

An Institutional Perspective on Prehispanic Maya Residential Variation: Settlement and Community at San Estevan, Belize

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This article explores implications of a pattern of residential settlement found at the prehispanic Maya community of San Estevan in northern Belize. Although an awareness of the decision-making behavior of domestic groups helped to isolate the pattern, a household approach cannot by itself account for the overall community structure that emerged from the differential distribution of San Estevan's residential forms. Making sense of the organizational forces underlying this distribution requires a more comprehensive set of explanatory tools drawn from conceptualizations of institutions and their powers to shape the spaces of social practice. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA)

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INTRODUCTION

An archaeological settlement pattern study conducted at the lowland Maya site of San Estevan, Belize, has demonstrated that the residential composition of site areas varies with distance to monumental precincts. Although the research findings may recall Sjöberg's (1960) model of concentric zonation, popularized in Maya archaeology in the 1970s (Folan et al. 1979; Hammond 1975; Haviland 1970; Kurjack 1974; Marcus 1983), there is little basis for comparison. In contrast to the predictions of concentric zonation, San Estevan's residential distributions do not correlate with archaeological indicators of "wealth" or "elite" status (cf. Abrams 1987; Arnold and Ford 1980; Carmean 1991). Instead, the dimensions of variation examined in the study were expressly chosen to address diversity in the organizational and productive strategies of prehispanic domestic groups. At San Estevan the spatial associations between residential forms and civic/ceremonial architecture indicate that activities housed in monumental precincts had important consequences for household

decision making. On the surface, this would appear to be a likely discovery, largely anticipated by the maxim that societies are systemically related wholes. As Ortner [1990 (1984):390] observes, however, our longstanding assumptions about the systemic properties of human interaction have tended to deflect attention away from the question of "where 'the system' comes from" (see also Mann 1986:1; Trigger 1989:27). In light of that question, the San Estevan findings lose some of their transparent logic. Analysis of the site's residential architecture was informed by an approach that attributes decision-making autonomy to individual domestic groups. Yet, because of its emphasis on household agency, this same approach posits only the most "tenuous" of connections between society's domestic and political institutions (Netting 1993:19). The San Estevan study is therefore vulnerable to criticism about where best to situate agency in social process. More significantly, the study's findings suggest a counterintuitive relationship between agency and power. Should it prove reasonable to understand domestic groups as strategic decision mak-

ers, then how do we also understand a settlement system composed of such groups but seemingly structured by powers external to any of them?

San Estevan presents the curious case of a settlement system revealed inadvertently and on the basis of premises that are to varying degrees compromised by the research results. My purpose here is to reconcile this discrepancy between expectations and outcomes and, in the process, to clarify some of the organizational forces realized through San Estevan's spatial patterning. The article begins with a description of how the anthropological literature on households was used first to discriminate among residential arrangements and subsequently to reveal spatially sensitive dimensions of variation in the site's assemblage of domestic architecture. Discussion then moves to consideration of where the San Estevan settlement system came from. The power to structure that system cannot solely be attributed to either administrative or household action. Rather, it must be located in the interplay of both institutional arenas. The remainder of the article considers how best to model agency and power as they relate to institutions, in general, and to households, in particular.

RESEARCH AT SAN ESTEVAN

San Estevan is located just east of the New River, at the far western margins of northern Belize's flat, coastal plain (Fig. 1). Initial archaeological studies by William Bullard (1965) and Norman Hammond (1973) helped to define major chronological and architectural components of the site. Settled in the Middle Preclassic and possessing significant occupation by Early Classic times, San Estevan reached its greatest population levels and areal extent in the Late Classic Period (Hammond 1973; Levi 1993). Bounded by the New River to the west and by large seasonal wetlands to the north, east, and south, the Late Classic com-

munity spanned three limestone ridges, or uplands, ringing the perennial wetland, Long Swamp (Fig. 2). Each of these ridges supported a precinct of monumental architecture, with the most prominent housed at the center of San Estevan's largest upland zone. Each ridge also sustained myriad residential groupings of variable scale and spatial configuration. My own archaeological fieldwork at the site documented this diversity of residential arrangements within a sample of 20 survey blocks measuring 250 m on a side. Three additional residential zones, each comparable in size to a survey block, also were investigated, but in a more opportunistic fashion as they gradually became cleared of bush or cane. All architectural remains in these 23 survey localities were mapped and surface collected, and selected residential units were test excavated in order to obtain information about their construction histories.

The Archaeology of Domestic Groups

Fieldwork at San Estevan laid the foundation for an examination of the distributional parameters underlying diversity in the composition and layout of residential units at the site. Empirical in intent, the research sought to identify and account for organizational differences among the community's prehispanic domestic groups. That variation in residential forms comprised the principal vehicle used to address these issues requires some justification given increasing concerns over the interpretive potential of architectural data. Critics of architectural approaches to domestic group behavior register two primary objections: first, that residences are unresponsive to temporal dynamics spanning reductions in domestic personnel or their wholesale replacement (e.g., Hirth 1993); and, second, that structure plans and interiors do not always constitute sensitive or unambiguous indicators of domestic activities (Allison 2000; Goldberg 2000).

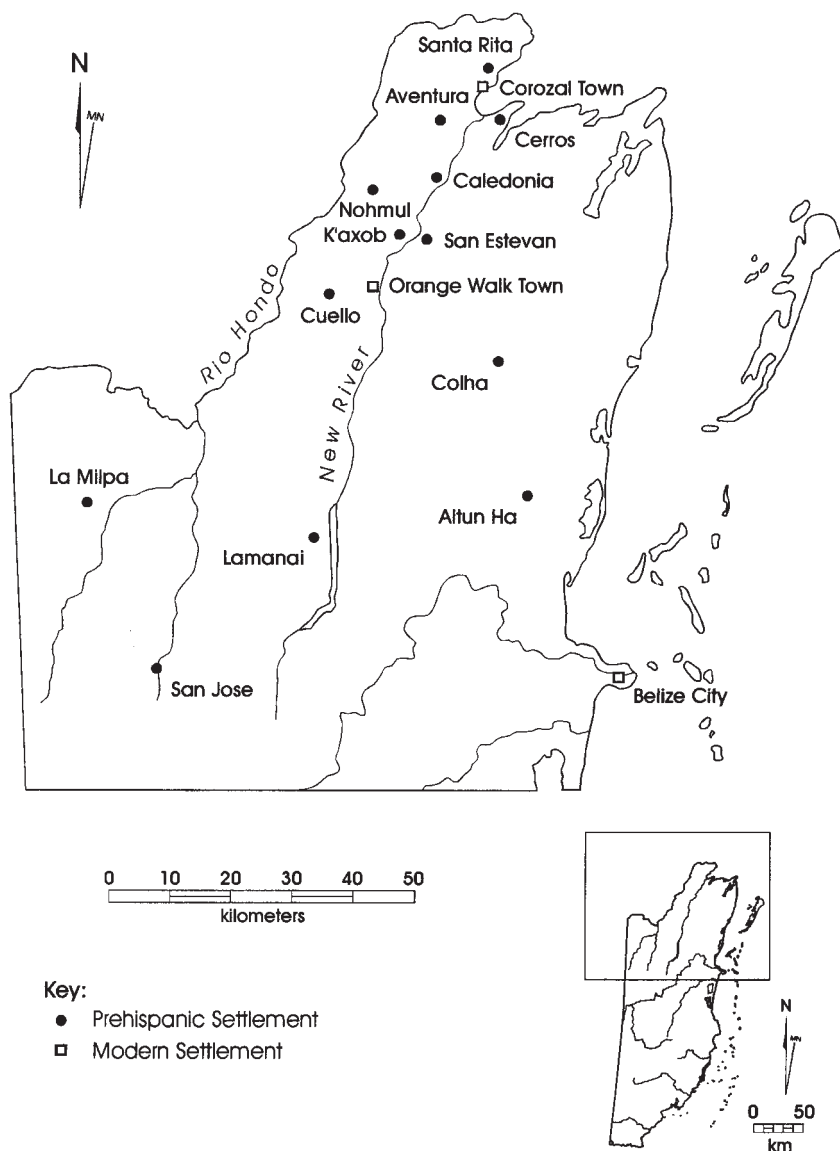


FIG. 1. Map of selected archaeological sites in northern Belize.

Much recent research in lowland Mesoamerica attempts to compensate for the latter problem. To great effect, emphasis has shifted from architecture to artifact and from structural space to extramural space (e.g., Alexander 2000; Johnston and Gonlin 1998; Killion 1990, 1992; Killion et al. 1989; McAnany 1992a). Nevertheless, the verdict

is still pending on whether activity area research captures temporal fluctuations of a different order or on a finer scale than architectural studies (but see Alexander 2000:92–93). Furthermore, activity studies do not necessarily provide comparable information on domestic group behavior. As research is ever more closely trained upon

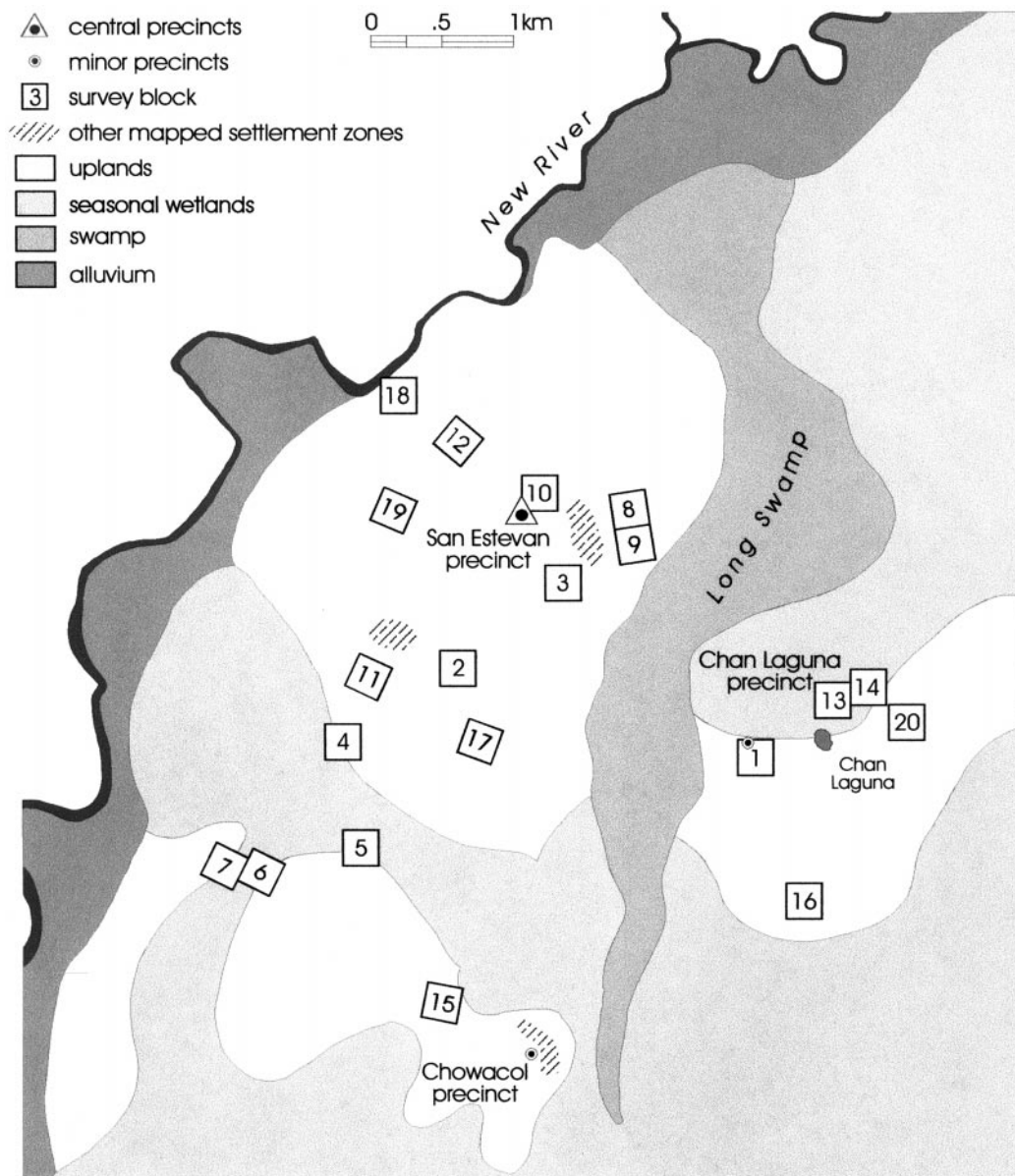


FIG. 2. San Estevan Project area showing locations of monumental precincts, survey blocks, and other mapped settlement localities.

human action, behavior increasingly becomes identified with task—the work that people do. The connections forged among the people doing all that work often appear incidental to the tasks performed. Yet, interconnections among people speak to be-

havior in its organizational aspect (cf. Flannagan 1989:248), and on the whole, analyses of the “built environment” provide some of our most critical insights into organization as it is materially represented (Lawrence and Low 1990).

Not surprisingly, most investigations of residences in Maya archaeology have stressed social affiliations. I would argue that dissatisfaction with this kind of research arises more from the organizational perspectives brought to bear on domestic architecture than from any interpretive pitfalls intrinsic to the data set. The lineage models employed for many years by Mayanists furnish a case in point. Although extremely sophisticated both methodologically and theoretically (see especially Hendon 1991; McAnany 1992b, 1995; Sanders 1989; Sheehy 1992), lineage approaches invariably produced typological assessments that invoked a set of normative and uniformly experienced beliefs to seamlessly merge prehispanic Maya domestic and political institutions. Domestic organization was asserted to be fully determined by unilineal descent principles that comprised, as well, the pervasive idiom for power relations throughout Maya society. Distance to apical ancestors was argued to have governed access to political aegis and productive lands. Accordingly, variations in the size of residential units, their construction histories, and expressions of inequality were interpreted to reflect the divergent fortunes of lineages and their constituent families.

While a few detractors have challenged the specific relevance of unilineal descent groups to the prehispanic Maya (e.g., Gillespie 2000; Wilk 1988), the vast majority contend more generally that "families" and domestic groups are rarely coterminous (e.g., Hendon 1996; Johnston and Gonlin 1998; Ashmore and Wilk 1988). Introducing a fundamental question of causality, both concerns invite debate over the organizational determinants of domestic life. Typological perspectives pointed to a set of uniform and stable forces located somewhere outside the mundane activities in which domestic group members engaged. The alternative, of course, is to situate causality directly within the domestic realm, itself.

In anthropology, the agrarian ecological studies of Robert Netting have lent the greatest support to this latter perspective. Netting's early work among Nigeria's Kofyar agriculturalists highlighted a striking flexibility of domestic forms and activities in relation to the variables of demography and land availability (Netting 1968, 1993). At issue was how to account for the existence of such variation within the context of a single cultural group subsumed by a single overarching political structure. Circumventing a facile demographic determinism, Netting directed attention to the tasks performed by Kofyar households and the ways in which their labor was deployed. The household, he emphasized, was a corporate entity whose membership shared responsibility for production, consumption, and reproduction. Discharging those responsibilities was contingent upon the household's ongoing mediation of external forces and constraints. Variation in domestic group organization should therefore be understood to follow from strategic differences in household decision making.

Appropriating the term "household" to signal a shift away from an *a priori* holism that empirical studies could not support, Netting and his students challenged both the structural-functionalist causality that gave primacy to societal norms as well as a persistent, if tacit, unilineal evolutionism that informed arguments about the correspondence between domestic and political institutions (Netting et al. 1984:xvii-xix; Wilk 1991:18-26). A concept of household agency informed both critiques. The authority attributed to household decision making suggested the overall expedience of tradition (Wilk and Netting 1984). At the same time, it undermined conventional notions of a determinant stream of causality flowing from society's most powerful members to its least. The conduct of political life was geographically diffuse and proceeded at multiple scales, while the household was a locus where land and labor

converged in sets of situated activities (Wilk 1991:31–33). In consequence, household agency compelled investigations of organizational dynamics to be thoroughly grounded in “local environment” (Netting 1993:21).

Finding Households in Residence at San Estevan

San Estevan’s prehispanic community had been dispersed over more than 30 km² of an ecologically diverse area. Its residential units ranged from isolates and paired structures to several different kinds of multistructure, plaza-focused units. A household approach, grounded in “local environment,” contained the implication that the formal and distributional properties of residence should be examined together, a necessary contextualization that typological perspectives often neglected. Moreover, by situating sources of organizational diversity in household decision-making processes, the approach offered a means to inspect residential variation without recourse to assumptions about how the domestic realm was tied to broader socioeconomic and political forces. Finally, household research contained the germ of an idea about connections between people and the places they inhabit, pointing to the central role recruitment plays in the functioning of any domestic group.

Households are highly contingent social forms, poised at the precipice of failure should relationships between economic orientations and household membership be disrupted (e.g., Cain 1988; McDonald 1991). There are many ways for households to adjust the balance sheets—tallying production and consumption and juggling among alternative productive and recruitment options. In addition to childbearing, recruitment strategies may include various marriage practices, adoption, extensions of real or fictive kinship, and forms of sanctioned

coercion like servitude and slavery. Not merely contingent, therefore, households are also negotiated constructs, pursuing (or being compelled to accept) some forms of recruitment and not others. And for the household to work as such, it requires organizational strategies of incorporation (cf. Arnould 1984; Bachnik 1983; Blanton 1995).

The close connection between household production and recruitment, and the organizational strategies necessary to effect this connection, suggested a way to identify San Estevan’s prehispanic households while at the same time gauging differences among them. One of the most impressive facets of San Estevan’s residential assemblage was the range of architectural mechanisms used to incorporate individual structures into larger residential groupings. Plazas, structure abutments, shared substructural platforms, and broad basal platforms supporting whole residential groups were some of the more common mechanisms that helped to confer spatial integrity to residential units at the site. Many of these devices were differentially distributed across the site, and no one residential unit possessed the entire array. San Estevan’s domestic architecture seemed highly strategic as a result. Although an inferential leap, I began to view this array of mechanisms as a repertoire of architectural elements available to domestic groups for the purpose of organizing their membership. Differences in the elements selected should speak to differences in the connections that had been forged among domestic group members through their efforts to balance productive options and labor requirements. Prehispanic households at San Estevan could be simultaneously discerned and differentiated by the kinds of structure incorporation mechanisms they had employed.

On the basis of a combined consideration of structure incorporation mechanisms and structure number, five principal classes of residential arrangements were identified at the site (Fig. 3). Isolates and Paired Plat-

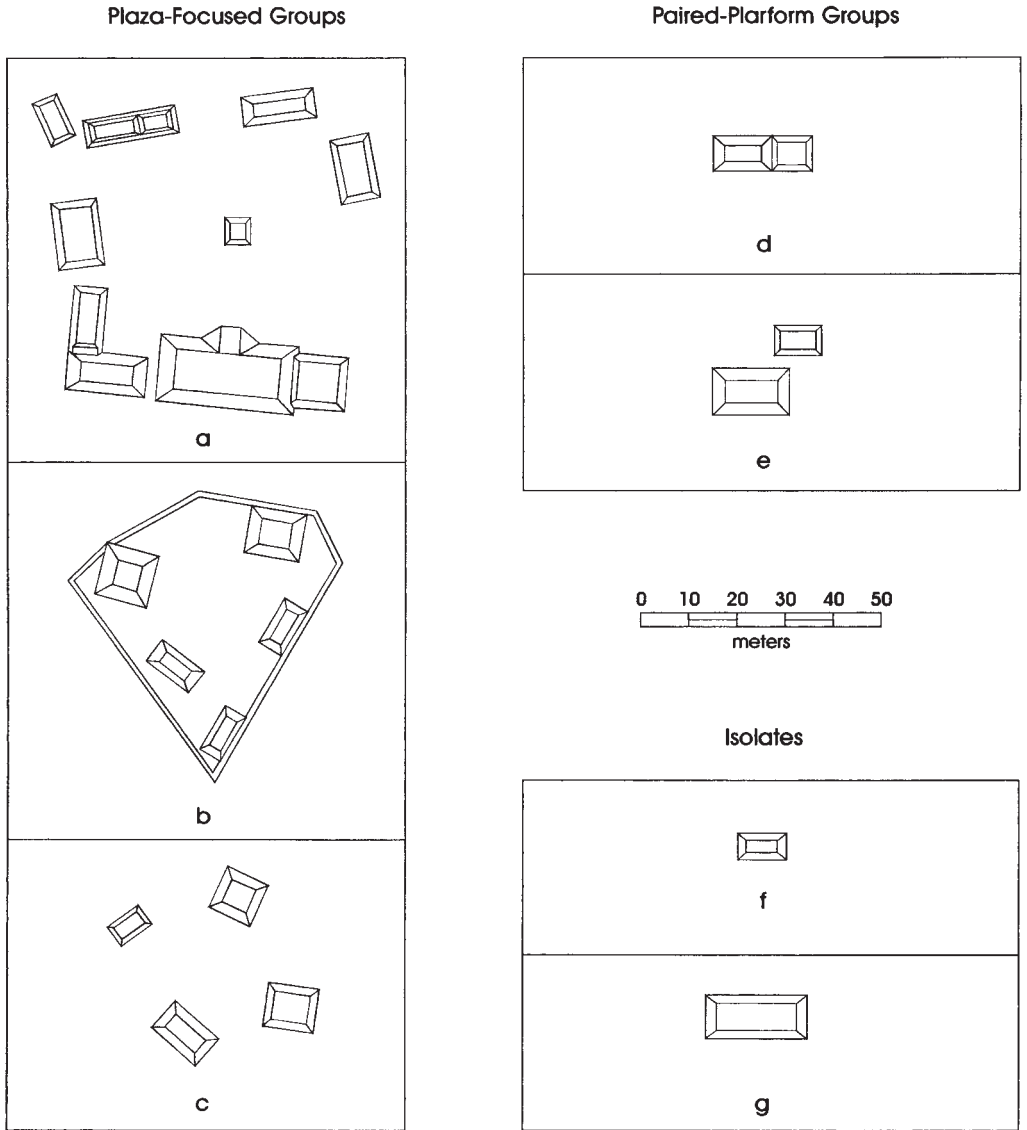


FIG. 3. Residential classes at San Estevan. (a) Large Composite Group, (b) Basal Platform Group, (c) Focus Group, (d and e) Paired Platform Groups, and (f and g) Isolates.

form Groups, consisting of 1 and 2 structures, respectively, showed little or no investment in architectural mechanisms of structure incorporation, and both lacked clear vestiges of plaza foci (Figs. 3d-3g). The rest of San Estevan's residential units were plaza-focused arrangements, and the vast majority of these fell into three well-defined

classes. Members of the Focus Group class possessed 3 or 4 structures positioned to define a central plaza area (Fig. 3c). In the Basal Platform Group class the primary integrating feature was a broad basal platform supporting from 2 to 5 structures arranged along the platform's perimeters (Fig. 3b). Large Composite Groups, on the

other hand, possessed from 6 to 13 structures and exhibited a profusion of structure incorporation mechanisms, including one or more plazas, numerous structure abutments, linear basal platforms supporting 2 or 3 contiguously aligned structures, and small alters or shrines (Fig. 3a).

The residential classification used at San Estevan partitioned the architectural assemblage according to pronounced differences in the composition and layout of the site's residential units. These differences, however, could not be correlated with obvious dimensions of inequality. Significant disparities existed in the labor and resources used to construct residential units, but variation within classes was as great as the variations between them (Levi 1993:229). On the other hand, the classification did help to systematize observations on temporal dynamics. Although excavation and surface collection data indicated that over 80% of San Estevan's domestic architecture possessed Late Classic occupation (Levi 1993:113), construction sequences often differed dramatically among San Estevan's residential classes. Isolate and Paired Platform classes showed the most internally variable patterns. Of the Focus Groups tested at the site, half showed lengthy occupations extending from the Early Classic through the Late Classic, while the remainder originated in the Late Classic period. Both early and later variants consolidated into Focus Group layouts within a single ceramic period. This fairly rapid process was apparently offset by a low ceiling upon group expansion, however, and Focus Groups never possessed more than four structures, regardless of temporal duration. San Estevan's Basal Platform Groups, averaging four structures per unit, evinced similar constraints upon group expansion but consistently showed great temporal depth. Comprising the community's most enduring residential loci, these groups were founded no later than the end of the Late Preclassic and were con-

tinuously modified into the Terminal Classic, long after building activity had ceased in other kinds of residential units. Finally, the residential units incorporating the most structures at San Estevan were also among the shortest lived groups at the site. Despite their sprawling size and spatial complexity, Large Composite Group coalesced and declined during the Late Classic.

In summary, the residential classification offered little support for the idea that a single, enduring set of normative values governed the behavior of San Estevan's prehispanic domestic groups. Typological approaches that invoke the uniform operation of unilineal descent principles to account for residential diversity gain credence only if the residential units possessing the largest numbers of structures at a site also exhibit the greatest temporal depth. This simply did not hold true at San Estevan, the site's Large Composite Groups providing a case in point. Taken as a whole, the construction histories characterizing San Estevan's suite of residential classes suggested that households had been variously organized in response to a far more nuanced "local environment." In order to make the connection between households and their immediate environs, it was necessary to model how local conditions, the context of residence, had varied as well.

Household and Community at San Estevan

Each of San Estevan's domestic groups had existed within a context that could be framed at two scales. First, any particular group had occupied a particular locality defined by the presence of other groups in its immediate vicinity. The immediate context of a group therefore could be described in terms of a given tract of land and the array of domestic forms that land supported. San Estevan's survey localities provided the principal means to assess context at this scale, and there were 17 in the sample that

possessed visible remains of residential settlement. Assessments of the residential assemblages characterizing each of these localities began with tabulations of the frequencies of occurrence of specific residential classes. Raw frequencies, however, could not convey how the residential units typical of some classes clearly occupied more three-dimensional space than those of others. Although these larger units might occur in relatively low frequencies within a given area, they nevertheless managed to dominate that area spatially. In order to better capture this spatial dimension, residential classes were next ranked according to their average architectural volume. On average, Large Composite Groups were volumetrically larger than other kinds of residential units at San Estevan, and their rank was arbitrarily set at 100. This figure allowed the ranks of San Estevan's remaining residential classes to be computed as a percentage of the architectural volume of Large Composite Groups. For any particular site area, therefore, weighted frequen-

cies for residential classes could be determined by multiplying actual frequencies by numerical ranks. It was then possible to characterize the context of any given unit according to the spatial preponderance of residential classes in its immediate environs. A particular residential class was considered to dominate a locality if its weighted frequency was at least twice as large as the sum of the weighted frequencies of other classes (Table 1).

Obviously, many residential units at San Estevan possessed comparable contexts by virtue of their presence in the same survey blocks. Units located in widely disparate areas of the site, however, also could share important quantitative and qualitative similarities in the residential makeup of their respective localities. For example, some localities evinced a similarly broad range of residential classes, with no one class achieving dominance (Dominant Class = NONE; Fig. 4). Other areas, while supporting a diverse residential assemblage, nevertheless showed a preponderance of either

TABLE 1
Raw and Weighted Frequencies (*f* and *wf*) of Residential Classes by Survey Localities

Surveyed localities	BPG			FG			PP			I			LCOMP			Dominant class
	E	<i>f</i>	<i>wf</i>	E	<i>f</i>	<i>wf</i>	E	<i>f</i>	<i>wf</i>	E	<i>f</i>	<i>wf</i>	E	<i>f</i>	<i>wf</i>	
SB1	2	4	344	2	4	68				1	6	36				BPG
SB2				1	1	17	1	5	75	1	7	42				PP/I
SB3	1	1	86	3	3	51		3	45		5	30				NONE
SB6								1	15		5	30	2	4	400	LCOMP
SB9								1	15		2	12				PP/I
SB10		1	86		3	51		2	30		1	6				NONE
SB11							1	1	15		5	30	1	1	100	LCOMP
SB12				1	1	17		3	45							PP/I
SB13										1	1	6				PP/I
SB15		1	86					2	30		4	24				NONE
SB16							1	3	45	2	4	24				PP/I
SB17					2	34		1	15							FG
SB18							1	1	15	1	1	6				PP/I
SB19					1	17		3	45		1	6				PP/I
Central zone		3	258				1	2	30		2	12				BPG
Martinez zone													2	2	200	LCOMP
Chowacol zone		4	344		1	17		1	15		3	18				BPG
Column totals	3	14		7	16		5	29		6	47		5	7		

Determination of the dominant residential class in each locality has been made on the basis of weighted class frequencies. "E" indicates the number of groups in which structures were test excavated. This figure does not include groups where excavations tested only plazas or other extramural areas. Nor does "E" indicate instances where construction sequences were obtained through examination of looters trenches.

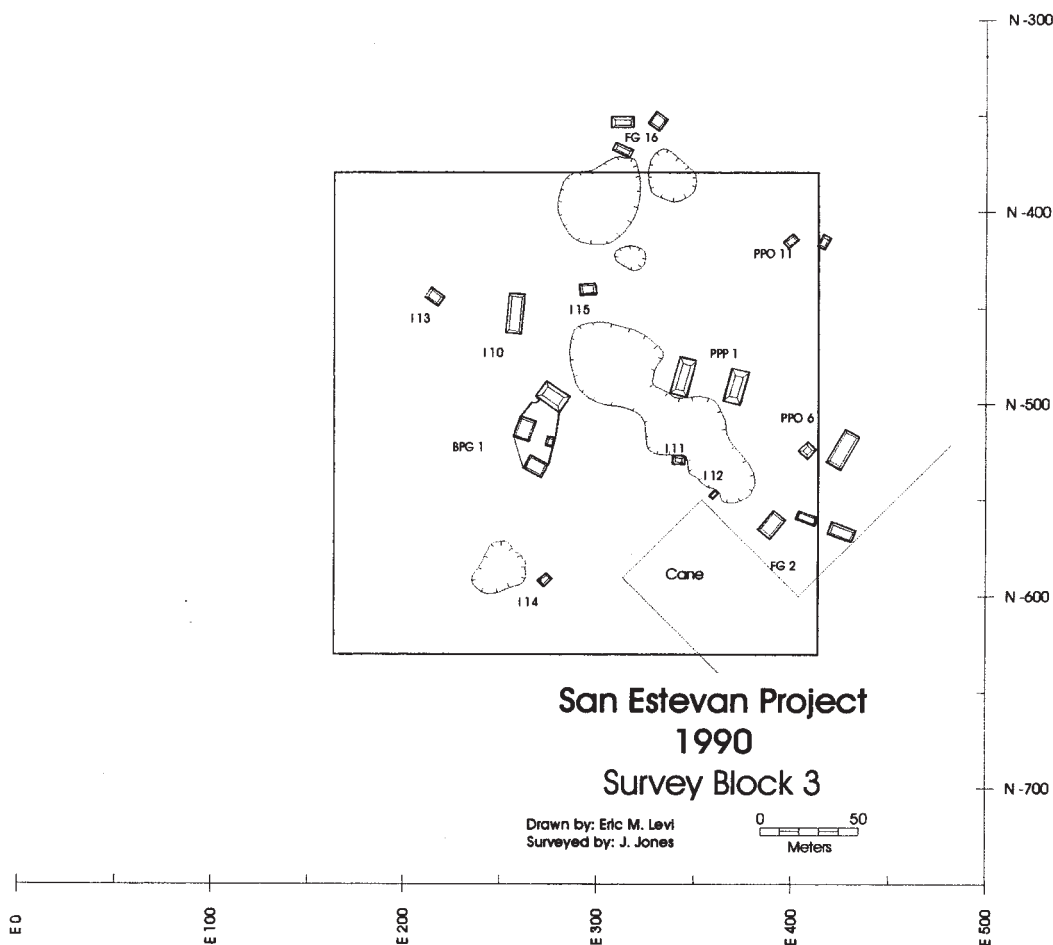


FIG. 4. Example of a settlement locality where no single residential class dominates the assemblage (Dominant Class = "NONE").

Basal Platform Groups or Large Composite Groups (Dominant Class = BPG or LCOMP; Figs. 5 and 6). In contrast to the diversity manifest by these first 3 kinds of localities, several site areas exhibited a remarkably narrow range of residential classes, with Paired Platform Groups and Isolates dominating the assemblages (Dominant Class = PP/I; Fig. 7). Finally, of the 17 localities examined, only 1 possessed a preponderance of Focus Groups and thus failed to show a residential assemblage comparable to any other site area. For the present, this anomaly must be

attributed to the relatively small size of the survey sample.

On the whole, therefore, the majority of San Estevan's residential localities appeared to share a rather limited range of residential patterns. Those patterns, in turn, suggested that certain areas of the settlement, by virtue of commonalities in residential composition, may have afforded a comparable range of economic options to San Estevan's prehispanic domestic groups. In order to investigate this possibility, it was necessary to determine whether areas that overtly shared similar residential as-

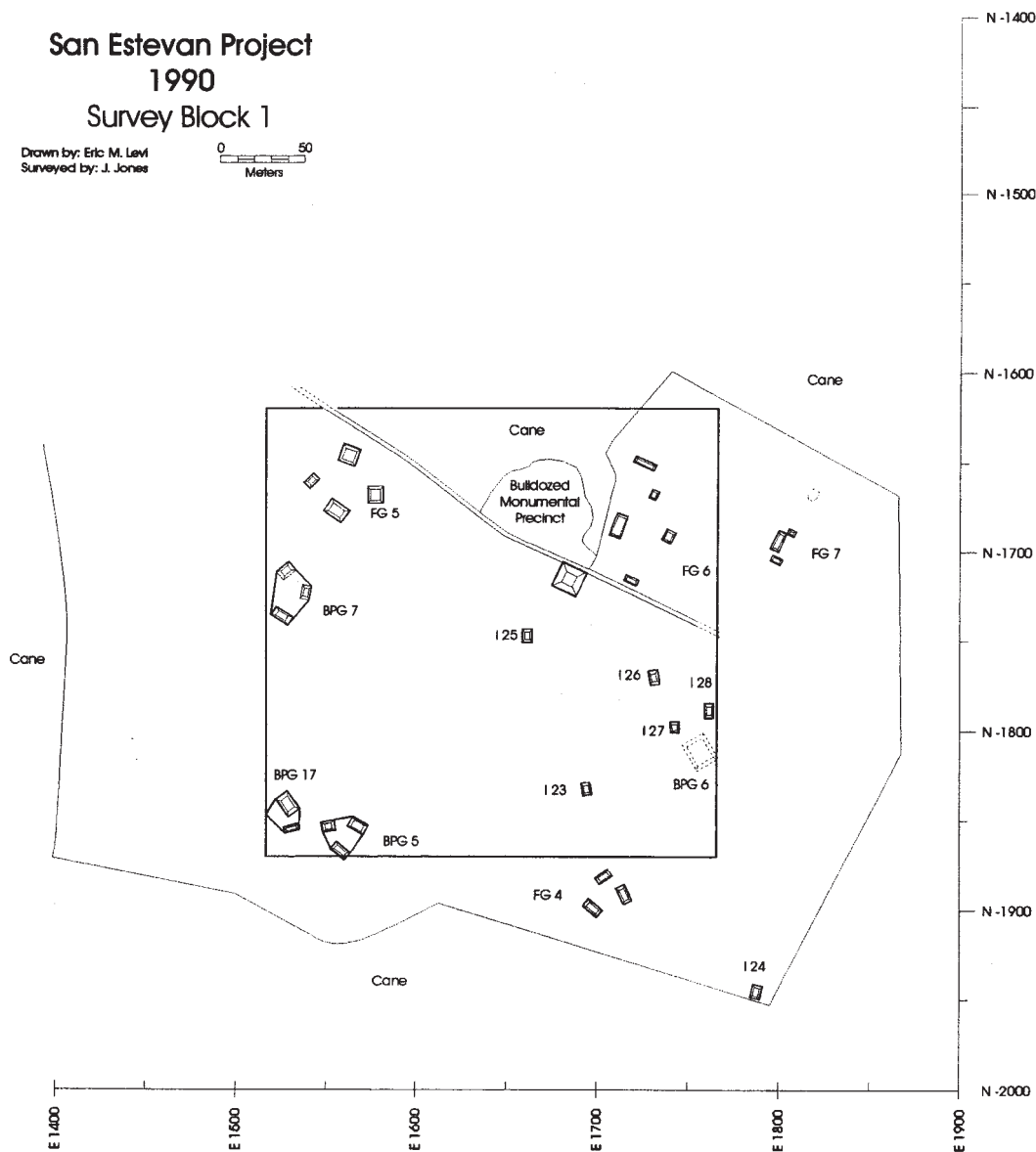


FIG. 5. Example of a settlement locality where Basal Platform Groups dominate the residential assemblage (Dominant Class = "BPG").

semblages also exhibited similar spatial relationships to spheres of economic opportunity within the context of the wider community. At this second scale, the residential composition of settlement zones could be broadly linked to settlement ecology, with clear implications for prehispanic agrarian

practices (Levi 1996). Ultimately, however, both the diversity and kinds of residential classes found at any given locality specifically correlated with proximity to nodes of monumental architecture (Fig. 8). Areas dominated by Basal Platform Groups never appeared further than 0.50 km from one of

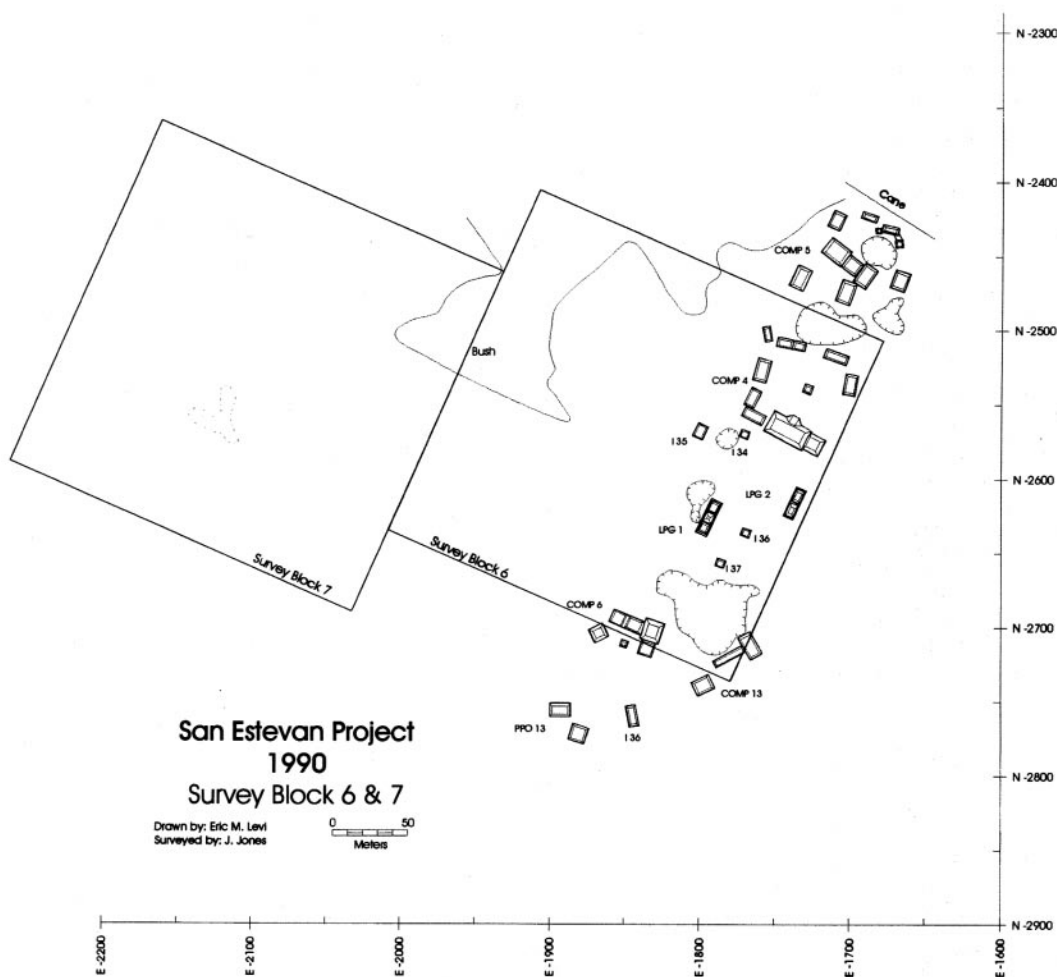


FIG. 6. Example of a settlement locality where Large Composite Groups dominate the residential assemblage (Dominant Class = "LCOMP").

San Estevan's three nodes of monumental architecture. Areas characterized by highly diverse residential assemblages and the absence of a dominant residential class only occurred within a 0.7-km radius of monumental precincts. Beyond this point, and extending for roughly 1/2 km, residential assemblages were marked both by a loss of diversity and by the preponderance of Paired Platform Groups and Isolates. Moving even further away from monumental precincts to the margins of San Estevan's upland zones, there was yet another dra-

matic shift, and Large Composite Groups dominated the landscape.

THE HOUSEHOLD PARADOX

While a notion of household agency motivated much of the San Estevan research, this idea bestows what Gillian Hart (1992) has called an "imagined unity" upon something that is actually an aggregate of individuals. Hart and others have argued quite persuasively that viewing the household in terms of the separate and often conflicting

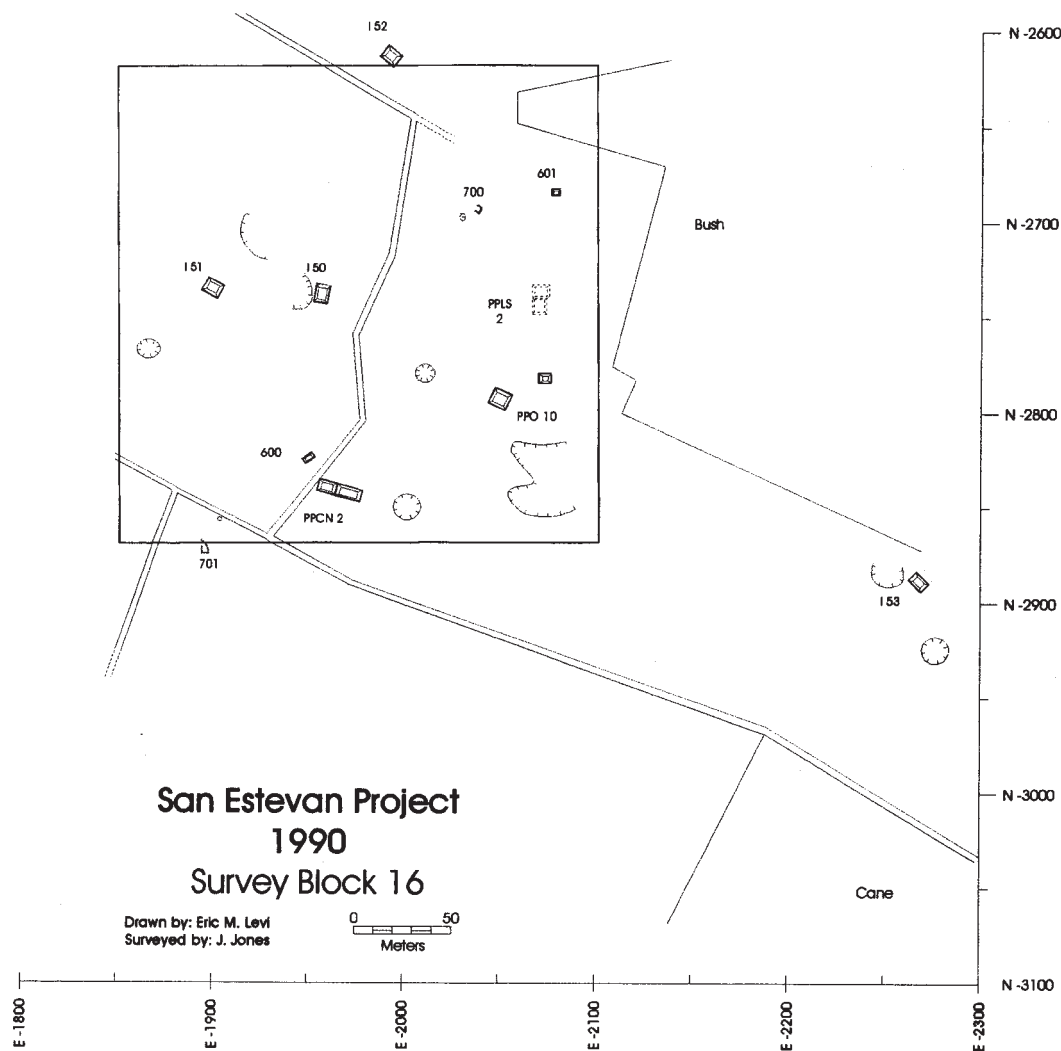


FIG. 7. Example of a settlement locality where Paired Platforms and Isolates dominate the residential assemblage (Dominant Class = "PP/I").

interests of its constituents is critical to understanding larger social processes (e.g., Folbre 1988; Hendon 1996). Yet a rationale for the variation evidenced by San Estevan's residential architecture emerged only from a model of households as decision-making entities, negotiating strategies of recruitment and production. Still other scholars have questioned the validity of attributing agency to either households or individuals, pointing out that such decision

making is embedded in broader institutional settings (de Montmollin 1987; Halperin 1985). A second contradiction arises from this critique. Only by granting agency to San Estevan's prehispanic households could clear limits to their decision-making autonomy then be discerned. Quite simply, certain organizational strategies proved likely, unlikely, or impossible for San Estevan households, depending on the settlement localities they occupied. One

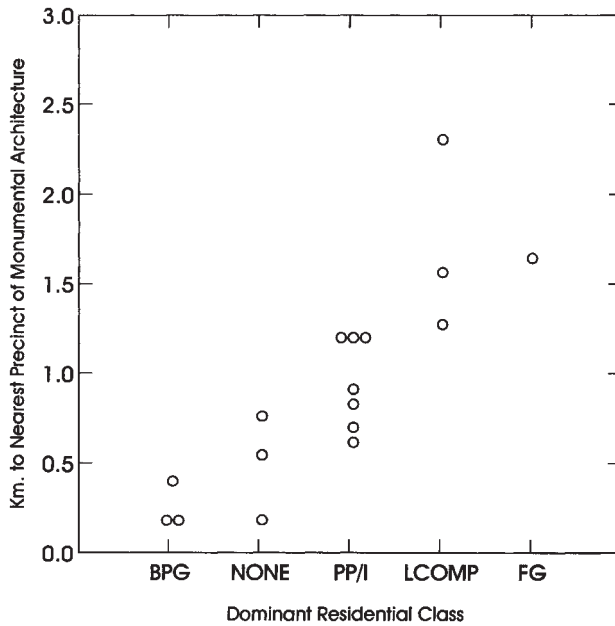


FIG. 8. Distribution of survey localities in relation to nodes of monumental architecture. Localities have been grouped according to the dominant residential class characterizing each.

final contradiction more fully conjures the specter of systemic connections between domestic and political life. Although the analysis was able to show that the organizational strategies pursued by San Estevan's households had varied in relation to their productive activities, it also underscored the influences exerted by the community's most prominent political arenas.

The San Estevan study thus reveals a critical paradox delineated by three questions to be addressed below. First, why may households behave as if they were individuals, when clearly they are not? Second, why must households be credited with agency before limits to their autonomy can be perceived? And, third, if agency is not solely the prerogative of individuals—if there are other "active entities" in society (Johnson 1989:208)—then what is it in this complicated interplay of individuals, households, and suprahousehold entities that contributes to the organization and inter-relatedness of the entire social field?

In short, where do we locate the systemic properties of the San Estevan community? Answers to these questions require the combined input of an eclectic array of scholars whose works converge upon the related subjects of institutions, power, and agency.

Institutions and Power

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive history of the term "institution" nor even a thorough critique of definitions. Rather, I limit the discussion to a few theoretical developments relevant to considerations of institutional power. By and large, theoretical exploration of institutions has been conducted outside of anthropology, primarily in sociology, but also in history, economics, and psychology. Until the practice theorists, 20th-century sociological traditions were dominated by the tendency to erect clear conceptual boundaries between people and institutions. This tendency is

best exemplified in the writings of Talcott Parsons (1951, 1960), who maintained that people form collectivities while institutions consist of formal rules that delimit the roles people assume and the actions they take (Parsons 1951:39–40). Historical depth was implied: Institutions endure, people do not. People, as a result, became the ahistorical subjects of network analysis (Coleman et al. 1957) and interaction theory (Goffman 1963, 1967), whereas the study of institutions fell under the purview of an historically grounded macrosociology with strong Weberian roots. Whether practice theorists have managed to successfully breach the divide between people and institutions through poststructuralist bridging is certainly open to debate. With the notion of *habitus*, for example, Pierre Bourdieu reconstituted people as historical subjects but, in doing so, preserved their opposition to institutions [Bourdieu 1990 (1980):56–58]. *Habitus* is historically and experientially derived knowledge embodied by an individual. The content of *habitus*, although selectively incorporating a history that may extend far into the past, nevertheless is informally configured during the course of an individual's life span and remains in large part unexpressed or unrecognized. Although institutions are also historically derived knowledge, they perpetuate awareness of their pasts in the present through recognized symbolic schemes that people may consciously elucidate and manipulate (Bourdieu 1991:105–106). Ultimately, therefore, institutions stand external to individuals, shaping the determinacy of *habitus* to the extent that people can be considered to “inhabit” institutions [Bourdieu 1990 (1980):57]. Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) also seemed to have some difficulty defining institutions in terms of people. Arguing from his standpoint of the fundamental “duality of structure,” he asserted the former to be those “practices which have the greatest space–time extension” (Giddens 1984:17). However, to explore institutional

power, Giddens adopted an “*epoché*” approach *à la* Braudel (1973) that collapses institutions into “rules and resources,” effectively neutralizing both history and people (Giddens 1984:28–34).

By contrast, there have been very few generalizing treatments of institutional phenomena by anthropologists who, instead, have opted to focus on how specific institutions work. In rare, early exceptions, anthropological discussions show a clear indebtedness to sociology's Parsonian tradition (e.g., Lowie 1948:3). Later commentary, however, points to an altogether contrary assessment best illustrated in the work of Mary Douglas. According to Douglas (1986:46), institutions are “legitimate social groups.” The drawbacks to this definition are obvious. Outwardly, at least, it offers a synchronic perspective and reflects anthropology's traditional ambivalence toward history. It is also inherently reductionist, the emphasis on “legitimacy” revealing anthropology's deference to—and unwillingness to unpack—the “emic” point of view. If the emphasis shifts to “social groups,” however, the definition allows for the possibility that institutions are situated within groups of people rather than the reverse. In consequence, institutions have the potential to be understood as problems not only of enduring structure but of emergent organization, as well (Kowalewski 1994:1).

The productivity of an organizational approach to institutions has been amply illustrated by historian Michael Mann in his treatise on social power. In Mann's view, the linkages forged between people always involve power relationships, although the sources, effects, and expressions of power may vary (Mann 1986:1–33). Gathering the insights of Parsonians, Weberians, historical materialists, and practice theorists, Mann described organizational power in its collective, distributive, extensive, intensive, authoritative, and diffuse aspects. Collective and distributive powers refer to sources—power in as opposed to power

over. Extensive and intensive refer to effective strength as measured, respectively, by size and areal extent of the relevant population and by degree of "mobilization" or "commitment" (Mann 1986:7). Finally, the last two terms implicate the manner in which power relationships are expressed and experienced, either authoritatively through "definite commands and conscious obedience" or diffusely through shared "social practices . . . not explicitly commanded" (Mann 1986:8). It should be noted that although Mann defined his six terms according to three oppositional pairs, no one pairing truly delineates a specific dimension of contrast along which organizations will vary. For example, all organizational forms necessarily will rest upon collective power while the degree to which they manifest distributive powers may differ. Similarly, some organizations may exhibit great degrees both of intensive and extensive powers, while others will show an inverse relationship between the two.

Mann's contribution is twofold. First, an institution gains its social presence or nodality as much from power relationships generated *by* people as from knowledge structured *for* people. Second, the social force of an institution may be gauged by the organizational power it summons in relation to other institutions. Together, these two points help to resolve some of the apparent contradictions in the San Estevan findings.

Agency and Institutional Power

Why households can be profitably studied "as if" they were individuals rests principally on an understanding of collective power. Collective power is an emergent property of all institutions in that individuals by means of "cooperation . . . enhance their joint power over third parties or over nature" (Mann 1986:6). Through the combined efforts of its members, therefore, the household wields power that would be

otherwise unavailable should its members act alone. Because this power is contingent upon the existence of the group, and dissipates when the group breaks apart, it is not erroneous to grant the household a kind of autonomy, rooted in but distinct from the separate interests of its members. Although not an individual, the household is nevertheless an actor.

If the household can act by virtue of its collective powers, then the actions of its members must achieve some outward semblance of coherence and coordination. Over the years, there have been many attempts to model this phenomenon, from Durkheim's collective conscience and the practice theorists' habitus to economists' formulations of the household's joint utility function. Mann's intensive, authoritative, and diffuse powers also constitute a response to the problem of collective action and the individual compliance it requires. It is Mary Douglas, however, who has demonstrated how these aspects of organizational power stem from a common cultural fund that is both epistemic and conventional. Comparing diverse institutions, from small descent groups to international scientific communities, Douglas (1986) explored how they form and reform around rationales that appear "natural," morally justified, and historically legitimated. The individuals comprising an institution can and do think and act independently, but communication and the achievement of goals are enormously expedited when expressed in terms of these established logics. An institution gains at least some of its power through this appeal of efficiency, providing a ready set of conventions that its constituents may use to organize their experiences and actions.

As institutions, then, San Estevan's households held certain organizational powers to define and justify goals of production, consumption, and reproduction. Although the site's architectural record directly reflects neither the goals nor the precise strategies households adopted to

achieve their ends, it does provide clues to how those strategies were variously expressed. San Estevan's mechanisms of structure incorporation and the residential variants they produced must be considered different sets of conventions that at one time framed different kinds of household experience and action. However, as the San Estevan findings suggest (and as critics of household decision making duly note), the power exercised by households through the organization of their membership is not especially formidable. There are other institutions in society that command far more power. We sense this greater power because it embraces larger numbers of individuals and a broader areal expanse. In Mann's (1986:3) terminology, these "sociospatial" consequences reveal power in its distributive and extensive aspects. At San Estevan, there were institutions of governance, physically anchored in monumental precincts, that had far greater power than any individual or household in the community. Their greater power was made manifest through the ability to limit the organizational options that households could pursue at any particular settlement locality. Yet, it would be a mistake to argue that these larger, more dominant institutions completely overpowered San Estevan's households. They influenced only the range of options available. Individual households were left to work through those options, with variable results and differential success.

The San Estevan findings highlight that society's institutions are not consistently arranged in a kind of nested hierarchy, with the most powerful fully determining the nature and powers of lower institutional orders. A more apt rendering comes from Carol Crumley's (1979, 1995) model of heterarchy, which imbues organization with a dynamism lacking in conceptions of society that are more rigidly hierarchical. Although not discounting the existence of hierarchical relationships of dominance and subordination, heterarchy anticipates an absence

of fixity, modeling those relationships as historically and situationally specific. Society's institutions stand overlapping and "counterpoised" (Crumley 1995:3). They are comprised of diverse and intersecting memberships with divergent and intersecting goals. More powerful institutions, therefore, do not always and necessarily subsume less powerful ones. Very often they function to influence and constrain and can be influenced and constrained in turn. This heterarchical understanding of organizational power helps to resolve the second contradiction of the San Estevan analysis. Household agency may not be obviated but shaped by other, more powerful institutions; and it is only by seeking the limits to household agency that the greater organizational powers of these other institutions become known.

DISCUSSION: SPACE AND "THE SYSTEM"

In this article, I have stressed institutions and their organizational entailments in order to make the point that agency and power are emergent capacities of organization rather than intrinsic characteristics of persons (see Dobres and Robb 2000 and Sweely 1999 for summaries of the range of debate on loci of agency and power). For archaeologists, there are important theoretical and methodological consequences to this position. Theoretically, our ability to model broad social processes is not automatically or directly enhanced by breaking households apart into the individual actions of their constituents. Gillian Hart recommended this tactic as an expedient to constructing politicized views of the household. According to Hart (1992:122), household institutions are best understood to be "dense bundlings of rules, rights, and obligations," all of which can be "subject to contestation" (Hart 1992:122). A politicized household, therefore, is one in which the sources of power for any given member

may at times differ from and compete with those of other members. An essentialist perspective, on the other hand, would construe institutions as neatly bounded, inwardly coherent, and outwardly cohesive. Curiously, it was Robert Netting's (1993) essentialized view of political formations (and not households) that justified his efforts to distance sources of household variation from political influence. Institutions of governance, conceived to possess unitary goals and invariant impacts, could in no way be made to account for the variety of domestic forms over which they presided. Clearly, an essentialist perspective is unrealistic. But given the organizational powers that accrue to their memberships, institutions wield a social force that would be incalculable should we focus too narrowly on the actions of individuals. I suggest, in contrast to Hart, that we consider institutions to coalesce through "dense bundlings" of interaction among people who possess diverse organizational affiliations. It then becomes possible to politicize all institutions—to see the tensions and contradictions of each—without losing sight of the ways in which organizational power motivates institutional action. What makes a politicized view of institutions and, especially, a politicized household both necessary and useful is the realization that society's most powerful institutions are exposed through the actions taken by its least powerful ones. Methodologically, therefore, institutions comprise some of the most salient units of analysis accessible to archaeologists.

The San Estevan findings underscore the need for a more flexible, heterarchically based understanding of the institutional media of action in society. Not surprisingly, with an awareness of the cross-cutting organizational powers of institutions comes the risk of overplaying agency while underconceptualizing the system as a whole. Given the growing emphasis on agency in anthropological thinking, it seems appropriate, if unfashionable, to consider what

might be overlooked should we lose sight of the system. Social systems exhibit powers well in excess of those attributable to institutions. They possess a persistent, almost dogged, durability that resists all efforts to politicize their constituent institutions, to situate those institutions within groups of people, and to imbue those people with organizational powers. Practice theorists have suggested that the persistent, structuring components of any system reside in regimes of knowledge (i.e., institutions) that produce real material inequities among people and groups. I would argue that "the system" has a far greater material presence. Taken individually, institutions achieve substance over and above the visible economic disparities they might produce. Through collective power, institutional action summons conventional modes of representation, and archaeologists should be alert to a potentially wide array of material conventions through which organizational affiliations are expressed and experienced. But, additionally, the organizational powers of institutions have decided spatial consequences (Mann 1986:3). At San Estevan, for example, architectural conventions of structure incorporation signaled group affiliation while simultaneously carving out the spaces of domestic life. As organizations of people, therefore, institutions craft their own spatial realities (cf. Kus 1983). Taken together, however, San Estevan's institutions and their respective powers were realized not simply as discretely bounded landmarks on the terrain, but through the way the entire community was spatially constituted.

Accordingly, the San Estevan analysis offers another vantage on the locus and determinative dynamic of "the system." In a very concrete sense, the systemness of a society resides in the space forged jointly by particular institutions possessed of variable goals and characterized by variable degrees and kinds of organizational power. This spatial presence, perhaps more than knowl-

edge, is what makes societies so resilient in the face of efforts to change them. Knowledge may be readily contested, negotiated, and reformulated. Historically, space has been a far more invidious enemy of change, requiring tangible (and often vast) inputs of labor to alter flows of people and their knowledge and resources (Harvey 1990). Space, therefore, has a duality all its own, part enduring structure and part organizational medium (Soja 1985). It is in this latter capacity that we can refer to space as a critical component of "organizational process," a phrase used by Eric Wolf (1990:591) to communicate the power of the system as a whole.

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