awa in northern Iraq retained traditional expressions in architecture, symbolisms, and ideology of the Mesopotamian kingship and thus outward reflections, but displayed a very local character in the private sphere, for example, in the use of local pottery types. Neal Spencer's (British Museum, London) contribution on households in Egyptian occupied Amara West in Nubia concluded the conference. He contrasted the development of a densely built neighborhood within the city walls with spaciouly arranged villas outside the city's enclosure. By combining architectural, functional, economic, symbolic, and diachronic analyses with an investigation of plant remains and skeletal material in the adjacent cemeteries, and also considering the third dimension — an upper floor, lighting and ventilation — Spencer was able to convey a picture of the ancient living conditions. Mircomorphological analyses will in the future add even more information. He furthermore traced cultural entanglement in different styles of Nubian and Egyptian architecture, pottery types, and burial customs and related this development to a

long history of Nubian-Egyptian coresidence where the boundaries were naturally blurred after a certain time.

After the final coffee break of the day, three respondents commented on the different papers and provided an insight into their own research and involvement with household archaeology. Nadine Moeller (Oriental Institute) focused her response on the contributions on ancient Egyptian households. She summarized the different papers and raised a number of important aspects. Moeller highlighted the difficulty in distinguishing class and moreover ethnicity via household analysis. She furthermore gave an insight in the domestic archaeological record of the Old Kingdom, a period that was not covered in the papers, and the difficulty even discerning households at that time. Elizabeth Stone (Stony Brook University) expressed a rather critical attitude toward the state of an integrated approach in Near Eastern archaeology. From her perspective, the lack of data from old excavations and the limitations of today's archaeological research in terms of exposure were to be held responsible for the current and, in her view, very backward state of household archaeology in the Near East. Cynthia Robin (Northwestern University), on the other hand, stressed the progress in Mesoamerican archaeology in recent years in bringing together the historical and scientific approach that can help to reveal the hidden transcripts of past societies. In the attempt to determine and locate specific household tasks within the architectural frame by the presenters, she emphasized the overall multifunctionality of household space that was exhibited in almost all the papers.

All eighteen conference participants reconvened on the stage for the roundtable discussion led by David Schloen (Oriental Institute). The discussion started with a provocative comment by Schloen, who proclaimed the limits of archaeology to determine certain social concepts and behavior in past societies. He made a strong case for the integration of texts that was seconded by other participants over the course of the discussion. Following up on that, the use of ethnoarchaeology was emphasized and contrary to earlier developments that had discredited the application of ethnographic data, it was even advocated to not only use ethnoarchaeological analogies for a specific area, but to look for parallels in other societies, periods, and regions. Furthermore, the aspect of landscape reconstruction was highlighted, which has a direct effect on households and which needs to be included in the analysis. The participants generally disagreed with Stone's critical attitude toward the state of Near Eastern archaeology and agreed upon the necessity to combine all lines of evidence without giving priority to any of the available data-sets that were mentioned in the different papers. Realizing this challenge requires the integration of all the different specialists providing these types of data-sets in the research agendas from the start. And even if for certain places and periods not all of the different techniques and data-sets are available, one should take it as strength, think creatively, and explore different ways to come to a better understanding of households in the past. The proceedings of this seminar will be published as part of the Oriental Institute Seminar (OIS) series during the coming academic year (2013–2014).

The seminar definitely fulfilled its proposed goal of bringing together specialists from all different regions and periods. The participants were able to exchange ideas and further the development of the discipline by applying an integrated approach with the promise to come to a more reliable picture of households in past societies. I would like to thank the Oriental Institute at this point for supporting my idea and helping me by all available means to organize a successful conference. My thanks goes to Gil Stein for the encouragement and advice in finding a great panel of speakers, to Christopher Woods for his guidance, and to

HOUSEHOLD STUDIES IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Steve Camp for the exceptional financial funding of this conference. Bringing together specialists from all over the world would not have been possible without the financial support of Arthur and Lee Herbst, the German Archaeological Institute, and the University of Freiburg. Mariana Perlinac and Brittany Mullins were responsible for the great atmosphere and accommodation that made this conference such an enjoyable event. I thank John Sanders and Paul Ruffin as well as Hannah Van Vels and Ted Good for their expertise and help with the IT and audio-visual equipment; Foy Scalf, Akemi Horii, Monica Velez, and Amy Weber for their great job in announcing the conference; and Emily Teeter and Jack Green for the wonderful gallery tour. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Tom Urban and Leslie Schramer for editing the texts and providing the beautiful programs and conference posters.
