



Early Mimbres households: Exploring the Late Pithouse period (550–1000 AD) at the Florida Mountain Site



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ABSTRACT

Many studies have explored the household to understand social organization, production, and other dynamics of societies throughout the world. In this work, the approach outlined by Richard Wilk and colleagues is used to investigate households at the Florida Mountain Site, an intermittently occupied Late Pithouse period (550–1000 AD) residential site in the Mimbres Mogollon area of Southwestern New Mexico. Drawing on the similarities of this intermittent residential site to contemporaneous pitstructure sites in the Mimbres area, we suggest that one or more household units occupied the site. Our analysis also supports previous inferences that Mimbres households were integrated into more inclusive levels of social organization (e.g., extended kin groups, villages, communities), but also indicate that this integration maintained cohesion during seasonal residential movements from more permanently occupied pitstructure sites.

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1. Introduction

The diversity of schema by which people organize to meet their reproductive and socio-economic needs has been discussed by several scholars (Bender, 1967; Douglass and Gonlin, 2012; Flannery and Sabloff, 2009; Goody, 1972; Kuijt, 2000; Wilk and Netting, 1984; Yanagisako, 1979). This research indicates that groups are highly flexible and that correlations between social organization and architecture are anything but normative. Rather, architecture is often functional in that it is built to serve specific needs such as residential space, communal space, or socio-religious space of various levels of inclusion within a group; i.e., nuclear family, household, kin group, and moiety.

Further, the architectural requirements of a group can change depending on things such as anticipated length of occupation and purpose of occupation at a location. This later point is something often overlooked where sites containing ephemeral or less-permanent architecture are underrepresented in regional survey and excavation efforts. This is likely because they typically occur in marginal areas that have not been the focus of survey and are perhaps perceived as not holding the promise of data to address research questions on par with more permanent habitation sites.

However, we should be interested in how people organized in any society to make a living from the landscape and be willing to entertain the possibility that social organization may or may not have varied between sites of varying durations of occupation and purposes. In this case, defining the relationship between social organization and architecture becomes the task and not something that can be assumed dependent on individual variables such as structure size.

This paper works to explore this task in archeological inquiry using an example from the North American Southwest. Based on differences in the sizes and characteristics of excavated architecture in this region, culture histories commonly present a dichotomy between small residential structures and larger communal structures during the pitstructure periods that precede the transition to living in pueblos (Wills, 2001, 2007). Further, it is typically assumed that small residential structures were the dwellings of individual households (Hegmon, 2002; Wills, 2001, 2007).

The interpretation of small pitstructures as household residences during pithouse periods appears to be based upon three factors. First, the fact that they were the most common architectural form during pitstructure periods suggests that these structures represent the residence of the basic social unit, the household (see Goldsmith, 1993 for discussion of this principle). Second, the domestic nature of the artifacts and features associated with small pitstructures supports this interpretation. Third, the size of these structures has been used to suggest that the occupants

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were either a nuclear or extended family. In contrast, large pit-structures often exhibit architectural differences and evidence of behavioral activity that set them apart from small pitstructures, even though some domestic activity may still occur within them (Adler, 1989; Lipe and Hegmon, 1989). Recent archeological investigations and ethnographic data challenge the normative dichotomy between large and small pitstructures and have worked to change the notion that all small pitstructures were residential and occupied by individual households (Creel and Anyon, 2003; Hegmon, 2002; Hegmon et al., 2000; Lucas, 1996, 2007; Wills, 2001, 2007).

This paper continues to address this misperception through an investigation of household organization of groups that occupied the Florida Mountain Site (LA 18839), an intermittent Mimbres Late Pithouse period (550–1000 AD) occupation partially excavated in 1985. We define *intermittent occupation sites* as those that consist of temporary or less-permanent architecture where people likely only lived for short durations of time. Some have labeled these sites as “limited activity” or “limited occupation” sites (Nelson and Lippmeier, 1993; Ward, 1978), but we feel this suggests that perhaps not all activities carried out at more permanent sites are found or conducted at these less-permanent sites.

The Mimbres culture of southwestern New Mexico represents a branch of the Mogollon, one of the major cultural traditions in the North American Southwest. While variation exists in the timing and degree of change among Southwest cultural groups, most populations, including the Mimbres Mogollon, share a similar developmental trajectory that includes: the adoption of agriculture and ceramic technology, becoming increasingly dependent on cultigens, decreasing residential mobility, population aggregation, and a transition from pitstructure architecture to pueblos. In the Mimbres region, many of these processes began or took place during the Three Circle phase (800–1000 AD) and are related to the social transformations in Mimbres society, marking the transition from pitstructure to pueblo architecture at the beginning of the Classic period (1000–1150 AD).

We argue that evidence from the Florida Mountain Site suggests that Mimbres people lived similar lives (organized socially) at temporary residential, possibly seasonal, sites that were similar to the lives they lived at more permanently occupied pitstructure sites. While we were unable to fully excavate the Florida Mountain Site, we used available data to develop an interpretation of household organization that provides a preliminary view of how Mimbres people organized themselves on the household level during the Late Pithouse period, especially at sites peripheral to more permanent villages. This serves as an initial model for the examination of household organization at contemporaneous Mimbres pitstructure sites and further demonstrates the utility of household studies for archeological communities in other regions of the world.

Drawing on the work of Lightfoot (1994), Varien (1999), and Wilk and colleagues (Ashmore and Wilk, 1988; Wilk and Netting, 1984; Wilk and Rathje, 1982), we appraise the presence of households at the Florida Mountain Site by examining artifacts, site layout, site setting, and the relationships between artifact distributions and architecture for evidence of the five practices (production, distribution, coresidence, transmission, and reproduction) typically organized at the household level (Wilk and Netting, 1984; Wilk and Rathje, 1982). The results suggest that one or more households occupied the site contemporaneously and that these occupations included the construction and use of communal space. Given these results, we then discuss the potential ramifications for understanding Mimbres social organization at pitstructure villages.

At a broader scale, this work seeks to demonstrate the potential that intermittent occupation sites can hold to address even difficult questions such as the stability of group social organization and lifestyle during mobility away from permanent villages. In the case of

this work, we suggest that Mimbres groups lived and organized socially in a similar fashion regardless of whether they were residing at permanent villages or intermittent occupation residences, perhaps indicating the earlier existence of rigid worldviews or social expectations that have been suggested for the subsequent Classic Period.

2. Household archeology

Because they represent the basic scale at which social organization articulates with material culture, investigating households is key to exploring social processes in societies past and present. Unfortunately, the concept of the household was ambiguous in the past, often confounded with other social formations such as the family or the residential group (see Netting et al., 1984, pp. xiii–xxxviii; Wilk and Netting, 1984, pp. 1–4). Cross-cultural ethnographic studies indicate that the way people come together, the activities they pursue, and the material correlates of these activities vary considerably (Hendon, 1996; Wilk and Netting, 1984; Wilk and Rathje, 1982; Yanagisako, 1979). As an example of the variation that can exist between households and residences, Wilk and Rathje (1982, p. 620) noted that multiple households may reside under the same roof or a single household may reside under multiple roofs.

Early studies concerning households often conflated multiple variables into their unit of analysis, so much so that Western notions of a *household* composed of a *nuclear family* came to characterize these studies, and they made no attempt to distinguish between the two terms. Bender (1967) sought to break this combination down into its variant analytical units. He believed that when one sought to investigate households and families, they were examining “three distinct social phenomena: families, coresidential groups, and domestic functions” (Bender, 1967, p. 495). Each of these structural units could vary within the same social group depending on multiple factors. Bender’s analysis shifted the focus within household studies away from one interested in the morphology of the household unit to a focus on household practices. To Bender (1967), households performed domestic functions that aid the household group in meeting the basic needs of survival and reproduction.

While Bender’s critique allowed households to be approached in a more meaningful fashion, Goody (1972) realized that there were potential problems in assessing the household in structural terms as well as in economic terms without taking the historical development of a particular social group into account. This critique was well suited for the implementation of the study of households in archeology, and several studies (e.g., Haviland, 1988; Whalen, 1988) have used an historical materialist approach to households in order to study structural changes in social and political organization.

Wilk and Rathje (1982, p. 618) sought to rectify the ambiguity of what constitutes a household by defining the household as “the most common social component of subsistence, the smallest and most abundant activity group.” The crucial distinction in this definition is the cooperative social and economic action of household members to meet their needs, not kinship relations or coresidence. Wilk and Rathje (1982) note that archeologists must first be able to isolate the physical architectural structure before being able to discern the actual groups that lived within its confines and the actions they performed. They believe that archeologists can begin to make inferences about the nature of the household units within a given social system by obtaining a detailed knowledge of the society’s economic and subsistence activities. This is accomplished through studying the social practices of households, which are the basic activities that households

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