Archaeological Perspectives on Houses and Households in Third Millennium Mesopotamian Society

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By Alessandra Salvin

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INTRODUCTION

This work was proposed by Prof. Roger Matthews. The development of the book followed the research done for the PhD thesis. Chapter one reviews all the available publications about household archaeology.

When the research questions were chosen all the possible methodologies of analysis were explored. One of the aims was to utilise evidence from different sites in order to cover as many variations as possible. One of the biggest challenges of this work has been to find a sufficiently versatile methodology applicable to the nature of the evidence, which is very heterogeneous and often incomplete. Chapter two shows that the analysis investigated various methodologies, some of which were partially discarded when they proved to be insufficiently useful to answer the research question or insufficiently versatile to apply to different types of evidence. This happened with, for example, the spatial analysis method: the calculation of the relative asymmetry was found to not be useful (see the formula in 2.3) and it has been not utilised, while the flow charts which are part of the same theory were found to be useful in analysing privacy.

To examine variations and use of space, seven sites were analysed from north (Tell Melebiya, Titris Höyük, Tell Taya), central (Khafajah, Tell Asmar), and southern Mesopotamia (Tell Abu Salabikh and Shuruppak). Chapters three, four, and five feature detailed analyses of all the houses with an almost complete layout of the ground floor among the seven sites chosen for a total of sixty-eight house plans.

In chapter six, the information gathered from the detailed analysis of the previous chapters was discussed in order to answer the four research questions. In all the analysis chapters, quantitative and qualitative methods were combined.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 The Archaeological Significance of Houses

"Il ne devrait pas être nécessaire d'insister longuement sur l'importance que rêvet la maison dans l'expression des traits culturels d'une civilisation....[les] archéologues...dans le monde mort où ils évouluent, "oublient" parfois cette humble manifestation de la créativité humaine. Parce qu'elle n'est pas porteuse, pensent-ils d'une signification politique, artistique ou religeuse, la maison est sacrifiée au palais et au temple, jugés plus prestigeux." (Aurenche 1981, 3)

Historically, there have been only few studies in Ancient Near Eastern archaeology that have concentrated on domestic buildings. While we have extensive knowledge of temples and palaces, much less is known about houses and residential districts. This is a serious gap in the knowledge of Mesopotamian culture, since the house is one of the main spaces for social dynamics. Taking into consideration only the "public architecture," we understand the big political and economic movements but we miss their impact on Mesopotamian society (Pollock 1999, 147–8). Empires come and go but houses and households represent continuity in a society, being the vital element containing the fundamental characteristics of a society, and one must therefore comprehend houses to understand a culture. Moreover, they reflect the social changes that are key factors in the development of complex political systems (MacEachern, Archer, and Garvin 1989, 526).

Sanders (1990, 45) says that: "A building is a cultural unit of meaning before it is an object of practical function ... the built environment plays a crucial role in providing cues for proper social behavior by encoding the world view and cultural values of the builders."

In the words of Tringham, who sees architecture as an arena for social action: "the social, political, organisational, and other behavioural and cultural factors are more directly influential in shaping architecture and the

use of space than is the effect of the physical environment" (Tringham 1995, 164).

When we study houses and households we find information on the material structure, people, and ideology that inform the creation of the structure and the cooperation of the group as well as the socioeconomic activities that the households are engaged in (Sillar 2000, 2). For example, evidence of cereal grinding and textile production found in houses gives us valuable information about the economy and the role of women and children in Mesopotamian society.

Moreover, Schloen recognises, in what he calls the "patrimonial household model" (see below), the basis of Ancient Near Eastern societies. He believes that the "familiar patriarchal household served as the universal paradigm for all social relationships, whether economic, political, or religious" (Schloen 2001, 54). For example, household-derived terms such as "father," "son," "brother," "master," and "servant" were used to describe political relationships in diplomatic correspondence (Schloen 2001, 256).

In the archaeology of the Ancient Near East, many of the relevant publications that do address domestic buildings have focused on only one or two sites and, with some exceptions, do not provide a general picture of Mesopotamian dwellings throughout the millennia (see, for example, Brusasco 1999–2000; Chesson 1997; Stone 1987; Verhoeven 1999; Starzmann 2008).

The study of the long-term socio-historical developments has seldom been undertaken in recent years by students of the Ancient Near Eastern civilisation. Near East specialists have tended to restrict their investigations to topics defined more narrowly in spatial and temporal terms. (Schloen 2001)

In the next paragraph, many studies will be discussed to provide a picture of a household's research context.

The purpose of this book is to analyse the characteristics of Mesopotamian houses to fill in aforementioned knowledge gaps. By covering multiple sites over an extensive region, it is possible to examine the range of housing variations and highlight specific characteristics to draw conclusions beyond the level of the mere documentation of the excavation reports (Margueron 1997, 45).

1.2 Research Context

There have been few exhaustive studies of private houses in Mesopotamia. Publications on its domestic architecture usually consist of reports from excavations and remain at this stage; they tend to be limited to one site and generally lack the development of a longer-term architectural study.

The three-volume study of Mesopotamian houses by Aurenche (1981) is an exception because he recognises the central importance of the study of houses in the context of archaeology. This study is principally organised by typology: he produces an excellent catalogue of building materials, building techniques, and types of houses, but he leaves little space for a cultural interpretation of the evidence. From the point of view of my research, this is a limitation because this work concentrates more on what can be known about the house as the main arena of social dynamics. Moreover, Aurenche's study focuses on prehistory and considers Mesopotamian house culture only up to the fourth millennium BC.

A number of recent works, which take into consideration a region or a long period of time and compare several sites, remain too focused on the classification of typology (Yon and Callot 1997; Battini-Villard 1999; Battini 2006).

An article by McClellan (1997) analyses three sites from North Syria in the Late Bronze Age (Emar, Munbaqa, and Alalakh) and looks at variations in domestic architecture from a typological point of view. Towards the end of the paper there is a mention of more ideological interpretations, but it is far from exhaustive.

An example of an interesting study based on only one site is the article by Vallet (1997) about Habuba Kabira, which gives a typology of houses from the Uruk Period with a study of the evolution of the dwellings.

There are other relevant studies, such as Stone (1987) about Old Babylonian Nippur. The author makes a parallel with several medieval Islamic cities (Fez, Damascus, Aleppo, Cairo, Baghdad, Harat, Isfahan, and Bam). From the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian texts, she interprets that a quarter, or a neighbourhood, of the Mesopotamian city was, like in medieval Islamic cities, a social and geographical entity. Her hypothesis is that the population belonged to all classes and shared a common village origin or ethnic identity. There was a clientele organisation. Spatially, a quarter was organised with a main artery and several cul-de-sacs at its

Chapter One

sides. Stone estimates the population of a neighbourhood to be between five hundred and one thousand people (Stone 1987, 3).

The limitation of this very good study, as Brusasco notes, is that it lacks a theoretical discussion of the relationship between house plan and social structure. Moreover, she concentrates on only one site and makes her assumptions about Mesopotamian society based only on the example of the city of Nippur (on the lack of theoretical discussion in comparative methodology see Schloen [2001, 3]).

In 1996, Pollock published the results of her survey investigating the Uruk Mound of Abu Salabikh. Her team produced maps of the distribution of artefacts that were used to interpret economic production. The result was a widespread distribution suggesting that most artefacts, such as pottery and stone tools, were produced in houses. The results were very interestingly used to support the theory that in the Abu Salabikh of the fourth millennium the production was not centralised and controlled directly by the institutions (Pollock, Pope, and Coursey 1996).

The PhD thesis by Chesson (1997) on urban households in the Early Bronze Age (EBA) communities of Syro-Palestine explores how microscale data resonates with macro-scale analyses. Chesson utilises the social anthropological House Society model, first developed by Lévi-Strauss (1979), to provide a link between the two levels of analysis. Chesson proposes that EBA Syro-Palestine society was hierarchical and differed from the Mesopotamian society characterised by an economic and political class system. Her study is based on the sites of Tell el-Handaquq South, Khirbet es-Zeraqun, and Arad. A useful concept from the same thesis, also employed by other authors (Chesson 1997, 110, 114, and 183), is the potential non-utilitarian use of artefacts, for example pottery.

Kohlmeyer (1996) published the results of the excavation of the Late Uruk Period in Habuba Kabira South. In that excavation, several house plans were exposed in portions of residential neighbourhood. An analysis of the space use led to a hypothesis of multifunctional rooms in which several activities took place, such as eating, sleeping, indoor working, and cooking.

Forest (1997) analyses one house from the Uruk Period in Jebel Aruda from an anthropological point of view, and hypothesises that there was a gender and age division of space and an evolution of the dwelling from the Obeid Period. Wattenmaker (1998) published a study on Kurban Höyük, a thirdmillennium site in Turkey. She explored the social aspects of thirdmillennium society, asking questions, such as, "Why did craft specialisation intensify concurrently with complex, urban societies?" She sought answers to this by looking at non-elite residential areas to investigate beyond the assumption that specialisation is only related to the production of prestige goods for elites. This interesting book is again limited to one site only.

In 1999, Allison edited a collection of articles from different geographical areas and periods, which is important in approaching the problems of the archaeology of households. From the point of view of architecture. for example. Allison addresses the problem that whoever designs a house may not be the one who inhabits it (Allison 1999, 4). As a consequence, we cannot assume that the archaeological remains are a reflection of the inhabitants. Following this logic, it would be possible to investigate the physical house only and not the social unit. This is an interesting point of view that can be taken into consideration, but it must not be brought to the extreme. It is useful to keep in mind that our perspective may be biased towards the builder's point of view, but houses have some information to give us about the households, especially mudbrick houses that are very easily modified to accommodate the different needs of different generations. Moreover, even if we cannot retrieve detailed information about a single house owner, it is possible to have more general information about the cultural values of that specific society (Sanders 1990). In fact, if the interior details of a house can reflect the personal values of the occupant family, "the generalities and behavioural cues of the architectural organisation and forms reflect broader cultural conventions" (Sanders 1990, 46–7).

In 2001, Schloen published a very interesting book about the concept and the symbolism of "The House of the Father" in the Levant. For the analysis, he looked at the archaeological and textual evidences from first-millennium Ugarit. Before the analysis of the evidence, there is a very thorough discussion of interpretative theoretical paradigms to approach the history of the Ancient Near East. Schloen criticises what he calls the two-sector model (see 1.5.1 below for a more-detailed explanation) adopted by Diaconff and Liverani and based on Marxist analysis (Schloen 2001, 187–210). As an alternative interpretation, he proposes the Patrimonial Household Model (see 1.5.1 below for a more-detailed explanation) derived from Weber's theories (Schloen 2001, 63). He applied this model to the interpretation of some well-known Near Eastern Bronze Age

societies supporting the interpretation with an accurate analysis of contemporary textual evidences (Schloen 2001, 255–313).

In 2001 Pfälzner published his thesis on "Habilitation." This work is organised by typologies with a classificatory purpose and built an excellent catalogue of a vast amount of domestic material. The author is also interested in understanding the functions of rooms. To achieve this, he utilises percentage statistics of artefacts (Pfälzner 2001, 62-3). Pfälzner also used the technique of building circulation charts to represent accessibility as in Hillier and Hanson (1984), although their work is not explicitly cited. The limitation of this study, as Bernbeck points out, is that Pfälzner's methodology of excavation ("diachronische Flächengrabung") seems to fail in identifying use phases. Only seven out of sixteen Bederi houses analysed display several use phases, and in regard to the ceramic analysis only four houses can be taken into consideration because the others do not have any vessels, or the vessels are present only on the latest phase (Bernbeck 2006, 125). To help in his interpretation, the author utilises ethnographic analogies with material from Syria and Africa. The analysis is conditioned by the assumption that the rooms were monofunctional.

A recent method utilised to study houses is the micro-debris analysis, which is a growing field in archaeology and also has its representatives in Near Eastern archaeology. The approach focuses on the study of micro-artefacts. Rainville (2005) applies this approach for a detailed discussion of households from three Upper Mesopotamian sites in modern southeastern Turkey: the ancient cities of Kazane Höyük and Titris Höyük and the ancient village of Tilbes Höyük. These sites belong to the Early Bronze Age dating between 3100 and 2250 BC. The study investigates the variability in activity areas in houses in order to relate the architectural and artefactual evidence to the role of household labour in early Near Eastern settlements.

Complementary to micro-archaeology is the micro-morphology approach that analyses the geological and chemical composition of sediment samples (the sedimentary matrix and the organic remains). Matthews was one of the first to apply this analysis to Near Eastern evidence (see, for example, Matthews et al. 1994, 171–212 and Matthews 2003, 377–88). In 1975, Matthews applied quantitative analysis during the excavations of the Sumerian site of Abu Salabikh. At that time, the systematic collection of animal bones and flotation from charred botanical remains was not usually

utilised in historical Near Eastern archaeology (Matthews et al. 1994, 172).

Matthews also performed thin-section analysis on occupation deposits, finding information on the use of space see for example Matthews et al. 1994, 196).

In 2008, Nishimura completed a PhD thesis on the layout of Titris Höyük in the third millennium, combining archaeological evidence with the magnetometry surveys conducted on almost half of the thirty-five hectares of the ancient settlement (Nishimura 2008, xvi–xvii). The increasing use of survey techniques allows for the analysis of urban layout on a large scale. It is often possible to identify city walls, residential districts, temples, and palaces and their spatial relationship rather than limiting research to the partially excavated areas.

The above are some examples of publications about houses in Mesopotamia. To the best of my knowledge, there is no study on the general characteristics of Mesopotamian houses in the third millennium BC as observed by Margueron in his considerations about the state of the research (1996, 21–2). Moreover, the majority of the studies have not related household-level evidence to the emergence of urbanism. In this work, some sites of third-millennium Mesopotamian society will be considered and will be analysed as case studies.

The third millennium in Mesopotamia is a critical period of early urbanisation. It is very important to look at houses to understand the culture of this period. The intent of this thesis is to identify common aspects and differences in Mesopotamian houses. Moreover, I intend to relate these characteristics to the socioeconomic history of the period to broaden the understanding of this significant period in Mesopotamian culture.

1.3 Research Issues and Questions

To begin the analysis it is useful to make some research questions explicit. The intention of some of these questions is to identify variations in Mesopotamian houses where they can be related to geographical (differences among regions or sites), chronological, or social (related to different strata of the population) factors. These findings would in turn provide a basis for reflection on their difference or variation as a function of the relationship between architecture and social behaviour in a complex society.

It is possible to ask some questions about Mesopotamian houses, such as:

- (1) How large were Mesopotamian residential groups?
- (2) How was space used in Mesopotamian houses?
- (3) What evidence is there of variation in the wealth of Mesopotamian houses?
- (4) What is private and public for the occupants of Mesopotamian houses?

In the following I will explain where these questions come from and why they are asked.

1.3.1 How large were Mesopotamian residential groups?

One key aspect when analysing houses and households is knowing the number of components of a residential group. This basic information is not easy to find for ancient societies. If a minimum required amount of square metres per person must have existed, for poor household this could have been as small as the few square metres necessary to lay on the floor for sleeping. On the other hand, issues of wealth and prestige could have influence the maximum number of square metres available per person. The variation between those two limits could have been large.

Textual evidence, where available, is not of much help because it mainly regards the contracts of sales of properties or inheritance involving only the individual taking part in the legal transaction and not all the components of a household that in some cases could comprehend servants and/or various kin (see paragraph 2.1.4 for this topic).

Even evidence on the sizes of populations in ancient Mesopotamian towns is at the level of hypothesis and the numbers of inhabitants are estimated in range with large uncertainty, for example between 2,120 and 10,303 individuals proposed by Postgate for Sumerian cities (see paragraph 1.5.1).

Schloen, in his book *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol* (2001), suggests that Bronze and Iron Age Levant was characterised by "sharecropping, impartible inheritance, [and] complex-family households." Schloen thinks that because the land available for agriculture was scarce the inheritance was impartible, and landless people survived as dependent

household workers in a complex family as servants or in some form of adoption (Schloen 2001, 119–20).

One of the aims of this work is to see if Schloen's model for Bronze and Iron Age Levant or other models derived from ethnographical and ethnoarchaeological data (see the chapter on methodology) can be applied to third-millennium Mesopotamia using the archaeological evidence from some case study residential districts.

1.3.2 How was space used in Mesopotamian houses?

The interpretation of the use of space in Mesopotamian houses has always been difficult. It has already been pointed out that, in the history of excavations, residential buildings had too often been less attentively excavated then other buildings, and moreover that stratigraphy in small buildings is more delicate and there are more frequents repairs, sub-divisions of rooms, and changes of use within the lifetime of a dwelling (Postgate 1994, 58–9).

Postgate cites three studies as examples of the analysis of the use of space in Mesopotamian houses based on evidence collected in well-conducted excavation (Postgate 1994, 59). Two studies are from the 1980s: Henrickson's analysis of third-millennium Khafajah (Henrickson 1981) and Stone's analysis of second-millennium Nippur (Stone 1987). The third is Postgate team's excavation at Abu Salabikh in the 1990s. The examples show how good studies produced results with too many uncertainties to allow for the confident attribution of function to rooms in houses (Postgate 1994, 59).

Generally, for this analysis, built-in features are taken into consideration: some are evident indicators of room functions, while others are subject to interpretation. These elements are: hearths, ovens, *tannours*, benches, drains, basins, bins, jars embedded in the floor, and other details such as plastered floors, the presence of altars in the room, or tombs under the floor.

This information helps in the definition of room functions, while some are self-evident—for example ovens and *tannours* indicating where cooking took place.

Hearths are usually identified as heating facilities and not cooking places, this interpretation leading to identifying rooms with hearths as "living rooms" by archaeologists (Postgate 1994, 59–60; Kramer 1979).

Objects, on the other hand, are not of great help in identifying room function. Not many objects were left in houses no longer in use, and those found may have come from collapsed roofs (Postgate 1994, 60). In the cited examples of Khafajah and Nippur, the distribution of artefacts was not especially helpful in establishing room use (Henrickson 1981; Stone 1987).

Analyses of the plan of buildings have been useful in understanding the use of rooms. The size, shape, and position of rooms relative to courtyards, other rooms, or outside helped archaeologists to make hypotheses (Matthews and Postgate 1987; Deblauwe 1994; Brusasco 1999–2000). In paragraph 1.4 below and in the methodological chapter, models of spatial analysis are analysed and some are tested in the case studies.

1.3.3 What evidence is there of variation in the wealth of Mesopotamian houses?

Attempts have been made to collect evidence of variation in wealth in Mesopotamian houses. Usually, the first object of analysis is the size of dwellings. Kramer researched a modern Iranian village, showing a correlation between compound size and wealth: richer households, in her samples, possessed larger land. But there was not a correlation with wealth and the actual size of dwellings. In Kramer's evidence, richer families owned more land but did not use more square metres of dwelling space per person (Kramer 1979, 152–4).

Schloen pointed out how:

archaeologists working in the Near East traditionally identified larger houses as those of the rich and smaller houses as those of the poor. But wealth is highly correlated to family size under pre-modern conditions, because richer householders can afford polygamous marriages or more numerous servants. (Schloen 2001, 181)

Luxury objects are another indication of wealth that may be found on floors and in tombs of houses. Moreover, the presence of seals and private archives of clay tablets are considered indicators of the social status of the inhabitants of a house that may be part of the administrative elite of the