



# Rethinking households, communities and status in the southern Brazilian highlands

Jonas Gregorio De Souza

Department of Archaeology, University of Exeter, Laver Building, North Park Road, Exeter EX4 4QE, United Kingdom



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## ABSTRACT

Disparities in domestic architecture are a potential correlate of emergent status inequality between households. In the southern Brazilian highlands, pit house settlements exhibit significant variations in structure size and site layout. Particularly relevant are the oversized structures whose function has been debated but remained unresolved. Here, I present data from Baggio 1, a large site including an oversized structure (cal CE 1365–1790). I show how the oversized pit house emerged earlier and was distinguished not only by its dimensions, but also by its privileged hilltop position and practices of floor renewal. When the settlement expanded with the addition of smaller pits, some of which were small houses, whereas others were specialized facilities, the precinct around the oversized structure continued to be the focus of activities of the settlement. Based on ethnography of the Jê peoples of Brazil and cross-cultural relationships between household size and status, I argue that the dwellers of the oversized pit house could have derived a higher status from their more numerous kin and connection to the founders of the site. Finally, the appearance of oversized pit houses must be understood in a broader context of landscape and social transformations in southern Brazil after the turn of the second millennium AD, which was also reflected in other material signs of emergent status inequalities.

## 1. Introduction

Archaeologists interested in the emergence of status inequalities among formative societies have household archaeology and community patterns as a major line of evidence. In the context of lowland South America, the pit house settlements of the southern Jê represent a unique and yet little explored case study among early village societies of the New World. Around 2000 BP, the southern Jê (archaeologically identified with the Taquara/Itararé tradition) rapidly dispersed over the southern Brazilian highlands and adjacent escarpment and coastal plains (Fig. 1). The earliest sites are recognized as occupations in rock shelters and surface ceramic scatters, but after ca. cal AD 600 a new form of settlement with the first pit houses represented a transition to more permanent occupations. In addition to pit houses, after cal CE 1000, the southern Jê began to create earthworks of public and ceremonial nature, such as funerary mound and enclosure complexes (De Souza et al., 2016a; Iriarte et al., 2013, 2008; Robinson et al., 2017). The mounds contain secondary deposits of cremated remains belonging to a few individuals, with a few exceptions where multiple burials have been located. The onset of this new monumental burial tradition, coupled with the apparently restricted access to mound burial and disparities in grave goods and architecture have been pointed out as signaling the formalization of status inequalities among the southern Jê,

especially in light of the historical descriptions of chiefly funerary rites (De Masi, 2009; De Souza, 2012, 2016a; Iriarte et al., 2013, 2008; Robinson et al., 2017).

The earthen architecture of southern Jê settlements is of particular value to those interested in household archaeology in the South American lowlands, as it contrasts with most archaeological contexts of the Neotropics where the limits of domestic areas have to be tentatively inferred from artefact density (Araujo, 2001; Siegel, 1995; Wüst and Barreto, 1999). Most importantly, there are great disparities in number, dimensions, and spatial arrangements of pit houses in southern Jê settlements, differences that could be related to emergent status inequalities.

The immense variability in the architecture and contents of pit structures suggests that not all of them were utilized as dwellings. Throughout the article, however, I refer to them as “pit houses” due to the common use of this term in the literature, without necessarily implying a domestic function for all structures. The function of most pits as habitations has been deduced from excavations that revealed domestic refuse such as lithics, utilitarian pottery, charred *Araucaria* (Paraná pine) seeds, and features such as hearths and post holes. Pit houses are generally circular, with a few elliptic examples, and have average diameters of 2–5 m and depths of 1 m or less before excavation, with original profiles ranging from vertical with flat floors to

E-mail address: [jonas.gregorio@gmail.com](mailto:jonas.gregorio@gmail.com).

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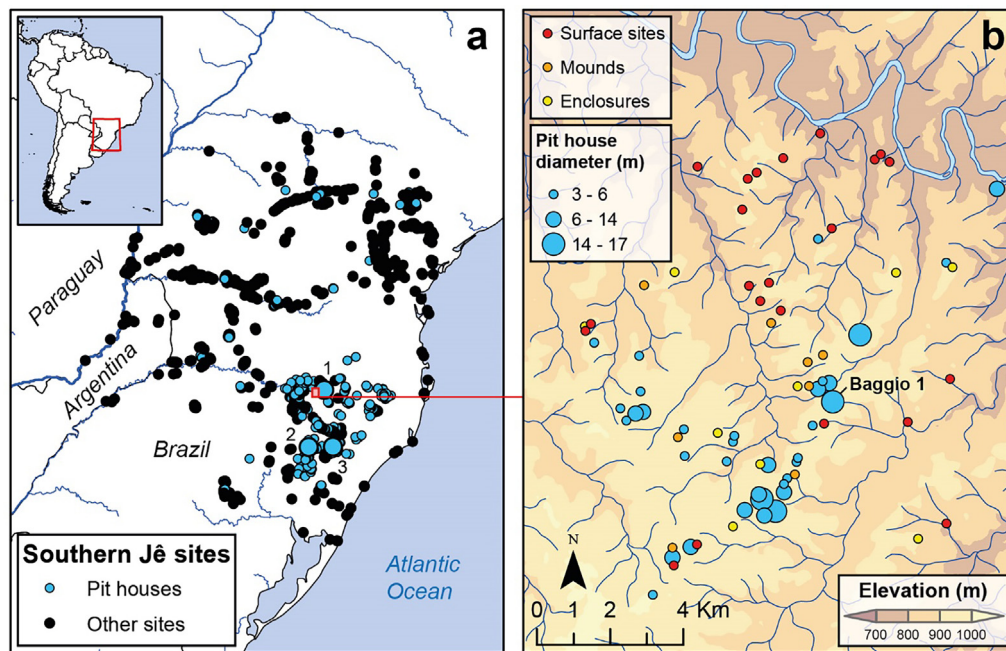


Fig. 1. (a) Distribution of Southern Jê pit houses and other types of archaeological sites. Oversized pit houses mentioned in the text: (1) SC-CL-52; (2) RS-A-27 and RS-A-29; (3) RS-AN-03. (b) Southern Jê sites located in Campo Belo do Sul.

hemispherical, in some cases including benches (Beber, 2004; Chmyz et al., 2003; Copé, 2006; La Salvia, 1983; Saldanha, 2005; Schmitz et al., 1988, 2002). Settlements that include multiple pit houses are sometimes built over an artificially levelled terrain, suggesting previous planning, and also exhibit trackways between the houses, pointing to long-term patterns of movement and long occupations (Iriarte et al., 2008; Saldanha, 2005). Deep, uninterrupted occupation strata have been reported for some pit houses, with dates spanning five centuries from top to bottom, which reinforces their interpretation as permanent dwellings (Copé, 2006). However, many excavated sites exhibited thick layers of abandonment between living floors, with radiocarbon dates frequently showing long intervals between occupations (Chmyz et al., 2003; Müller, 2007; Saldanha, 2005; Schmitz et al., 1988, 2002; Schmitz and Rogge, 2011). Variations in the degree of permanence and occupation dynamics of pit houses probably existed in the broad territory and long cultural history of the southern Jê.

One unresolved problem is the function of oversized structures that can reach 25 m in diameter and 7 m in depth. Appearing after cal CE 1000, oversized structures could have served as extended family houses, high-status dwellings or as ritual buildings (Copé, 2006; Reis, 1980; Schmitz et al., 2013a). Because the historical southern Jê societies have been described as regionally organized in chiefdoms with hereditary leadership (Fernandes, 2004; Mabilde, 1983; Métraux, 1946), variations in pit house architecture could reflect the beginnings of status disparities that became institutionalized later. However, few studies have been designed to specifically address this question. Despite the continuity between pre-Columbian and historical southern Jê groups (specifically the Kaingang and Xokleng) in territory, material culture and funerary practices, the rich ethnographic corpus has mainly been explored for the interpretation of burial mounds rather than domestic contexts (De Masi, 2009; De Souza and Copé, 2010; Iriarte et al., 2013, 2008; Robinson et al., 2017).

In this article, I present data from a dense, architecturally complex southern Jê pit house settlement (Baggio 1), which also includes a centrally-placed oversized structure (Structure 1). Evidence from different structures and areas of the site revealed significant variations in pit house chronology, architecture and content. I show that the foundation events in the settlement's history involved the construction of

Structure 1 at a privileged position on a hilltop, followed by elaborate cycles of house renewal involving conflagration and entombment. As the settlement grew with the addition of smaller pit houses, Structure 1 persisted as the social epicenter of the community, with most activities occurring in its neighborhood at the expense of the lower, peripheral sector of the site. I argue that the history of Baggio 1 can be interpreted with reference to the ethnography of modern Jê societies, among which differences in household size are a source of status acquisition. Furthermore, the development of the Baggio 1 site has parallels with historical southern Jê villages, organized around the dwellings of elders who host gatherings and vie for prestige and influence with other household heads in a region. Finally, I situate the emergence of Baggio 1 and other compounds with oversized pit houses in the broader context of the southern Brazilian highlands after cal CE 1000. Mounting evidence suggests that the turn of the second millennium AD was a period of major transformations in southeastern South America, involving changing landscapes, migrations, and a peak in population densities – conditions that could have fostered the development of status inequalities among the southern Jê and their materialization through new forms of ceremonial and domestic architecture.

## 2. Household archaeology and community patterns

### 2.1. Household size and wealth

The study of households is crucial for debates about emergent complexity. Because the household functions as a basic economic unit in most formative societies, decisions made at the household level may lead, in the long term, to the development of social inequality (Ashmore and Wilk, 1988; Coupland, 1996; Hastorf and D'Altroy, 2001; Maschner and Patton, 1996; Mehrer, 1995; Robin, 2006; White, 2013; Yaeger, 2000; Zeidler, 1984). For archaeologists, variability in domestic structures is one of the clearest material signatures of disparities in wealth and status (Coupland, 1996; Hayden, 1997; Peterson and Shelach, 2012; Shelach, 2006). For example, in a cross-cultural study of middle-range societies in the Americas, Feinman and Neitzel (1984) found that one of the most frequent means of differentiating leaders was the size, construction or location of their houses. Most importantly, domestic

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