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Houses in a Landscape: Memory and Everyday Life in Mesoamerica [Review]

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Hendon, Julia A. (2010) *Houses in a Landscape: Memory and Everyday Life Mesoamerica*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), xvi + 292 pp. £68.00 hbk, £16.99 pbk.

Using the material remains found in and around ancient Maya domestic spaces in three settlements in Honduras, Hendon examines how aspects of everyday life, rather than ritual and commemoration, transform these shared spaces into 'places of memory'. She argues that social memory is a reconstructive process and that human groups re-envision the past in light of present circumstances. Social memory – or what she refers to as 'memory communities' – would have involved an interaction with the remains of the dead, buried within the context of their social spaces. In other words, memory is an active process that binds people together through historical social bonds, and non-elites provide rival memories to the official narratives of the elites. She argues that by rethinking about the basic aspects of what archaeologists deal with in the archaeological record – the material remains of burials and households – she can place these within social practice. She also attempts to dissolve the boundaries between everyday practices and the ritual world to argue that rituals are a part of regular life in that they bring the past into the present through selective memory. She contends that archaeologists should create a separation between domestic activities and craft activities, in that both involve memory as part of self-identity through lifelong training, are part of the daily routine, and incorporate a broad range of individuals across the life cycle. She emphasises that ritualisation, or the practices of action and interaction, occurs within domestic life. She builds on the arguments of previous scholars that ritual and religious beliefs are incorporated into the domestic sphere, and are fundamental to the fabric of society. And yet, the timelessness of the ancient household, due to its repetitive quotidian activities, has made it difficult to anchor it to notable events or to view it beyond the mundane. Finally, she examines periodic ritual through the ballgame as an activity that brings together disparate communities as a way of reinforcing social identity. She argues that the space of the ballcourt is tied to domestic space through the presence of household objects such as clay whistles and figurines, and encompasses a range of activities that make up ritual spectacle but that we might also see in the home.

As someone who has studied domestic Maya architecture for nearly two decades, I believe this volume makes several valuable points that are applicable to any archaeological project in Mesoamerica. First, we should not simply think of rituals that took place within the domestic sphere as merely scaled-down versions of elite rituals, as they do not necessarily share meaning or consequence. Second, material objects have a kind of an animation that causes people to relate to them, even if they are only a part of everyday life. Simple objects like *metates* convey information about daily activities and social status, in terms of what they were made of and how they were shaped. However, the social memory derived from objects like *metates* is based on repetition and routine rather than the specialised and unusual events. The grinding surface reveals the material traces of the history of their use and the user's grinding practices. Third, just as we would with monumental architecture, we should consider the use of domestic space in terms of access and privacy, and the way in which older architecture may have been incorporated into settlements – either as modified structures, or abandoned buildings that could still be touched and viewed by inhabitants. Something as basic as a domestic storage area may indicate whether everyday items were left in plain view or hidden, or were mixed in with ritual items, thus blurring the boundaries between ritual and domestic activities. Craft production, for

example, was varied in terms of where it was conducted and whether the object being produced should be viewed during the production process.

While clearly written, this volume is definitely geared towards a specialised audience, even though it would be well suited for graduate or upper division student reading in courses on Mesoamerican archaeology. Although the quality of the line drawings and some of the author's photographs are mediocre, overall the figures are well suited to the text and add to the reader's understanding. The book does a great job of forcing the archaeologist to rethink the spaces they excavate and to examine how her ideas fit within their own domestic research contexts. It is also significant in that it argues that non-elite spaces such as domestic households are rich environments for understanding the ancient Maya – in many ways, more so than any elaborate tomb or palace, in that it provides insight into how the overwhelming majority of the population lived.

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