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Households in the Ancient World

Essay 2 - Theory and Evidence

Many ancient civilizations did not leave behind writing that can be understood, or writing about the mundane day to day life that the people lived. Because of this, the only way to understand the home lives of ancient civilizations is by looking at what they have left behind in the form of archaeological evidence. Looking at objects left behind by the past and excavated buildings and grave sites can only provide so much detail, however, which is why applied theories are so important in the field of archaeology. Understanding the operation of ancient societies and their households needs the assistance of sociological theories compared to the evidence we have of the past. Humans have always been humans, their surroundings were just drastically different which impacted the way that their societies developed and the things that they found important. Using both archaeological evidence and theory is the best way to try and reconstruct the past and how the people of the past lived and organized their households and societies.

Considering their durability, most relics that are excavated from archaeological dig sites are different forms of pottery. The make and material of the pottery varies depending on the location in which it is recovered, but pottery is one major consistency between ancient cities. While there are many different artistic styles of pottery, their intended use is always fairly consistent depending on the shape of the vessel. Storage vessels are very common, indicative of

the ancient people of the households being able to purchase or make goods and store them for later use. Storing goods for later use is an important aspect of human survival and an indicator of civilization. Being able to keep things for later times means that the people of these civilizations were not necessarily living day by day with food, and instead had a consistent supply either from local farmlands or ports, or from importing from other locations across the Mediterranean. While seeing the fragments of pottery or in some cases the entire piece of pottery can indicate that pottery was made and used, it's important to analyze what the vessel could have contained and what that means about the people of the area. Pottery can be identified as coming from other locations by testing the type of materials being used or examining the style of creation of the vessel, and having pottery from other places across the Mediterranean shows the existence of expansive trade routes and the perceived value of exotic items. Finding goods from other locations can indicate the preferences of the people who once lived in the area, and the connections that were forged during ancient times.

These preferences of non-local goods and presence of established trade routes can be examined under sociological theory to better understand the people of ancient times. Material wealth seems to have been important, even in ancient times, and the recovery of pottery from other locations within these ancient households makes that clear. Material wealth and the differences in class standings create divides within society, and despite a lack of written records to confirm any sort of tension between classes, the differences in the households and tombs of these ancient people can make it obvious how different the lives of different social standings were even in the past. Wealthier homes and tombs that are excavated often have a lot more expensive goods and materials, such as ivory perfume vessels or bronze mirrors. (Graziadio, 63)

The contents of tombs and the honoring of their dead was clearly very important to the people of the ancient world, based on the items recovered from inside excavated tombs. Many artifacts recovered from those time periods were found within tombs, and the contents of ancient tombs varied depending on the wealth of the family and the location of the tomb. Pottery, fabrics, weaponry, and jewelry were commonly placed into the tombs, the style of these objects varying and once again displaying the clear trade connections in the ancient world as items from Egypt or other geographical locations were recovered in Cyprus. The most consistent discovery inside tombs is pottery, the styles and origin locations wide in number. The use of the pottery is also varying; some tombs consisted of vessels for drinking parties, others had vessels intended for storage and cooking, and some had pottery that was ornate and the use of which is undetermined. (Bartelheim, 181)

While not as common as pottery or jewelry, some tombs had tools and weapons within them. The types of tools varied by location and wealth of the tomb, but these items give some insight into the lives of the people who were buried in the tomb. A tomb excavated on the Karpaz peninsula of Cyprus had multiple types of tools, the tomb yielding sickles, saws, and shovels. (Bartelheim, 161) The recovery of these tools gives insight into the occupation and social standing of the deceased. These tools are primarily meant for agriculture, and cast from local bronze. The geographical location of this tomb is not extremely close to any of the local bronze deposits, implying that the tools were purchased or traded for on another part of Cyprus before being brought to the location of their discovery. This displays local connections between people, and it is possible that the family of those within the tomb worked to grow food and could have traded for other items with the crops that were yielded.

While each time period has distinctly different methods of making and using tombs, there is some scattered evidence of tombs being repurposed over time to host later descendants of a family or entirely new families. One dig site in Kokkinoglia consists of tombs which are determined to have been built during the Late Neolithic Period, but the contents of the tomb has evidence of pottery and goods that were produced during the Early Chalcolithic Period. (Clarke, 9) The use of tombs from earlier time periods can show the length of time that a particular family was living in an area, or indicate that the tomb was abandoned before someone was placed into it along with their belongings and grave goods. A generational grave used for multiple family members is not an uncommon idea during this time period, and evidence of this practice can show how important family was to these people as well as the tradition of burying the dead close to their relatives.

The construction of a home on its own can be a display of wealth and stability. Depending on the materials used to build the home and the location of the home, inferences can be made about the people who once lived within the walls of the household. Homes constructed in areas of richer deposits with more exotic goods than other places would have a different style of life when compared to a home built near the remains of farmland and with tombs consisting of less expensive goods and more practical ones, such as cooking pottery and storage vessels. Wealthy homes could have signs that the walls of the home were reinforced and added to over time, or be located in an area with equally wealthy tombs and households. One such example of location is the site of Kral Tepesi, where some homes were built on higher ground and the excavations of those homes and tombs wielded wealthier deposits than houses lower in elevation. (Bartelheim, 182) The higher location of the homes would have made them easier to defend, but also easier to see; a note of importance that the people of the home would have been playing

into. Their material wealth is clear with the contents of their tombs, and the distinct location of their homes is just another way that they set themselves apart and displayed their social standing. Social standing was clearly important in ancient times when observing wealthy homes and tombs in this manner, and the ways that it was displayed with material wealth and location of homes were obvious.

Some homes that have been excavated show signs of reinforcement and being added onto. (Dürig, 173) Renovations being done to a home instead of moving location or rebuilding completely shows that people of that social standing didn't have the monetary capacity to do so, or it is just as likely they were attached to the original build of the home and wanted to preserve it to continue living in the same space as their family before them, even if they had the wealth and ability to move or build a new home. Fixing things to keep them the same is a very human behavior, such as sewing up a rip in a child's stuffed toy or repainting areas of walls that have been damaged in some way. The original build of the house of Building 1 at the site of Chlorakas-Palloures has a very brittle floor compared to other buildings in the area, despite the impressive size and preservation of the home. (Dürig, 173) The house went through several distinct phases of existence, showing a long standing attachment to the building and the capability of paying for or constructing multiple renovations. There is also evidence of internal renovations to the home, not just exterior reinforcements and layers added onto the flooring as it began to erode with time. The building was well cared for and renovated multiple times, made clear by the archaeological evidence and examination of the building materials.

Different goods were found in different deposit locations depending on their material make. The intended use of the items and the value they held to the people who owned them influenced where each artifact was left behind to be recovered. Metals such as bronze, silver, and

gold were not as commonly found in some tombs due to their value and durability, and their use in day to day rituals and practices. (Graziadio, 65) The value of these items could have also been an influential factor in whether or not they were left in tombs, due to the fact that if a decent sum of money or high quality trade was completed in order to obtain the item the people who owned it would be more hesitant about burying it instead of making future use of it. Richer items would often be found in richer tombs, both because the families could afford these items and because they had the wealth to spare and would not be severely missing a couple of valuable items left with their dead in the tombs. While meant to honor the dead, this would also contribute to the symbolic capital of the deceased's family with the display of their wealth, using their economic capital to push themselves into a good light and a high social standing.

Some tombs, such as the excavation site at Chlorakas-Palloures, had deposits of animal bone alongside the human skeletal remains and other grave goods. (Dürig, 194) While some of the bones are from animals that were primarily used as food, such as pigs and deer, the bones of domesticated animals such as dogs and cats were also discovered. The discovery of these types of bones are evidence of ancient people keeping animals around for pets, not necessarily for hunting purposes; cats are not the animal of choice when considering a domestic creature to assist with catching food. In addition, the area of the recovered home is a wealthier place, further cementing the idea of these animals being kept for companionship rather than utility. Attachment to animals is another very empathetic human trait, and shows that these people would have had the means to support an animal living with them and wanted to have a pet with them. The bones being found within the settlement where other human graves were located shows another level of care displayed towards these creatures, and makes clear that the human concept of caring for an animal and enjoying its companionship has always been ingrained into our psyche. Owning a pet

would have taken extra resources and wealth, and having one could have been seen as a display of high social standing and contributed to the symbolic capital of the pet's owner.

Other recovered bones were animals hunted for food, or for their pelts; the bones of foxes were also found in the area, and it is highly likely that these animals would have been hunted for their pelts as they are predator animals and not seen commonly in bone deposits of food animals. Turtles, birds, and crabs were also among the list of animals whose bones were recovered, making clear that the people of this area were able to acquire aquatic and flight animals as well as common farm animals. This implies that fishing and trade was a common practice in this area, and these animals were caught and consumed or kept frequently enough for multiple examples of their bones to be found.

Across the archaeological sites of Cyprus, oil and perfume containers were not uncommon finds. (Graziadio, 66) The types of vessels containing these oils and perfumes varied greatly from tomb to tomb, though many of them were extremely ornate and detailed, with vessels such as glass pomegranate vases and ivory containers. The richness of these materials and the level of craftsmanship needed to create such items would be very indicative of the wealth of those who were buried with these vessels inside their tombs. Some of these items were unable to be identified by origin, which likely speaks to the rarity and price of these items. Perfume and oils were most likely staples for the women of this time, especially those who were living in wealth; having exotic oils would have been a clear display of economic wealth and high societal standing. Items like these can be analyzed with sociological theory as well, considered to be part of symbolic capital as a display of wealth and economic capital due to the price these items would very likely have had.

While not as common or well-preserved, the hearth areas of the homes of ancient Cypriot people are just as important to analyze to understand the methodology of food making and the responsibilities of the people of the home. One relatively intact hearth area was found at Alambra in Cyprus. (Henkel, 90) Unit IV, connected to other parts of the home via a passageway, hosted a hearth that had ash deposit left behind along with pottery cooking materials. The cooking vessels being found with the hearth was highly unusual, and could be indicative of the hearth holding some special kind of meaning to the people who lived within the home. The hearth of the home was often seen as a gathering place in ancient times, a fireplace to sit near to eat and converse with other household members. Artifacts being discovered near hearths was not common, as those items were usually stored elsewhere in the home or buried with the dead, so the find of a hearth with these items nearby is strange. (Henkel, 91) The chain of events leading to the hearth being left in that condition is unclear, but the difference shows that even with commonplace practices set in stone by the society they lived in, some people did things a little bit differently and deviated from the social standard. Deviations from society are far from uncommon within civilizations, but finding mostly concrete evidence of deviations is not very common and can be useful to assess how some people may have viewed the commonplace practices of their time.

While archaeological evidence is important to have a visual of the past where no writing was left, it is difficult to piece together the meaning and usage of the recovered artifacts without making use of theories to examine the households and societies of the past. Theory can expand on why relics are found in certain places and the societal implications of them; archaeological evidence can show the possible trade routes between areas and the wealth of the person that the recovered relics belonged to. Using one or the other can give a general concept of how things

operated in the past, using both together is important to compile a bigger and clearer picture of the lives of ancient people.

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