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Late prehistoric household archaeology in eastern New York

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Christina B. RIETH

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Christina B. RIETH

Abstract

Archaeological studies of households provide us with information about the interactions between past populations, the ways that they organized their settlements and the relationship of disparate segments of a community to each other. By examining the effects of households at several different scales, archaeologists can better understand the processes that underlie human behavior. This paper examines the Late Prehistoric Getman site in New York and the role of Iroquoian households as represented in the compartment, longhouse, and village contexts. Conclusions about equality, resource use, and the spatial organization of the longhouse are suggested.

Keywords

Iroquois, household archaeology, Late Prehistoric, settlement.

Introduction

Households are important units of analysis used by archaeologists to study the activities of prehistoric populations. Households not only define and link groups of people through a common lineage but facilitate and promote the general survival of the group by regulating the accumulation of subsistence items, develop social networks for inter-group trade, and provide inter-community relationships in times of economic hardship and warfare (Hayden, 1977). Cross-culturally, households provide a means of comparing the activities of these groups and the mechanisms by which such activities evolved across time and space. Finally, when linked with domestic architecture, households have the ability to provide information about the changes in the organization of space within structures and their period of use (Snow, 1989, 1995).

Northeast archaeologists have examined Late Prehistoric households at varying scales. These studies often focus on the role of the household within larger tribal or regionally diverse settlement areas or ecological zones (Finlayson, Pearce, 1989). Other studies have focused on the internal structure of villages and the multiple households contained within them (Knight, 1987, 1989; Prezzano, 1992; Archaeological Services, 2010) while a few studies have looked at individual households within these villages (Kapches 1984; Williams-Shuker, 2009). Michard-Stutzman (2009) and others argue that while these approaches provide detailed information about certain segments of use, the most fruitful approaches combine an analysis of the household at several different levels.

This chapter examines the role and activities of households at the Late Prehistoric (AD 1000-1500) Getman site in New York (Ritchie, 1973a). An examination of the activities occurring at different scales-compartment, longhouse, and village is presented and provides information about the diverse activities that were occurring. Comparisons with other villages are presented and provide us with a more detailed understanding of the importance of households among the Late Prehistoric occupants of New York.

1 - Household Archaeology

The household lies at the center of most settlement studies. Following Wilk and Rathje (1982: 618), “the household is the most common social component of subsistence, the smallest and most abundant activity group” with components linking the members, their activity areas, and the activities performed therein. These activities extend to the productive, distributive, transmission, and reproductive needs of the society and are embedded in the cultural and behavioral norms passed down between generations of kin groups. Cross-culturally, the size and composition of the household varies from a few individuals to several dozen members (Yanagisako, 1979; Bami, 2014). Some household members share a single house while other households have members who occupy spatially separated structures.

The size of the household has implications for mobility of its members and its ability to adapt to flexibility when dealing with diverse economic opportunities (Wilk, Rathje, 1986; White, 2013). Smaller households, often found in hunter-gatherer societies, have the ability to move across the landscape and make use of limited subsistence and economic resources. Large households, which are often found among sedentary groups, have the ability to exert greater flexibility in situations when the resources that were produced and consumed are diverse (Wilk, Rathje, 1986).

The production and distribution activities of a household often focus on the organizing ability of one or more leaders. The leaders are often responsible for scheduling and organizing members of the household around seasonal procurement tasks. Wilk and Rathje (1986: 624) suggest that such tasks may be associated with the pooling (distribution of goods within a particular household) and exchange (distribution of goods among households or larger corporate units) in a community. In societies with larger populations and more goods to distribute, the opportunities to redistribute such goods are increased and may ultimately serve to increase the leader’s status within the community.

Engelbrecht (2003) and others (e.g. Snow, 1994) argue that the residences and corresponding households of chiefs are often visible in the archaeological record and are marked by the largest houses which served not only as residences, but also meeting places, storage areas, and possibly even ceremonial locations for the community. Other features of these houses might include disproportionally sized internal compartments, more intensive pits for the concealment of shared goods, and higher quantities of non-household goods signaling the leader’s political and social status in the community.

Households are often organized around lineages and/or corporate groups who may have shared one or more central residences within a community. Corporate groups according to Freeman (1968: 266 as cited in Hayden, 1977: 3; see also Fortes, 1953; Nadel, 1951) “can be defined as one which has a body of collective rights and duties” that can be activated in diverse situations to meet the needs of a group. Corporate groups can be temporary and are not based on common descent. Schusky (1965: 77 as cited in Hayden, 1977: 3-4) defines a lineage as: “the unilateral descendants of a known common ancestor or ancestors” that extend several generations into the past.

In the Northeast, the longhouse was not only the main residential unit in Iroquoian villages but the metaphorical center of the community symbolizing the relationship of the various socio-economic components within and between villages. Hayden (1977) questions whether the activities in a longhouse were organized around corporate groups or lineages. He hypothesizes that given the amount of work that went into the construction of these houses their organization wasn’t haphazard but guided by a defined set of organizing principles within that society. One such organizing principle might revolve around the trade of goods and the ability of leaders to attract and sustain related kin groups to support this task (Hayden, 1977).

The activities of the household can be divided into those related to men's and women's work. Tasks normally associated with women's work include pottery manufacture, food processing, childcare, and crop harvesting. In agricultural societies and societies where women's labor is important in subsistence, pooling of labor often occurs and frees women's time for these activities (Brumfiel, Robin 2008: 3-5). Older children may play an important role in assisting with daily household and child-rearing tasks.

Men's work is often focused on the hunting of large animals, construction of residential structures, village defense, locating resources used in stone tool manufacture, and warfare. Men are more likely than women to be involved in political and religious activities (Snow, 1995; Engelbrecht, 2003) and evidence of these tasks may be reflected in the recovered artifacts.

Archaeological studies of households have been carried out at the individual household, residential, and community level (Kapches, 1987, 1990; Snow, 1989; Bamann *et al.*, 1992; Jameson, 1992; Warrick, 2000; Funk, Kuhn, 2003; Brami, 2014). Following Michaud-Stuzman (2009), approaches incorporating analyses at the level of the individual household and at the site level provide complementary analyses that contribute to our understanding of the past. Such studies allow archaeologists to study behavior related to the households' division of labor, the spatial arrangement of storage and processing features, ritual activities, and the ability of family groups to share or participate in activities organized along lineage and corporate group designations. Information about the incorporation of foreigners can also be inferred providing information about the adoption of captives, and other outsiders. Comparative approaches between households can also provide information about variation within villages.

2 - The Late Prehistoric Period (AD 1000-1500)

The Late Prehistoric Period is a dynamic time in the Northeast and represents a period in which major changes in settlement and social organization occurred. Included among these changes was a shift from a hunter-gatherer subsistence strategy to one reliant on the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash (Hart, 2000). The settlement patterns of these early groups underwent changes evolving from seasonally occupied camps located along major waterways to large multi-family villages situated atop defensible terraces. Resource processing and special-purpose sites were nearby and supported village activities (Perrelli, 2001; Rieth, Horton, 2010).

Large multi-family longhouses were at the center of life in these villages (Snow, 1984; Hart, 2000). The longhouse was advantageous in that it allowed one structure to be built to house extended households whose members cooperated in the completion of a variety of tasks. This was important particularly in times when men and other task groups were absent from the village. The longhouse was constructed with a line of hearths down the center surrounded by rows of bunks on either side for sleeping. The arrangement of the house allowed for the sharing of food and domestic resources as well as provided a communal work area for those living inside. Historic descriptions of these houses reveal that they were crowded structures filled with activity (Morgan, 1901; Gehring, Starna, 1988). Although efficient in construction and use, this house form came at a cost in that privacy was often lost and, unless hidden, one's personal possessions were in full view of the entire longhouse.

The size of these structures varied with the earliest thirteenth century longhouses in New York measuring 75 feet (22 m) long and 22 feet (6.5 m) wide (Ritchie, 1994). A house of this size may have contained close to 50 occupants. These structures grew to nearly 400 feet (121 m) in length in the fifteenth century with several hundred individuals residing inside (Tuck, 1971). Changes in the household caused by the incorporation of new members can be seen archaeologically in the expansion and reorganization of living and task areas in the structure.

Finally, early settlements were not surrounded by palisades or ditches suggesting that the location of sites atop terraces was sufficient for defense. Beginning in the 13th century, settlements contained increasingly complex fortification units consisting of single and double palisades. These structures were seemingly used for defense as well as creating a physical boundary between those “of” the village or household and those “outside” the village or household.

3 - Households at the Getman Site

The remainder of this paper examines the role of households at the Getman site, one of the largest and most extensively examined sites in the Mohawk Valley of eastern New York (figure 1). The site is located four miles from the Mohawk River in Montgomery County and archaeological investigations conducted in 1957 revealed six longhouses encircled by a double-walled stockade (Lenig, 1955; Ritchie, 1973a). Houses measured 20 feet (6.1 m) wide with a variable length (based on the portion of the house exposed) of 31 to 114 feet (9.4 to 34 m). Oval pit features, containing the remains of corn and white-tailed deer, were found both within and outside the walls of the longhouses. Ritchie (1973a) indicates that given the spatial arrangement of these structures, no more than three houses were occupied at a time.

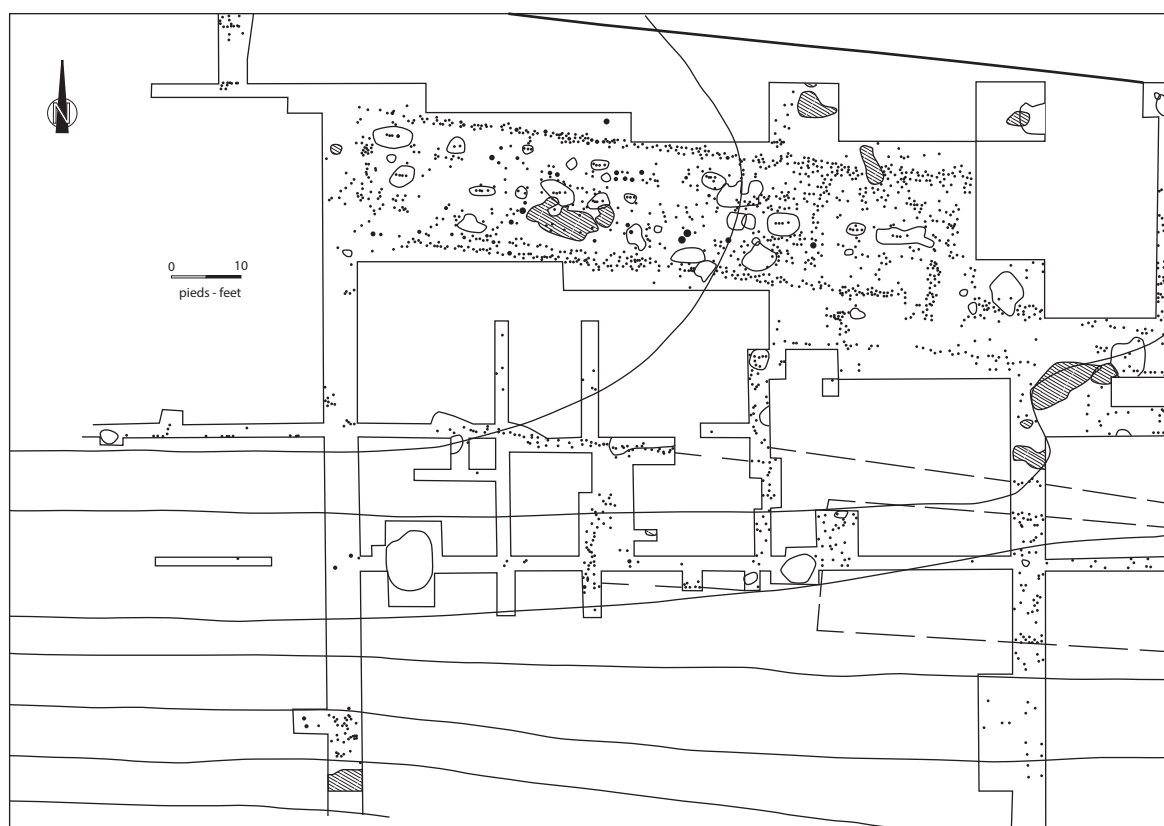


Figure 1 - Map of 1957 Excavations at the Getman Site, Montgomery County, New York (reproduced with permission of the Division of Research and Collections at the New York State Museum, Albany, New York; url: http://nysl.cloudapp.net/awweb/guest.jsp?smd=1&cl=all_lib&lb_document_id=72447).

In addition to use as a residential structure, the longhouse served as a “meeting place” for male members of the household. Unlike other matrilineal societies, Snow (1994: 39) indicates that male members of Iroquoian communities often gathered in portions of the house instead of male based “huts” or other communal structures. At the Getman site, a large central reddened spot in the center of the house and characterized by Ritchie as a series of closely spaced hearths may represent one of these gathering locations within a leader’s compartment.

While the household was a basic work group within the village, the household (and village) were tied to other “satellite” sites nearby. Snow (1994: 46-47) suggests that one of the satellite sites to the Getman site is the Otstungo site. The site is located a few miles away and may have been occupied at the same time.

A - House Size and Orientation

Six houses were identified at the Getman Site. Longhouse 1 measures 86 feet (26 m) long by 22 feet (6.7 m) wide, while Longhouse 3 measures 110 feet (33 m) long and 21 feet (6.4 m) wide. House 4 measures 114 feet (34 m) long and 22 feet (6.7 m) wide. Houses 2, 5, and 6 were not completely excavated but have a similar width as those recorded for Houses 1, 3, and 4 suggesting some regularity in the construction of these buildings. Each longhouse was arranged east-west with the ends of the houses opening onto the ends of the adjacent longhouse rather than running perpendicular to it as occurs at some later villages. The close spacing of entryways suggests that these houses may have been oriented for future joining (figure 2).

When compared with other Late Prehistoric villages, the Getman site has a greater number of houses and the placement of these houses is regular in orientation suggesting some early experimentation with the planning and standardization of village layout and the activities of the households living within them. At the Bates site, a 13th century village in Chenango County, a single longhouse was identified and likely expanded three times to accommodate a growing household residing within its walls (Ritchie, 1994: 285-287, fig. 10). The largest of these houses measures 73 feet (22.3 m) and may have accommodated up to 50 people. Although shorter than the house at the Getman site, it was a likely attempt at standardizing the longhouse form.

The Kelso site, a 14th century village in Onondaga County, produced remains comparable to those at the Getman site with a variety of widths and orientations (Ritchie, 1973c). House 3 measured 128 feet (39 m) long and 22 feet (6.7 m) wide, while House 4 measured 112 feet (34 m) long. Smaller houses measuring 20 feet (6.1 m) long existed and may have been incorporated into larger houses. The Kelso site may have had more than 300 occupants, nearly twice as Getman site (Ritchie, 1973a). Houses 3, 4, and 9 each had a central line of hearths and pits and was oriented around a series of compartments much like the Getman site.

B - Households within Longhouse 1

Longhouse 1 at the Getman Site was completely exposed measuring 86 feet (26.2 m) long and 22 feet (6.7 m) wide (figures 2-3). Ritchie (1973a) describes the structure as having “square” ends and containing a double-line of posts each measuring about 3 inches (7.6 cm) and set 8 to 15 inches (20 to 38 cm) into the ground. Larger posts 4 to 6 inches (10.6 to 15.2 cm) were also found and provide evidence of support posts. Running down the center of the structure is a corridor along which are twelve family compartments (figure 2). One additional compartment (Compartment 7) is shown in Ritchie (1973a: fig. 29) and may represent a work area associated with storage receptacles potentially found in Features 2 and 3. The presence of these features isn’t haphazard but likely signals the communal relations of the household and their need to share commonly produced goods.

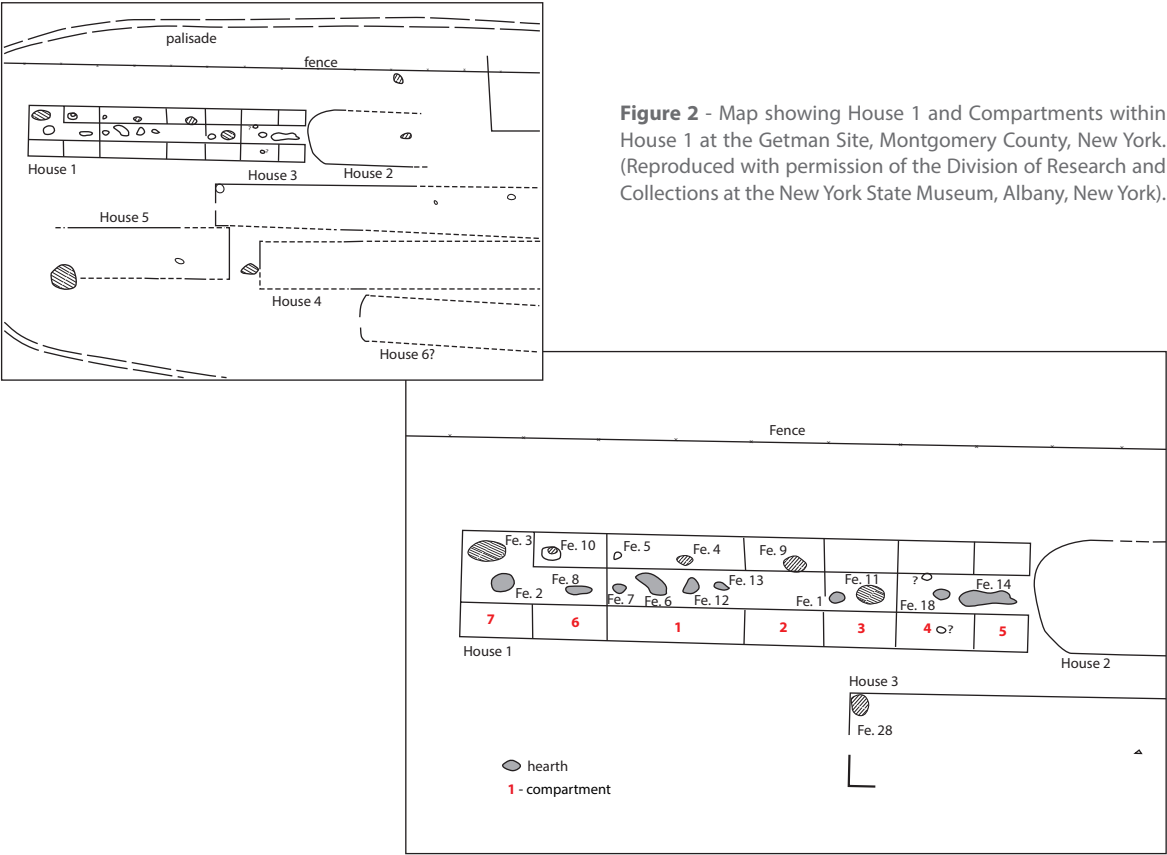


Figure 3 - House 1 at the Getman Site from western entrance (reproduced with permission of the Division of Research and Collections at the New York State Museum, Albany, New York).

East of House 1 is House 2, which is parallel and separated by a few feet (figures 2-3). The alignment of these two structures suggests that they were intended to join and create one structure similar to Houses 3 and 4 at the site (Ritchie, 1957: 51-53). As occurred at the Bates and Kelso sites, joining of longhouses may represent efforts to incorporate the members of nearby households into one structure for economic efficiency.

Seventeen features were identified in House 1. Included among these were nine hearths spread across all but one pair of compartments (Compartment 2). The occupants of Compartment 2 may have used the hearths in the adjacent compartments (figure 2). Being at the center of the longhouse, other explanations including the allocation of space for support posts is plausible as suggested by several large posts within the area of Compartment 2 (Ritchie, 1973a: fig. 28).

Household status can be seen in the size of the compartments within the longhouse. In Longhouse 1, the compartments are equal in size measuring about 10 to 12 feet (3.04 to 3.65 m) in length with a bench width of 6 feet (1.8 m) (Ritchie, 1957). At the east end of Longhouse 1, Compartment 5 (figure 2) measures 8 feet (2.4 m) in length. While the small size of the compartment may signal a reduced status of the household, the size may also be a factor of the closeness of House 2, which required the compartment to be truncated to make room for this structure.

In the western part of the longhouse, Compartment 1 is twice the size of the others and has twice as many hearths and pit features. The compartment measures approximately 20 feet (6.09 m) long with six features within its walls. Four features consist of hearths located within the corridor and may signal the prominent position of a lineage head within the household.

The organization of the longhouse was such that privacy was limited and household possessions were visible not only to those in their compartment but to those walking through the central corridor of the longhouse. Ethnographic accounts indicate that household members often stored goods in pits dug underneath the bed posts of their compartments to maintain some level of privacy (Ritchie, 1973a). Features 4, 5, 9, and 10 were found under the bed posts in Longhouse 1 and contained a variety of artifacts. Features 4 and 5 were found in Compartment 1 and contained twenty-two artifacts including a bone awl tip, rim and body sherds, a hammerstone, and a triangular point. The next highest concentration of artifacts was in Compartment 2 in Feature 9 with ten rim and body sherds. Feature 10, was in Compartment 6 and produced the least number of artifacts with one body sherd and one hammerstone. The large number of pottery fragments found in the features is curious and suggests that pots may have been placed in the pits to hold objects that have since deteriorated.

Finally, the shared living space within Longhouse 1 was largely void of artifacts suggesting that the occupants likely disposed of trash in a communal dump located beyond the house walls. This would not have been an act occurring in one compartment but would have been practiced among all of the members of the household. Small “depressions” identified during the excavation may have once been filled with debris as might have areas located beyond the palisade walls to limit the frequency of vermin within the houses (Ritchie, 1973a: 299).

C - Compartment 1 Households

Longhouse 1 contained thirteen compartments each occupied by a nuclear family. Compartment 1 is the largest and the subject of the following discussion. This compartment measured 20 feet (6.09 m) in length and had a row of bunks along its north and south walls. In the center of the compartment were features 6, 7, 12, and 13 located along the central corridor of the longhouse. Feature 12 is a saucer shaped-depression with a red burnt soil and a post mold on one edge. Its contents included pieces of pottery and a fragment of bone intermixed with wood charcoal. Feature 7 is a sterile ovate hearth surrounded by three post molds. Feature 6 is a depression shaped hearth with rim

and body sherds, bone fragments, and chert flakes (Ritchie, 1957: 25-38). Feature 13 consisted of a sterile patch of fire-reddened clay extending approximately nine inches below the ground surface (Ritchie, 1957: 11).

In addition to these hearths, two small pit features were identified under the bench posts on the north side of the compartment. Features 4 and 5 consist of small personal caches believed to belong to the occupants of the compartments. These features were likely constructed to hide valuable goods of importance for use as personal trinkets and for use in private religious contexts. The fact that this compartment has two such features supports the belief that the occupant(s) had a more prominent role as household leader(s).

When compared with other compartments in the longhouse, midden debris found on the floor of Compartment 1 was minimal and included the tip of a projectile point, a bone bead, a pipe stem, pottery and coil fragments, a point section, a hammerstone, and other lithic debris. Several of the pots were thin walled and may represent small storage receptacles. An examination of the pipe fragments shows that several different pipes are represented which suggests that life in the compartment was convivial among the household members.

Finally, the materials recovered suggest that resource processing was kept to a minimum with food, lithic, and pottery manufacturing occurring primarily outside the house. Of those objects recovered within the longhouse, more than 70% could be attributed to tasks associated with women. This was expected given that the longhouse interior is considered the domain of women (Snow, 1994).

4 - Discussion

Archaeological studies of households at different scales provide information about the range of economic tasks, the role of male and female work groups, social equality, and the private and public activities occurring in the past. As demonstrated by Williams-Shuker (2009) and others (Finlayson, Pearce, 1989; Michard-Stutzman, 2009), the advantages of looking at households in tandem with larger village and intra-village relations are numerous and often highlight the range of diversity found among Northeast groups. When intra-house activity areas are added, archaeological studies often transcend the public and enter the private sphere of behavior.

By the 14th century AD, Iroquoian households were part of a growing economy that was increasingly reliant on the use of corn, beans, and squash agriculture. The use of such crops required that households within a village needed to work together to produce these crops to maintain the survival of the community. The establishment of villages with multi-household residences was a mechanism by which groups could organize labor and direct work in the growing/harvesting of corn. A key component of such activities was the shared social and economic obligations to others. The distribution and communal sharing of goods at the Getman Site can be seen in the spatial arrangement of features across the longhouse and the presence of shared storage compartments (Williams-Shuker, 2009: 211). The identification of twelve compartments organized around nine central hearths reinforces the shared nature of household resources. Cooperation among households is also visible in use of shared storage cubicles at the ends of the longhouse as well as joint food storage receptacles identified in Features 3, 11, 20, and 23 in Houses 1, 4, and 5.

In addition to the use of features, construction of the longhouse itself is a communal activity in which individuals from different families participated. The collection of saplings and bark for the roof and walls were likely collected by male hunting parties while interior mats for the bunks and structure walls were likely woven by women who lived in the village. Following Snow (1994), adolescent males may have helped in the repair of structures when men were away.

Lastly, the construction of the palisade around the site represents an activity in which households from different longhouses were probably engaged. The communal effort needed to fell enough timbers for two rows of palisades was massive and required all available persons. Maintenance of the palisade was likely also completed by men from different households when not away from the village.

An analysis of the artifacts from Longhouse 1 suggests that the household groups shared a fair amount of equality as represented by the uniform size of the compartments, similar numbers of features, and the lack of variability of goods found strewn across the living floor of the longhouse. Most of the objects that were identified consist of utilitarian remains such as ceramic rim and body sherds, incised and plain smoking pipe fragments (see Ritchie 1973a: 308-310, plates 178-180) and faunal remains from a variety of local animals. Chert fragments (debitage) consisting of local Onondaga chert represent more than 95 % of the objects with a few pieces of non-local, possibly Normanskill, chert found. House floors were kept relatively clean with no evidence that Longhouse 1 contained fewer or more artifacts than the portions of other excavated longhouses (Ritchie, 1957).

When individual compartments are examined, we see that the distribution of materials across Longhouse 1 was variable and may indicate that different activities occurred in different compartments. An analysis of the types of artifacts recovered from each shows that Compartments 1 and 4 contained 33 % and 27.4 % of the artifacts from the longhouse. Artifacts recovered include pottery sherds, pipe fragments, point tips, scrapers, a muller, pieces of bone, and a hammerstone. These compartments contain tools relating to both plant and animal processing. Smaller quantities of artifacts were found in Compartments 2 and 6, each producing respectively 12.3 % and 14.1 % of the artifacts. Most artifacts found in these units consist of body and rim sherds. The features in these units contain very few faunal remains and limited evidence of plant processing. Finally, the least number of artifacts were found in Compartments 3 and 7 with each producing 4.5 % of the total number of artifacts or less. The only artifacts found in these compartments were pottery sherds and a ceramic pipe stem.

Finally, an analysis of the artifacts provides insights into the social relations and trading patterns of the village households with other contemporaneous groups. Evidence of trade at the Getman Site can be seen in the variety of local and non-local artifacts recovered in features and living floor contexts. Projectile points made from Onondaga and Little Falls chert occur and were likely from outcrops near the site.

Pestles made of greywacke and garnetiferous gneiss may have come from seasonal forays into the Adirondacks. Flakes made of quartzite may have been acquired from deposits located in the lower Hudson Valley. Finally, Ritchie (1973a) notes that pipe fragments from the Getman site resemble pipes found near Schuylerville on Saratoga Lake. Ritchie suggests that the occupants of the site might have travelled to the area to fish during seasonal spawning events. The interaction of groups living in these areas was important and likely helped to forge bonds between disparate groups in this dynamic landscape.

Conclusion

Households are important units of archaeological analysis. They are the building blocks for larger settlement studies and provide meaningful information about the relationships inherent in larger interaction, settlement and subsistence activities. This chapter has provided a brief overview of the role of households at the Late Prehistoric Getman Site in New York. Analysis of these remains suggests that the role of the household varied within individual longhouses. The analysis of the compartments within the longhouse suggests that although most households were equal,

one household (centrally located in compartment 1) may be attributed to a leader whose compartment was larger with increased numbers of features. By comparing the activities of the household with those of other sites, we can also gain an insight into the interaction patterns of this dynamic period.

Although this paper has endeavored to provide information about the household activities at the Getman site, additional research is needed to determine whether these patterns were unique to the site or represent universal trends occurring among Late Prehistoric groups. Such studies may provide useful information about the timing of such patterns and changes in the organization of households leading up to European Contact. More importantly, archaeologists need to examine the internal structure of these households and their variability within villages. Only then can we truly understand Late Prehistoric households in eastern New York.

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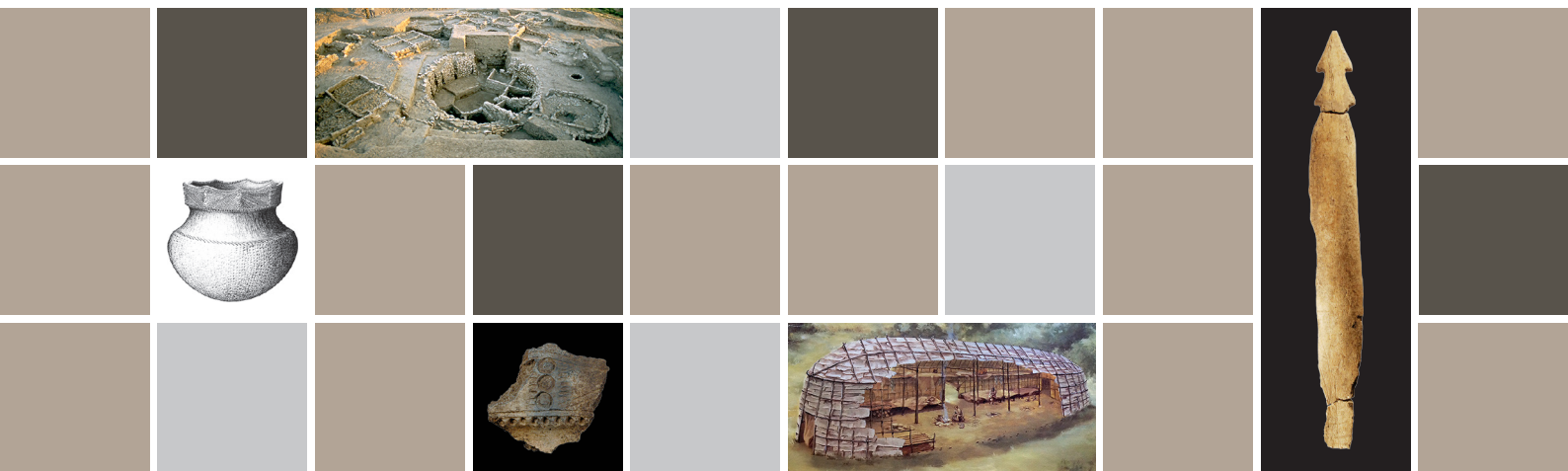
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A Transatlantic Comparative Approach



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