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The Village People: Social Aspects of Rural Settlements—Comments on Method and Theory

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The village is usually viewed as a basic geographic and economic unit, characterized by unsophisticated social organization, limited interpersonal ties and weak external social networks. However, studies in rural archaeology and anthropology revealed that village life was more complex. This article offers a survey of several key theoretical issues relevant for interpreting archaeological remains of villages, farmsteads and estates/villas from a social perspective. It focuses mainly on the organization of the settlement as a holistic unit and the specific houses/households within it. The article seeks to explore the complex correlation between the spatial and social aspects of rural housing—the way in which the archaeological record attests to interpersonal contacts, their frequency and character. It demonstrates that the rural population was not merely a passive supplier of agricultural products to the neighboring towns and cities, but rather actively shaped its own culture.

Keywords: rural archaeology, social organization, household archaeology, landownership, social identity, rural community, family, kinship

Introduction

When envisioning an ancient village or other forms of rural settlement, in almost any period and environment, the common perception involves several modest-sized domestic buildings on hills or in valleys, built in proximity to one another, with a few agricultural installations interspersed in their vicinity. Typically, such settings are devoid of streets and with minimal public buildings, with each dwelling housing a single nuclear family (e.g., Tate 1997:65; cf. Redfield 1953), and the inhabitants' efforts concentrated primarily on agricultural production. The village is viewed as a basic geographic and economic unit, characterized by unsophisticated social organization, limited interpersonal ties and weak external social networks. Nevertheless, studies in rural archaeology and anthropology reveal that village

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life was more complex, and unravelling the social and economic mechanisms of these settlements has proven to be an intricate endeavor.[2]

There is considerable scholarly interest in villages and other rural settlements such as farmsteads and villas in the archaeological and geographical research. My own interest in this topic was piqued primarily following extensive salvage excavations conducted recently in Israel, which have revealed a large number of small, seemingly rural sites, dated to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This raises the question of how we should approach the study of these settlements. While this article does not discuss specific sites, its aim is to survey several key theoretical issues in interpreting the archaeological remains of villages, farmsteads and estates/villas from a social perspective. Can we differentiate between these forms of rural settlements? What are the typical characteristics of each? How should we address economic aspects and issues related to the social structure of these settlements? This article focuses mainly on the organization of the settlement as a holistic unit and the specific houses/households within it. Separate studies would be required to discuss the house interiors and assemblages—such as pottery, various installations and small finds—and to analyze its architecture. Ultimately, this article seeks to explore the complex correlation between the spatial and social aspects of rural housing—the way in which the archaeological record attests to interpersonal contacts, their frequency and character.

The purpose of the present survey is to lay a *theoretical* prolegomenon for a future analysis of the household and community structure at specific rural sites in ancient Judaea in the Hellenistic and Roman periods; however, while some of the examples given here are taken indeed from the study of Judaea in antiquity, the limited scope of the article does not allow for a discussion of specific sites.

Scholars of rural archaeology often express discontent with the disproportionate attention given to urban areas in academic scholarship (Garnsey 1979:1; Faust 2005:105; Millett 2014:699; Evangelidēs 2022:160). Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate here, at the same time there is growing recognition of the social and economic aspects of villages, farmsteads, estates, villas and other field structures, some of which are discussed below. This gradual shift is due partly to the emergence of rural studies as a distinctive field of research within geography and related disciplines (Bernstein and Byres 2001; Cloke, Marsden and Mooney 2006; Shucksmith and Brown 2016). The *Journal of Rural Studies*, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Sociologia Ruralis and Rural Sociology* are dedicated to this specific subject, offering perspectives on the distinctive sociological and spatial theoretical dimensions of the economy and society in rural spaces.

[2] For a survey on the development of the study of the village, see Liverani 1999.

Can We Define a Village?

How do we identify a rural site? This is indeed a difficult question, particularly in the current Israeli archaeological scholarship. A very partial survey of several recent, mostly preliminary publications focusing on rural sites in Hellenistic and Roman Judaea (and two in Galilee) illustrates the classification employed (Table 1). From these archaeological reports it becomes apparent that in most cases, the excavators did not assign special emphasis to the typology of the site beyond its distinction as a rural rather than urban settlement.[3]

Defining a village is a difficult task. One obvious but simplistic observation is that a village is not a city. Classical sources, for example, distinguish between *polis* and *komē*.[4] Nonetheless, there are also intermediate forms/levels of settlement such as *polichnion* (town) and *kōmopoleis* (e.g., Mark 1:38; usually translated as "town"). In early rabbinic sources, we find the terms *krakh*, *'ir*, *'ayara* and *kefar*, but their meaning is not always apparent. From a geographical perspective, villages may be viewed as an agglomeration of farmsteads. The key distinction lies in evidence of multiple centers of domestic activity, distinguishing villages from complex farms, which typically had a single domestic focal point. Villages could span considerable areas, extending well over 20 ha (Smith et al. 2016:42–43).

In rabbinic sources, a village is characterized as a settlement lacking a robust framework of community services and providing only basic ones, such as a *miqveh* (ritual bath), water system and defense system or fortification, but not others, such as a judicial court. Safrai estimates that the minimal criteria for a city in rabbinic sources would have been a population of approximately 100 nuclear families and a size of 10 dunams (Safrai 1994:37–38).[5]

The distinction between rural and urban settlements lies not only in their size but also in their social structure, rendering their definition rather relative (and there were indeed very small urban settlements as well). Rural sites either lack any evidence of social stratification or exhibit evidence of a very limited elite group or dominating family (Faust 2005:106). Size and social structure are factors also in distinguishing between a village and a hamlet. A proposed definition pertaining to family or household structure is that villages comprise a coalition of different patrilinies that united to form the settlement, whereas hamlets represent a single line (Sutton 1994:322; Gerstel 2015:11–13). However, what is commonly referred

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[3] The purpose of this table is merely illustrative. Analyzing the data in these reports and discussing the possible considerations of the excavators in identifying the site as a village, farm etc., in light of the following theoretical survey, merits a separate study.

[4] The Latin term for a rural administrative district is *pagus*. Its adjectival form, *paganus*, "has long been mired in a pejorative etymology: originating from *pagus*… it might mean a rural person, but such a person, when not functioning as a cipher for an idealized seat of rustic moral virtue, was more often an uncouth or unlearned one" (Bowes 2020:3).

[5] The farmstead too is occasionally referred to as *'ir* in Talmudic traditions (Safrai 1994:48). For differences between village, town and *polis* in rabbinic literature, see Safrai 1994:17–103. Hirschfeld (1997a:80, 85–86, n. 16) argued that there is no clear determination between estate manor, village and town in rabbinic sources, and perhaps also in those of the Second Temple period.

Table 1. Classification of Rural Sites in Hellenistic and Roman Judea

The Site	Rural Typology	References
Ḥorbat ‘Etri	Village	Zissu and Ganor 2009
Bir ed-Duwali	Village	Hizmi 2011
‘En Gedi	Village	Hadas 2011
Khirbat el-Jafir	Village	Har-Even 2012
Umm el-‘Umdan	Village	Onn and Weksler-Bdolah 2005
Khirbat Ka‘kul (Pisgat Ze’ev H)	Village	Seligman 2006: esp. 15–16
Khirbat Wadi Ḥamam	Village	Leibner 2018
Khirbat Burnaṭ	Farm (early Hellenistic period) Village (late Hellenistic and Roman periods)	Amit, Torge and Gendelman 2008
Khirbat Badd ‘Isa, Qiryat Sefer	Village? town?	Magen 2004
Qalandiya	Farm	Magen 1984
Ramat Bet Shemesh (Site 94/10)	Farm	Sandhaus and Milevski 2022
Tel Rekhesh	Farmstead	Aviam 2018
Apollonia-Arsuf	Villa	Roll and Tal 2008

to as a village is sometimes quite similar at first glance to other types of rural settlements or field structures: the farmstead and the private estate (including the rural villa). The latter two may be located closer to the agricultural land than the village. Scholars have pointed to considerable difficulty in assigning settlements to a specific type, and distinguishing between a farmstead and a villa is also often challenging (Evangelidēs 2022:160). *The Roman Peasant Project* (Arnoldus et al. 2020:23) suggests classifying sites according to several factors, including their size:

Village (1.5–2.0 ha): distinct concentrations of ceramic and construction materials and the presence of artisanal installations, for example, kilns for tiles and furnaces for metalworking.

Villa (1–3 ha): abundant ceramic material and a presence of luxury architectural remains, such as mosaics and columns.

Farm (*fattoria*; 500–1500 sq m): ceramic and construction materials, and a presence of storage and/or transport ceramics, for example, amphorae or dolia.

Rothaus (1994) defines a villa as a large residential complex evidencing substantial wealth; however, he refrains from elaborating on its rural context. For example, the villas at Corinth were neither rural nor urban; they served as domestic centers utilizing the best available land, located within convenient distance of a large civic center (Rothaus 1994:391, 394). The classification into farmstead or villa is usually based on specific indicators, such as building size, and the presence or absence of architectural sophistication, i.e., mosaics, wall paintings, hypocaust floors, baths or elaborate sculpture (Witcher 2012; Evangelidēs

2022:160). Witcher (2012:22) addresses the challenge of classifying the farm, villa and village, noting that the data are sometimes interpreted subjectively, based on preexisting scholarly assumptions. He proposes a method of comparing one settlement hierarchy with another and one region with another, since it is not always possible to classify each settlement separately. Alternative classifications include weighing and comparing occupation, consumption and landscape resources (Witcher 2012:25–28).

One way to define a rural society is as one in which the landscape is used for production in a closed system of residence and land use and in direct interaction with the natural environment (Gilbert 1982). Rural space encompasses distinctive spatial practices associated with both production or consumption, as well as related individual and social elements involved in the negotiation and interpretation of rural life (Halfacree 2006:51). However, some scholars cast doubt on the scientific grounds of the definition of the term "rural," questioning its validity as an analytical construct. Hoggart argued that an undifferentiated application of the term "rural" in a research context is detrimental to the advancement of social theory, and that it is critical that sites are not selected for empirical investigation based on notions of rurality. He regards the broad category "rural" as "obfuscatory," whether the aim of the evaluation is descriptive or theoretical, as there may be significant intra-rural differences and notable rural-urban similarities (Hoggart 1990:245).

Hoggart (1990:246; see also Cloke 2006) questioned the existence of permanent social relationships in rural societies, suggesting that the designation "rural" is for many researchers merely a *symbol* of interest in small settlements or in particular types of economic activity, but not necessarily a statement about unique causal properties. He notes that the criteria for selecting specific locations or populations for research often include similarity in behavior or shared socioeconomic structures (Hoggart 2006:248–249). However, it is problematic to ascertain whether the specific spatial or economic situation in a given "rural" settlement is the sole or main reason for the behavior or structure under discussion, as there may be local factors that go beyond mere rural generalizations. In this regard, Thorpe (1972) highlights causal forces that connect settlements in ways that may not be apparent in the occupational, geographical or broader socioeconomic structures of these places. Thus, according to Hoggart (1990:249–251), the rural-urban dichotomy is not conclusive.

Despite its limitations, "rural" continues to be employed as a social category. For example, Cohen (1982) discussed local social relationships in British rural cultures as being mediated through fundamental structures such as kinship, friendship and neighborhood. While "rural" remains a common category in scholarship, serving as a basic introductory classificatory tool, it is crucial to recognize its limitations as a primarily heuristic term, acknowledging that not all villages are quite the same.

Judaean Villages, Farmsteads and Manor Houses

Late Second Temple Judaean period society was primarily agrarian, as noted by Josephus (*Against Apion* 60), and so was the Judaean population after 70 CE. Roman Judaea presents

similar challenges concerning the classification of villages, farmsteads and rural estates/villas, with flexible relationships between the administrative status (such as landownership; see below) and the actual size of the settlement. Some settlements could be classified as small *poleis* or large villages, making it difficult to distinguish between them (Safrai 1997:11–14). Safrai (1997:30–34) highlights an autonomous village social system in Roman Judaea, where there were only a few public buildings within the site. Based on the spatial layout of the houses, it is possible to distinguish between a gathered and dispersed village (Hirschfeld 1997b:82, 117–118, 121). Both share several common characteristics in terms of their general spatial layout: there are no streets, evincing no general planning of the settlement, and there is minimal organization of the division between private and public spaces, which serve as markers of the autonomy of the inhabitants and the gradual development of the settlement (Hirschfeld 1997b:118–119).

Farmhouses or manor estates serve as self-sufficient structures in an agricultural area, addressing both residential and agricultural needs. Typically, these structures are occupied by landowners, and occasionally, by farmers or land tenants (Hirschfeld 1997a:74); Applebaum (1977) explored potential political aspects of their prosperity in first-century CE Judaea. In certain cases, the village (usually a hamlet) comprised several individual farmsteads (Hirschfeld 1997b:77).[6]

How and why is a new village established? Safrai (1994:41–42) commented on the development of new villages, where satellite settlements develop in relation to the mother settlement within the territory of the latter. Several factors can lead to the establishment of such offshoot settlements:[7]

Economic Recession/Crisis Resulting in a Shortage of Land: Some residents of the mother settlement move to the fringes of its territory to use the land there—very often, land that is either deserted or cultivated only marginally. The residents of the soon-to-be-formed offshoot settlement seek to cultivate this land more intensively, and they relocate to be closer to it.

Insufficient Land for Construction: As the population grows, a shortage of land ensues. The majority of residents are unwilling to allow construction on neighboring farmland, causing the price of all land to rise. New residents prefer to move to a new site where they can build their homes on cheaper nonarable land.

Internal Social Strife: Dissension in the mother village forces some residents to leave and establish an offshoot settlement.

The establishment rate of satellite settlements is also affected by several factors:

Difficult Defense Conditions: The satellite settlement, having a small population, faces

[6] For a list of villages, farmsteads and estates in Roman Judaea, see Zissu 2001:254–270. For a summary of the settlement history of rural sites in Israel/the southwestern Levant during the Bronze and Iron Ages and the Persian and Hellenistic periods, see Faust 2022.

[7] For a similar explanation regarding the Mesoamerican village, see Drennan 1988.

greater dangers. In extremely challenging perilous situations, no satellite settlements will be established because of the inherent danger. During precarious yet less stressful times, the process may be slower, but economic pressure usually prevails.

Low Level of Community Services: Residents who are accustomed to a very high level of community and public services typically do not establish offshoot settlements. Such services, if they are even provided, are consistently of a lower standard in the satellite settlement.

Alternative Solutions: If the residents of the mother settlement can find alternative solutions to the aforementioned problems, they will not establish offshoot settlements. Such a solution may involve the development of a branch of a local industry or migration to a city.

These scenarios reveal the essence of rural life: land production, economic housing, security, social community and its services.

The Farmstead and the Private Estate

As noted earlier, distinguishing between a farmstead and a private estate may be challenging. Farmsteads are isolated structures located in the midst of agricultural areas, typically inhabited by the people who cultivate and use the land. In contrast, private estates extend over large areas and belong to wealthy individuals or families. Whether or not the owner lives there, the residents may include servants, hired laborers and slaves. Archaeologically, farmsteads typically control smaller agricultural areas (Faust 2003:91).

Special attention has been paid to the house and social structure of farmsteads of Iron Age Judah and Israel (Faust 2012:148–159, 175–176). The Iron Age II farmstead in Israel had twice the number of rooms on the ground floor as the number of rooms of an urban house, although they share the same basic (four-room house) plan. The larger number of rooms in rural houses should be attributed to the fact that they accommodated extended families, and more inhabitants required more segregation and privacy (including among the different nuclear family units). The internal division in the rural house varies from one house to another, reasonably as a result of the life cycle of the extended family (Faust 2003:96; see also Tate 1997:65). At different stages of this cycle, more people lived in the house and more segregation was required, while at other times, there were fewer occupants, and spaces could be enlarged at the expense of their number (Wilk and Rathje 1982:626).

In the project *Countryside of Roman Britain*, a farmstead is denoted as a small rural settlement without "villa" architecture. Farmsteads can be classified as "open," "enclosed" and "complex." Unenclosed or open farmsteads are defined as settlements where there does not appear to be any traceable boundary enclosing the main domestic core. Enclosed farmsteads are defined as settlements where all, or the majority of domestic and associated activity was contained within one or two enclosures, and where the internal space was not further subdivided to a significant degree. Complex farmsteads are defined as settlements, when there appears to be significant differentiation of space, either as a system of conjoined enclosures or as a principal outer enclosure with many internal subdivisions. The division of

space tends to reflect different activities, such as domestic, storage, agricultural processing, industrial and livestock raising (Smith et al. 2016:18, 20–21, 23, 28).

RURAL ROME AND THE ROMAN VILLA

Scholars of Roman society and rural archaeology focus on the life of peasants (for a working definition of peasants, see Grey 2011:27) and their domestic units (*domos*, *oikos* etc.). These non-elite houses in the countryside were typically an undivided, rectangular building, usually at least 10 m long. A porch or lean-to extended the interior/exterior space, while a beaten earth yard or courtyard formed the external workspace (Bowes, Collins-Elliott and Grey 2020:436). The Roman peasant house accommodated various household activities, such as agricultural processing, butchery, cooking, construction, animal rearing, storage, dining, buying and selling of goods and other forms of consumption (Bowes, Collins-Elliott and Grey 2020:442).

Garnsey (1979) concluded that northern Roman peasants lived in single-family, dispersed homes/farms in the countryside, while southern Italian peasants lived in villages and commuted to their farms. Grey (2011) discussed the internal workings of rural communities, the nature of the relations between community members and outsiders, and the impact of externally generated changes upon those structures of interaction. The morphology of Roman rural settlement in Britain included "enclosed settlements," "open settlements" and "linear system settlements" (Smith et al. 2016).

One may distinguish between three types of Roman villas: luxurious, farm and mixed. The farm type, with a manufacturing quarter, may have had two subtypes, with either specialized or mixed processing facilities. The mixed-type villa combined agricultural function and luxurious appointments (Matijašić 1982). Much was written about the Roman villa (which literally means farm; Dyson 2003:13–19). Typically, the villa was an elaborate country mansion or rural estate and a production hub. Its architecture, decor and productive capacity reflected its owners' elite status, or their aspiration to attain one (Pollard 2016:330–331). Cato (*On Agriculture* 3:2) distinguished between *villa rustica*, which encompassed built structures for processing and storing crops, including facilities for wine and oil production, and *villa urbana*, which had little or no agricultural facilities and was situated near a city.

Scholars distinguish villas from villages based on their size and character of surface scatters. Villa sites are defined when there are substantial spreads of material (over 2500 sq m), implying some level of architectural sophistication, or decoration, such as marble, column fragments, mosaic tesserae or fragments of painted plaster. Villas typically included an atrium, a peristyle court (or a simpler courtyard) and a triclinium. The use of luxury materials reflected construction by an individual who shared the tastes of urban elites to some extent, or at least sought to emulate them. The economic basis of villa owners may have varied, especially when small villas are concerned (Pollard 2016:332, 345). The villa was a diverse phenomenon, with examples of varied sizes, luxury and complexity, which apparently coexisted alongside one another and with smaller farms over several

centuries rather than showing a single clear trajectory of development (Pollard 2016:336). It is because of this staggering variegation of size, style and context that some scholars encounter difficulty in identifying villas and differentiating them from villa farms, likely inhabited by indigenous families (Rothe 2018:42, 48–49).

The prosperity of villas in Italy from the second century BCE is attributed to changes in land-holding and agricultural practices, perhaps due to Greek or Punic influence and the advancement of agricultural slavery (Pollard 2016:335). *Villa rustica* appeared in the Greek landscape from the late first century BCE onward. These new rural structures were principally aimed not at subsistence farming, but rather at the production of marketable agricultural surplus that generated a profit. As all surplus was transferred from the peasantry of the countryside to wealthy absentee landowners, the gap between town and country, or city dwellers and peasants, widened further (Rizakis 2013).

It is customary to regard villas and farmsteads as the most obvious signs of the Roman impact on the rural landscape. In Roman Greece, the Roman expansion seems to have affected changes in landownership, leading to the collapse of the small Greek farm and creation of great land estates (controlled by Romans or Romanized Greeks). This likely influenced a tenurial relationship between an elite landowning class and a peasant substratum (Evangelidēs 2022:16–17). Nonetheless, recent research in Italy has shown that the appearance of large villas does not necessarily imply the displacement of small farms (Launaro 2011).[8]

Landownership/Tenure

Fundamental factors shaping the social features of the village/farmstead are the identity of the landowner, the agricultural areas and the ownership terms.[9] Forms of land tenure vary greatly across time and space, with most societies having more than one form of land ownership and use. Typologies of land tenure and ownership can be diverse; Trigger (2003:315–337) referred to three types: collective, institutional and private.

Faust (2005:115), drawing on Falconer (1994), Hayden (1994) and Trigger (2003:315–337), suggested a classification into communal and independent villages. In communal villages, the rural community owned the land, establishing the village as an autonomous socioeconomic unit, where the inhabitants hold the rights to the land and the crops, which were in many instances grown collectively. Such villages exhibit not only relatively high standards of living but also communal enterprises. Villages of this type can exist either

[8] Regarding the contrast between village and farmstead in the Middle Ages in Europe, whether or not villages transformed into farmsteads in early medieval Italy, is still contested. This ongoing debate stems from the fact that archaeologists and historians focus on different features of a village (Francovich and Hodges 2003: esp. 22–26).

[9] On landownership in Roman Judaea, following rabbinic literature, see Safrai 2003; for landownership and economic structure in rural Greece during the Roman period, see Evangelidēs 2022:186–192.

in "tribute relationships" with an urban system, involving tax payments, or in "symbiotic relationships," exhibiting greater independence. In independent villages, the land and its products were owned by individual family units rather than collectively.[10] This form seems to have been somewhat rare in antiquity, especially in the ancient Near East (e.g., Trigger 2003:333). Archaeologically, the independent village may be distinguished from the communal one by the absence of indications of communal enterprises.

Special attention has been given by scholars to the correlation between the site's size and its economic system (Fletcher 1986), including storage of foodstuff, such as grain (Martin 2019). In the discussion of the household unit below, I will further address the wealth and economic aspects of the rural inhabitants.

Social Organization and Stratification

Social anthropologists have shown a particular interest in village life and its social structure. Wolf (1955) noted that rural communities are characterized by communal cooperation in land redivision and by balance mechanisms that maintain relative economic and social equality (see below). These communities are regarded as relatively close to the outside world.

Geertz (1959) conducted a classic analysis of a traditional Balinese village, examining its set of components. He identified seven general characteristics of social organization, each based on a different principle of affiliation or a different way of grouping or separating individuals: (1) shared obligation to worship at a given temple; (2) common residence—the hamlet as the basic political (judicial and economic) unit, with decisions made in formal meetings at a central meeting place; (3) ownership of rice, organized according to the water system; (4) commonality of ascribed social status or caste, resulting in villages of exogamous and endogamous kinship ties; (5) consanguineal and affinal kinship ties with patrilineal descent and inheritance, with the residential unit varying from that of a nuclear family to that of an extended patrilineal family; (6) common membership in voluntary organizations for specific activities, such as housebuilding, agricultural activity, transporting goods to the market, weaving etc.; (7) common legal subordination to a single government administrative official or governmental bureaucracy. Similar organizational plans may also apply to the ancient Judaean village life.

Some archaeologists attempted to reconstruct the community organization of a village based on the ancient remains. The Mesoamerican village (Flannery 1976) is perhaps the best-known example, especially in analyzing the number of domestic units as a criterion for the village's structure and its development over space and time. Community organization and hierarchy are based on households arranged in house clusters, as well as houses that are

[10] See also Faust 2012:174. Compare the private village and the social variation within it (Safrai 1998: esp. 22–23).

adjacent or related to each other ("patio groups") (Smith 1993). Determining the village's size poses methodological challenges. It is preferable to estimate it based on the number of households rather than on the size of surface refuse. It is also difficult to establish the "monetary population," that is, the exact number of houses in a given period (Marcus 2009:79–80). Also, there is no single model for calculating village population growth: some villages remain stable, while others show an increase in the number of households and in the estimated village area (Winter 2010).

Faust (2000) introduced an analysis of the social organization and community structure of Iron Age villages in ancient Israel based on house size, the extent and distribution of agricultural-industrial installations, and the presence of terrace systems, storage facilities and boundary walls. The basic social units were large extended families dwelling together, organized in larger kinship groups that were probably responsible for production and storage facilities ("corporate groups"). The lineage frequently comprised an entire village, but in some cases, several lineages constituted a settlement.

The archaeological evidence suggests that there was a forum responsible for decision-making on the village level, even in villages larger than the lineage. This is attested by indications of a local system of agricultural production: communal food-processing, industrial installations and storage facilities. The construction of a boundary wall also reflects communal organization (see also Philip 2001; Chesson 2003:86).

In many cases, the villages were not a self-sufficient agricultural system (Schwartz 2015:2–3). Studies on Near Eastern and Mesoamerican villages demonstrate that in contrast to a model, whereby the village is a community dedicated almost exclusively to food production and dependent on the city, with no economic specialization, the social difference between city and village is more complex (Schwartz and Falconer 1994). Some villages were economically diversified and potentially independent, and were consequently socially complex. Some featured specialized pottery production or artisanship—activities that were probably distributed throughout the region (Falconer 1994:137–138; Hayden 1994:198–201).

Utilitarian specialization of production for rural domestic consumption (pottery, tools) is indicative of social inequality and political complexity (Hayden 1994:199–202). It leaves open the question of whether the village's population, location and site density were dependent on subsidiary villages for their agricultural production and well-being (Falconer 1994:123–124). In addition, differences in the quality of domestic buildings, as well as other wealth disparities, such as quantity and quality of pottery, may point to different modes of labor organization (Gonlin 1997; see below).

This draws attention to the reflection in material remains of the phenomenon of social inequality, often referred to as "the archaeology of rank." A lack of homogeneity in the site's plan and architecture may indicate a functional difference among buildings, implying specialized activities undertaken by some residents (Wason 1994:138). The same principle also applies to intra-site relationships. Settlements may differ in size (measured in area or population) or "complexity"—a concept encompassing any number of aspects of plan

and construction. Settlement hierarchies may be established based on a patterned variation of size and complexity, which may be distinguishable from size variations resulting from factors not directly related to social organization—for example, different resources available to independent settlement groups (Wason 1994:128).

SOCIAL IDENTITY OF THE RURAL COMMUNITY

We tend to think of a village or even a farmstead in terms of a bounded community whose inhabitants interact. But how can we identify this social unit through the material culture? A community has several clear archaeological correlates that correspond with social reproduction, production and self-identification (Kolb and Snead 1997). Yet the very sense of community varies. Archaeologists commonly view it in a structural-functional sense: a coresidential collection of individuals or households with shared interactions, experiences and culture. Additionally, there are other aspects of community, such as the historical sense, molded by external forces, such as colonialism, the conceptual sense of imagined communities (see below) and the interactional sense created through face-to-face contacts and other practices (Yaeger and Canuto 2000).

The community's physical and social boundaries are expected to overlap the site's borders. However, it is not always easy to discern the latter, and not only due to technical challenges. Conceptually, the margins of a site's social community may extend beyond what at first glance appear to be its physical borders. Sometimes, the periphery has a much lower structure density than the residential core. Yet similar traits of material culture found in geographical proximity may indicate a shared communal identity (Hutson et al. 2008). Indeed, given that material culture creates or shapes identity, communities may be formed through daily routines of passage through material settings (Joyce and Hendon 2000:143). Material practices can contribute to an implicit sense of connection with broader groups, forming networks that are at once familiar but at the same time much wider than a set of personal acquaintances, in what is sometimes referred to as an "imagined community" (Joyce and Hendon 2000, following Anderson 1983).

THE HOUSEHOLD

Household Archaeology

Understanding rural life at microlevel, whether a village, farmstead or villa, requires an examination of the household unit. Household archaeology, a relatively new subfield of social archaeology (Wilk and Rathje 1982), aims to determine the relationship between social organization and spatial patterning (Souvatzi 2008:23). It is particularly relevant to rural archaeology for two main reasons: first, since rural sites have fewer public or monumental buildings in comparison to cities, more attention can and should be paid to the so-called ordinary household; second, in most cases, the number of excavated houses is limited, and each specific unit carries more weight than in urban contexts (e.g., Evans 1993).

A household may be defined as a group of residents or a domestic function, neither of which are identical to the family. While the household, domestic group and family may frequently correspond, they may also vary independently (Bender 1967). A household is a set of individuals, who share not only a living space but also some sets of domestic activities, such as food production and consumption, or sexual reproduction and child-rearing (Yanagisako 1979:164–165).

Some argue that the household is an activity group whose co-members cooperate in a set of practices, emphasizing that rather than responding to social change, it embodies a process that affects it (Souvatzi 2008:10, 20). Others regard rural households as "task-oriented residence units" (Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984:xx). A household may also include "residential propinquity," meaning that several structures or buildings are spatially related (Nevett 2010:173), or a household cluster, where separate groups or families cooperate as a single unit (Wilk 1984; Steadman 2016:168). Consequently, the concept calls for complex distinctions between kinship, labor and architecture (Routledge 2013:209).

According to Lévi-Strauss's (1982) concept of "House Society," the house is a *corporate body*, an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth (Gillespie 2000). The house perpetuates itself through the transmission of its name, goods and titles, along a real or imaginary line that is considered legitimate as long as this continuity can express itself in the language of kinship or affinity (Chesson 2003; Steadman 2016:141–149, and see further references therein).

Studying the architecture and related objects of the household is essential, as the latter is the most fundamental social and economic unit underlying social organization, serving as the basic unit of production and consumption in agrarian societies. Thus, many of the activities involved in adapting to the natural and social environment take place at the household level (Smith 1987:297). The form of the house and the household's organization are not simply "cultural" phenomena typical of a specific environment, but rather reflect the interaction of cultural norms and the decisions made by household members (Wilk 1984:235; Blanton 1994:7). Households are the loci of intersection between personal identities and the economic, social and ideological interests (Blanton 1994:7; Steadman 1996). The household's structure is shaped by the gender, ethnicity, power and politics of its participants (Souvatzi 2008; Steadman 2016:167–168).

Comparison between households enable us to measure wealth disparities and class stratification, as well as the role of the household within the community. By tracking and comparing consumption and use patterns of domestic assemblages, such as ceramics (e.g., tableware and cooking and storage vessels), tools and architectural elements, we can identify patterns of distinction and social differentiation within a community. The wealth of a household correlates with several significant social and demographic variables, including family size and structure, occupations of household members and the domestic developmental cycle (e.g., Yanagisako 1979; Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984). Investigations of household wealth may lead to more adequate models of local and regional social organization and of the local impact of higher-level institutions, such as state governments and market systems.

Household artifacts reflect the household's economic status and its variations over time. A material expression of wealth-related dietary differences may lie in the cooking and serving vessels assemblages. Even religious items and cult architecture can display wealth (Smith 1987). This may apply to ritual baths and synagogues in rural settlements in Roman Judaea.

When examining different households, the archaeologist should ask: How prevalent was the sharing of labor and activity areas between houses? What tasks were seemingly repeated in each individual house, and what tasks involved larger groups of people (Routledge 2013:210)? We should first seek the function of the household through its material culture. The household group is identified through the location of artifacts and spaces that signify activities related to production and consumption. Consequently, the identities of the household members are studied using more complex methodologies (Steadman 2016:166).

A notable attempt to link the site's domestic space and social structure is Smith's (1997) investigation of provincial villas throughout the Roman Empire. Based on ground plans of villas from Britain to Bulgaria, he argued that the spatial arrangement of rooms, hearths and corridors reflected the identity of the residents, and that changes in these arrangements reflected changes in the groups' composition. Smith also argued that it is possible to identify the kinship structure in certain villas. He distinguished between two main types of structures: the hall-type house and the row-type house. Whereas the hall-type house was suitable for only one household, the row-type house was built for more than one. A somewhat similar architectural and social observation was also applied, in very different historical and archaeological contexts, to the courtyard house and the row house in the Canaanite village (Faust 2005:111) and may also be relevant to Hellenistic and Roman households in Judea.

Social Organization and Structure

As previously noted, the primary social unit within the village community is the household. Carballo (2011) surveyed several recent studies attesting to the economic interdependence and diversification of village households, their strategic flexibility in affiliation, the integrative ritual practices undertaken within domestic spaces and the material correlates of prestige competition between households. In the context of competition between households for status and the variability of residence, Carballo also noted that the household's status was based on domestic architecture and activities, as well as spatial segregation and elevation of elite residence (Carballo 2011:161, 166).

The village's organization is sometimes related to the weight of household independence. Different social networks exist within the village for sharing production and consumption, private or communal. These can be observed in the spatial organization of production activities and storage within domestic dwellings. Household autonomy increases when interior features become more frequent and interior space, more compartmentalized, with activities and storage focusing on discrete localities within the household. On the other hand, when community organization grows, distinct large nondomestic buildings, usually at the center of the site, emerge for suprahousehold decision-making and ceremonial activities (Byrd 1994). Usually, cooperation between households within the village is also evident,

especially when there is a lack of marked social differentiation within the community (Chesson 2003:86).

Domestic Architecture

In the above discussion of the social aspects of rural archaeology, one significant issue was omitted—architecture. The dwelling house stands as the basic physical unit, and any examination of the village, farmstead or villa requires an exploration of its architecture. For example, Smith (1987:300) stresses that residential architecture constitutes the most robust and consistent expression of wealth levels in agrarian sociaties. There are, of course, some variations in the size and quality of housing that are directly related to a household's access to goods and services. Indeed, household architecture has been extensively studied (e.g., Kent 1990; Blanton 1994; Steadman 2016) and warrants a separate discussion, given its relevance to almost every aspect mentioned in this survey.

The Family

Kinship was a foundational element in the social organization of past societies, evinced through several models (Ensor 2013). Assuming that the residential house is the dwelling place of the family, insights into the family can naturally be drawn from the shape and function of the rural domestic space that its members occupied. Faust (2012:128–178) emphasized the central role of the family in the rural community and organization. Flannery (2002) argued that economic and social developments within a village influenced the spatial layout of the household and the family structure. It is tempting to determine the latter based on house plans and related findings (Steadman 2016:151–158; cf. Guijarro 1997).

Some scholars have calculated the size of the Iron Age Levantine family, or evaluated its structure, based on the house's floor area (Faust and Bunimovitz 2014:147–151; Faust et al. 2017:160–161). Others have calculated the number of inhabitants or nuclear families in a household in Roman Egypt (Nevett 2010:126–127, and see further references therein). Routledge (2013:216) concluded that the average size of families and households was relatively small, and remained consistent across three millennia and throughout a wide geographical area in the Levant, while family structure exhibits more variability. However, house size is not necessarily indicative of nuclear versus extended family structure (Matson 1996).[11]

[11] Calculations of family size may rely on estimates of population size per floor area in domestic units, a common practice in archaeological scholarship (Botha 1998:54–57, and see further references therein; Steadman 2016:40–45). For example, Naroll (1962) calculated a universal measurement of a 10 sq m floor area per person in a prehistoric settlement. Note the more exact calculations made for Roman households (Packer 1967), including those of Pompeii (Wallace-Hadrill 1994).

Summary: Practical Implications

This survey presents the fundamental questions, variations, complexities and challenges in the study of rural sites, from a social perspective. It demonstrates that the rural population actively shaped its own culture, functioning not merely as passive suppliers of agricultural products to the neighboring towns and cities (as already argued by Millett 2014:717). I have endeavored to tie together scholarship on geographic, social and economic processes, but it is important to note that all of these processes are mediated by a variety of local factors (Woods 2011:8), from regional to imperial scale, which are beyond the scope of this discussion.

I strived to synthesize practical conclusions from this survey for those engaged in analyzing the archaeological remains of villages or other rural sites. I would highlight three key points: (1) the general settlement pattern should be identified to determine the number of distinguishable built structures and the distance between them, enabling a general classification of the site type; (2) the differences between the structures should be defined in terms of size, location and adjacent agricultural installations, providing insights into more detailed site classifications, or a more comprehensive understanding of the social organization within communities; (3) a detailed analysis should be conducted of each structure/household, its architecture, interiors and assemblages to establish a microanalysis of rural life, spanning community to family level and even to individual resident level.

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