Ethnoarchaeology: Households and Communities

What is this class about?
Ethnoarchaeology combines ethnographic fieldwork with archaeological research questions. It can take many forms, but common to most of them is an attention to material culture of living groups of people to better understand material remains from archaeological contexts. Thus one of its ultimate goals is a better understanding of human lives in the past.

We are using the framework of social definitions of living spaces – households and communities. This will aid our appreciation of the diversity of their definitions and how that is materialized, and will provide us with a spatial scope that brings together many forms of archaeological evidence.

How is this class structured?
This graduate seminar is focused on reading and discussion. There are some shared readings and some readings unique to each student based on their special interests (for example, an interest in a particular type of material remains, or a particular type of analysis, or a particular archaeological time and place, or a particular type of question about human behavior). We will integrate these various lines of enquiry and various types of material culture in our discussions.

Each student will be building towards a final paper and presentation on their focal topic, written in the style of a literature review (what is the history and current status of published research on this focused topic; how have interpretative goals and analytic approaches changed over time and why; what has proven useful; what future trends seem likely or arguably desirable). Ideally this can then be folded into a chapter in a thesis or dissertation, or serve as the starting point for the eventual goal of a publishable literature review.

What will be read?
Our shared readings will be ethnoarchaeological publications, with a mix of past literature reviews and focused case studies, of journal articles and books, and of old and new. Some of these focus on what has been done with a particular material type, for example ceramics or lithics or structural remains. Some focus on particular analytic techniques for defining where within a structure or compound different activities took place, for example chemical analysis of soils and identification of micro-debris. Some focus on aspects of behavior, for example intersections of social systems and production and distribution of goods, or material expressions of ritual behaviors and beliefs.

Most (or all, if the library responds positively the purchase request) of the shared readings will be available at no cost, either in PDF form on our D2L site or as e-book options via our library.

Learning Goals?
Overall, the course is designed to explore what resources there are for those interested in developing a better understanding of the diverse contributions that ethnoarchaeological research has made or could make, and/or connecting ethnoarchaeology to their archaeological research interests.

As always, we will also focus on practicing and improving communication skills, both written and oral.