A Child’s House: Social Memory, Identity, and the Construction of Childhood in Early Postclassic Mexican Households

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ABSTRACT Despite the recent attention given to the archaeology of childhood, households continue to be treated by archaeologists as the product of adult behavior and activities. Yet children shaped the decisions and motivations of adults and influenced the structure and organization of daily activities and household space. Further, children’s material culture serves to both create and disrupt social norms and daily life, making children essential to understanding broader mechanisms of change and continuity. Thus, archaeologists should reconceptualize houses as places of children. This research brings together multiple lines of evidence from the Early Postclassic site of Xaltocan, Mexico, including ethnohistory, burials, and figurines to reconstruct the social roles and identities of children and to problematize our understanding of households. I argue that thinking of houses as places of children enables us to see that children were essential to daily practice, the construction and transmission of social identity, and household economic success.

Keywords: childhood, households, social memory, Central Mexico

Despite the recent growth of literature on children and childhood, households are typically treated by archaeologists as the product of adult behavior, activities, and motivations. Although the archaeology of childhood has flourished with several recent volumes dedicated to the study of children (Ardren and Hutson 2006; Baxter 2005a, 2005b; Kamp 2002a; Sofaer Derevenski 2000), non-child-focused research still omits children from models and interpretations. Household archaeology is one field of study that could benefit from the insight gained from research on children. Children most likely made up the majority of household inhabitants and were at least partially responsible for the formation of archaeological deposits in household contexts (Hammond and Hammond 1981). Moreover, children no doubt influenced the decisions, goals, motivations, and choices of the adults living with them. Yet, children are often seen as marginal to, if not completely omitted from, studies of households (Ardren and Hutson 2006; Sofaer Derevenski 1994). The goal of this article is to put children back into houses by thinking about the roles, meanings, and activities of children in the past.

In this article, I do not simply argue that children are important and worthy of study but that we fundamentally cannot study households without looking at children. Households are composed of both adults and children, and an analysis that only considers the activities and strategies of adults in the absence of children generates an image of a fictitious adult-centered world. Archaeologists primarily conceptualize houses as places of production and consumption, ritual activity, and social and political interaction; however, houses were also places where adults raised children, where children grew and were socialized, and where children socialized adults. Children were not just a part of households; they were omnipresent in most aspects of daily life. They shaped the decisions and motivations of adults and influenced the structure and organization of daily activities and household space. Furthermore, children’s material culture is hardly inconsequential; rather, it serves to both create and disrupt social norms and daily life, making children central to understanding broader mechanisms of change and continuity. Thus, by ignoring children we can only come up with incomplete, if not flawed, understandings of archaeological data (Baxter 2008).

Studies focusing on childhood have been instrumental to raising awareness of children, yet we must take childhood and household archaeology a step further. Child-focused
studies tend to analyze archaeological data first as if it were created by abstract forces and then subsequently consider how children were present or relevant, with an inherent assumption that material culture is primarily the product and domain of adults to be occasionally accessed by children. Rather than simply “add children then stir,” we need to reconceptualize houses as places of children (see Figure 1).^1^ In seeing houses as “places of children,” we avoid treating households as entities that operated in a childless vacuum and gain a better understanding of not only what households did in the past but also why they did it. Thus, archaeologists must consider both who used the objects that they recover and who created archaeological deposits. In this article, I integrate children and their material culture not as an afterthought but, rather, as fundamental parts to understanding how households functioned as a whole.

Using ethnohistoric and archaeological data, I investigate the social roles and identities of children in Early-Middle Postclassic (C.E. 950–1350) Xaltocan to understand how the lifecycle was conceptualized and understood. Further, I analyze infant burials and find that they are central to understanding the construction of social identity and production of memory in households. Next, I consider objects that were used and made by children, in particular miniature vessels and figurines, to understand processes of socialization, identity, and social change. Lastly, I look at the role of children in the formation of the archaeological record by considering the distribution and deposition of figurines. I demonstrate that thinking of houses as places of children enables us to see that children were essential to daily practice, constructions of identity, and household economic success.

TOWARD AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

The archaeology of childhood is an outgrowth of the anthropology of children (Allison and Prout 1990; Lancy 2008; Montgomery 2008; Schwartzman 2001) and gender archaeology, created in answer to the argument that archaeological research took an inherently androcentric perspective that excluded women and children (Baker 1997; Baxter 2005a; Lillehammer 2000; Rothschild 2002; Soffaer Derevenski 1997). As Mary Baker writes, “We treat as fact the assumption that the material we find was used by men,
we have faith that men were there, while women must be found” (Baker 1997:188)— and the same goes for children as well. Although many insightful studies on childhood have focused on “finding” children in the archaeological record, the archaeology of childhood should not just be about identifying children; it should also challenge our assumptions and preconceptions so that we do not unconsciously or consciously treat children as irrelevant or inconsequential to our interpretations of the past. The ultimate goal then of the archaeology of childhood should not be simply to find children in the past but, rather, for them to already be a part of our analyses.

Studies of childhood have been critical to identifying broader patterns of cultural and social change and continuity (Baxter 2005a; Lillehammer 1989). The process of socializing children is important for not only the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next but also as a mechanism for social change. As Jane Eva Baxter argues, “Children are not passive recipients of adult social input, but are themselves active social agents who interpret, select, and appropriate ideas and behaviors in particular ways” (2005a:32). Although cultural innovation is frequently attributed to adults, such change is often instigated by children. Archaeological and ethnographic research has found that when child producers of textiles and pottery have minimal supervision, they are innovators of stylistic change and diversity (Greenfield 2000; Smith 2005). When production is heavily regulated by adults, stylistic conservatism is more likely to occur (Greenfield 2000). Therefore, in contrast to assumptions that cultural innovation is largely the product of adult agency, we should turn our attention to children when evaluating models of social and cultural change.

Children’s material culture provides an excellent opportunity for archaeologists to understand broader patterns of socialization and change. Play is a universal aspect of childhood (Schwartzman 1978); consequently, there should be material manifestations of children’s play in the archaeological record (Baxter 2005a; Kamp 2001b). Artifacts made specifically for children by adults, such as toys, may represent attempts by adults to impose social norms of behavior on children (Wilkie 2000). Ethnographic studies have found that children’s play often mimics adult roles and daily tasks (Bugarin 2006; Keith 2005; Park 2005; Schwartzman 1978). However, as discussed by Laurie Wilkie, “Children redesign toys through the ways that they are used, ignore toys that do not suit them, and create toys from non-toy objects” (2000:102). Helen Schwartzman additionally warns, “Even though children’s play may reproduce features of adult roles and activities, the intent may have been to mock, make fun of or even challenge social order. . . . It is important to be aware of the satirizing as well as socializing possibilities of play” (2005:127). Consequently, the recovery of children’s material culture from archaeological contexts represents at least two levels of social meaning: that intended by parents to instill onto their children and that ultimately extracted and redefined by children themselves.

**CHILDHOOD IN ANCIENT MEXICO**

Much of our current understanding of childhood in ancient Mexico is based on colonial-period documents. In the Primeros Memoriales, Bermadino de Sahagún (1997:252) defined stages of childhood in ancient Mexico including the “small child” (makes mud balls and cries out), “child” (does not yet understand), “youth” (cuts wood) or “maiden” (spins and weaves), “grown youth” (master of youths) or “grown maiden” (spins but does not grind maize), and “grown youth of marriageable age” (cultivates the soil) or “young marriageable maiden” (grinds corn and prepares food), indicating that while older children were productive members of society, they were not immediately considered to be of marriageable age. He further outlines divisions of childhood in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–82, bk. 10:12), including “baby” (suckling or within the womb), “infant” (undefined), “little child” (less than five or six years old), “child” (of five or six years old), “boy” (undefined), and “youth/maiden” (undefined). The “infant” and “small child” were both depicted as naked, while the “small boy” was wearing clothing similar to that of an adult (see Figure 2), emphasizing social distinctions between younger and older children. Rosemary Joyce (2000a) notes that formal lifecycle rituals took place at birth, age four, and again around age 13, marking transitions in life stages. She identifies three important phases of childhood including infancy (birth through age three or four), childhood (age four through eight where training in adult tasks began), and young adult (beginning around age 13). Documents therefore suggest that the Aztecs divided childhood into several phases, minimally infancy, childhood, and adolescence, with the likelihood that even more divisions were culturally defined.

Babies were greatly loved, coveted, and cared for in Aztec society (Durán 1971:112; Shein 1992). When babies were born, they were referred to as “precious necklace, precious feather, precious greenstone, precious bracelet, precious turquoise” (Sahagún 1950–82, bk. 6:176). Jill Leslie McKeever Furst (1995) argues that precious stones and...
feathers were equated with the *tonalli* (soul or life force) of gods (Sahagún 1950–82, bk. 11:228); hence, Sahagún’s noble informants may have been linking their infants to auspicious tonallis by referencing these highly valued materials. Alternatively, Joyce (2000a) argues that infants were described as raw materials because they were undefined and needed to be worked into special forms by adults. Yet, in the subsequent passage Sahagún refers to infants as “their [ancestors’] chip, their flake,” suggesting that infants were not undefined but rather were physical embodiments of the ancestors. Modern Nahua similarly provide infants the names of grandparents or recently deceased relatives to transfer the essence of that individual (Furst 1995).

The Aztecs believed that the souls of dead infants did not go to the land of the dead but rather to a separate location in the afterworld, Chichihualcuahuilco, where they could be nursed by a tree of breasts while they waited to be reborn (López Austin 1988; Sahagún 1997). According to Alfredo López Austin, the death of breastfeeding babies was “nothing but a return to heaven, the expectation of another opportunity to return to earth’s surface. They would again be placed in maternal wombs” (1988:314). The Aztecs believed that the gods placed the tonalli into the fetus when it dropped in the womb (Furst 1995). Thus, rather than being blank slates on which to be written by adults, infants possessed a tonalli before birth and represented the passage of important tonalli across generations.

The Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1992) provides an informative summary of children’s activities and contributions to household labor from ages three through 15 in ancient Mexico. According to the Codex Mendoza, small children mostly received instruction and participated in small tasks such as gathering firewood from ages three through five. At age six, children were given small chores and became more actively involved in craft production, for example, girls practiced spinning thread. By ages 13 and 14, children were fully productive members of the household, with boys fishing in the lagoons and girls weaving cloth and grinding corn for tortillas. Lastly, the Codex Mendoza depicts 15-year-old boys heading to schools for either religious or warfare training and 15-year-old girls getting married (Berdan and Anawalt 1992). Although the Codex Mendoza represents children's roles as strictly gendered, Sahagún notes that tasks could overlap: “Great care was taken to see that the children, girls or boys, swept the courtyards of their homes” (Sahagún 1997:75).

According to Cecilia Klein and Naoli Victoria Lona (2009:367), Aztec commoner religious beliefs were primarily concerned with “health, reproductive fertility, and nourishment of families and communities,” especially the protection of children. Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón describes a wide range of rituals related to children. He notes, “All that is needed to introduce a million superstitions among the Indians is for children to get sick” (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984:161). Separate rituals existed for curing children and adults, and special healers were called to cure children. The Feast for the Little Dead described by Durán (1971:441–443) commemorated dead children and sought to protect living children from death. Figurines, commonly interpreted as objects used in household ritual, were likely used as talismans in childbirth and as protection from disease (Cyphers Guillén 1993; Klein and Victoria Lona 2009).

As cultural definitions of childhood vary across economic and social groups, we cannot assume that understandings of childhood based on colonial documents are universally applicable across central Mexico or throughout time. Biases introduced directly by Spanish authors or indirectly from social reorganization caused by Spanish conquest may also influence our interpretations of prehispanic childhood. Thus, archaeology is required to reconstruct the meanings of childhood in Early Postclassic Mexico.

Not all archaeologists have ignored the role of children in ancient Mexico. Michael Lind (1987) suggests that crudely made miniature vessels found in household contexts throughout the Nochixtlan Valley functioned as toys and were used in the enculturation of Mixtec girls. The miniature vessels are present in large quantities in household middens and replicate large ceramic vessels used in food preparation and crude attempts at replicating high status wares (Lind 1987). Twentieth-century Mixtec children played with miniature ceramic vessels similar to those found archaeologically (Romney and Romney 1963; see Figure 3). Marcus Winter (2005) similarly suggests that figurines from ancient Oaxaca were used by children as toys. Closer to Xalotocan, Geoffrey McCafferty and Sharisse McCafferty (2006) analyzed children’s burials at Cholula. They found that whistles, flutes, ceramic balls, and figurines were associated with children’s burials, suggesting that these items were toys. Although there were some similarities in the burial program of adults and children at Cholula, important distinctions tell us that children were not simply miniature

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**FIGURE 3.** Children playing house with miniature vessels, Juxtlahuaca. (Reproduced from Romney and Romney 1963)
adults but had unique identities and roles that merit further investigation.

**POSTCLASSIC XALTOCAN: AN ISLAND CAPITAL**

In this article, I explore the social roles of children and meanings of childhood by examining burials and figurines from commoner households in Xaltocan, Mexico. The site of Xaltocan is located in the northern Valley of Mexico (see Figure 4) and was a man-made island situated in the middle of a shallow, brackish lake (Brumfiel 2005). It was first settled at the beginning of the Early Postclassic (C.E. 900–1150), and by the Middle Postclassic (C.E. 1150–1350) Xaltocan became an important imperial center that collected tribute from nearby villages (Brumfiel 2005; Gibson 1964). Xaltocan was reportedly the capital of the Otomi; however, it was likely a multiethnic community, as was typical of central Mexico (Brumfiel 1994). In the mid–13th century, Xaltocan entered a war with Cuauhtitlan and was defeated in 1395 (Bierhorst 1992; Gibson 1964). Xaltocan was conquered again in 1428 by the Aztecs who resettled tribute-paying peasants and installed a military ruler (Hicks 1994). Archaeological research at Xaltocan has demonstrated that the site is associated with Aztec material culture and likely shared cultural attributes with the Aztecs, although it also had distinctive practices and ideologies (Brumfiel 2005).

Xaltocan’s success was in part because of the implementation of multiple resource strategies employed by households. Crops were grown in nearby chinampa (raised) fields, and within the home domestic-based production of tools, food products, cloth, and ceramics required a large and diverse pool of labor (De Lucia 2007). Children are less likely to contribute significantly when it is necessary to travel long distances to obtain resources (Kamp 2002b); however, in Xaltocan, fields were nearby, the lake provided immediate access to resources, and production took place in homes. Children could have easily helped their parents tend fields, prepare food, and gather the small animals, fish, and insects that lived in the brackish lakes surrounding Xaltocan. Children could have also helped with household tasks such as taking care of younger siblings, spinning, or helping to
prepare food. Thus, the close proximity of daily chores to the home in Xaltocan would have made children’s labor efficient and central to the household economy.

The focus of this study, Structure 1, was a domestic structure inhabited by multiple households near the center of modern-day Xaltocan. It had two clearly defined construction stages with several additional remodeling events taking place throughout its occupational history. Radiocarbon dates from various levels place occupation from the early 12th through 13th centuries C.E., or the Early to Middle Postclassic periods, which were associated with Aztec I pottery and correspond with Xaltocan’s period of autonomy and economic success. Given the range of radiocarbon dates and sequence of remodeling events, this structure was likely continuously occupied by at least three to four generations of families.

CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD IN THE MORTUARY CONTEXT

To document culturally defined constructions of childhood in Xaltocan, I turn to burial data. Seven primary burials of infants and young children less than four years of age (see Table 1) were recovered from Structure 1 under room floors and correspond to various occupation levels. Other Early Postclassic houses excavated across the site include “Casa G” with three infant burials, “Casa Zoc” with five infant burials, and “Casa Y” with one infant burial (Brumfiel 2007a). No adult remains have ever been recovered from domestic structures in pre-Aztec Xaltocan; however, a Middle Postclassic (C.E. 1150–1350) cemetery containing seven adults and six children under five years old was partially excavated on the periphery of the site (De Lucia and Brumfiel 2004). The cemetery was not associated with a structure, suggesting that adults were buried in discrete cemeteries in pre-Aztec Xaltocan. Young children could be buried in residential structures or in cemeteries; however, children older than five have not been recovered from any primary contexts. The cemetery burials were all primary interments and were in flexed, extended, or seated positions. All of the adults had offerings including decorated pottery and tools such as spindle whorls, needles, and obsidian blades. Three females were associated with spindle whorls and one with a bone needle, suggesting that these tools were markers of female identity in both life and death (Brumfiel 2007b; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). However, gender identity may have become less significant with age as two elderly females (over 50 years of age) had the most elaborate offerings but were the only women without gender-specific tools (De Lucia and Brumfiel 2004).

All subadult skeletons recovered from house floors in Xaltocan were less than four years of age, the age when children were typically weaned (Motolinia 1971:308). The

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### TABLE 1. Phase 1 Burials from Structure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial #</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Locus</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Side</th>
<th>Artifacts</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cuarto 7</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6 to 9 months</td>
<td>Southwest corner of room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cuarto 6</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Crossed arms and legs</td>
<td>Supine</td>
<td>3 miniature bowls, 2 miniature jars, 1 miniature basin, 1 projectile point</td>
<td>12 to 18 months</td>
<td>Southwest corner of room, excavated into wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cuarto 6</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6 to 9 months</td>
<td>Southwest corner of room, excavated into wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cuarto 6</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Seated</td>
<td>White stone lip plug, 2 stone balls</td>
<td>1 year ± 4 months</td>
<td>Southwest corner of room, excavated into wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cuarto 6</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>1 mini bowl, 1 sherd disk</td>
<td>2 years ± 8 months</td>
<td>Southwest corner of room, excavated into wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Cuarto 8</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>1 mini jar, 1 vessel with spout</td>
<td>3 years ± 12 months</td>
<td>Along southern wall of room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Locus 3</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Flexed</td>
<td>Seated</td>
<td>2 miniature bowls</td>
<td>3–4 years</td>
<td>Southwest corner of room, excavated into wall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
where living survivors inscribed the dead into social memory argues, “Burials can be viewed as particularly charged sites derived house floors simply because it was convenient. As Joyce burials. However, it is unlikely that children were buried un-
of infant burials is often overlooked in the absence of adult
Mexico and throughout Mesoamerica, yet the significance
Social Memory and Household Reproduction

TABLE 2. All Subadult Burials from Xaltocan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artifacts</th>
<th>No artifacts</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
<td>(n)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year:</td>
<td>1 9%</td>
<td>10 91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–6 years:</td>
<td>7 70%</td>
<td>3 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>8 80%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

spatial segregation of children under four might reflect the fact that the Aztecs believed that unweaned children went to a separate location in the afterworld. Although López Austin (1988) argues that unweaned children were free from mortality because they had not yet ingested corn, stable-isotope studies from Xaltocan reveal that young children consumed maize before they were fully weaned (Danforth 2000). Differential burial treatment for unweaned children tells us that the key defining feature of this lifecycle transition was likely weaning rather than the introduction of maize.

Although infants and toddlers shared a common lifecycle stage as suggested by their common burial under house floors, burial practices suggest that these groups were culturally distinguished in pre-Aztec Xaltocan. In Structure 1, infants under one year of age lack offerings, while all of the children one year and older were provided with offerings. Of the 21 subadult burials of known age recovered from excavations across Xaltocan, 91 percent of infants under one year lacked grave goods, while 70 percent of children over one year had grave goods (see Table 2). This pattern is similar to Cholula (McCafferty and McCafferty 2006), where infants under one year of age were less likely to be associated with grave goods. The lack of offerings in the youngest infants could reflect the fact that young babies would not have been using material culture and, consequently, it was not incorporated into the mortuary context. Alternatively, the inclusion of offerings for children over one year of age might reflect an entrance into a new life stage. Children reach major milestones around 12 months including walking, talking, and greater comprehension of adult language. Although ethnohistory does not emphasize a cultural division at 12 months, burial data reveal that there were at least three divisions of early childhood in Postclassic Mexico: infancy (0–1 year), toddlerhood (1–4 years), and childhood (older than four years, buried separately).

Social Memory and Household Reproduction

Infants are commonly buried under house floors in central Mexico and throughout Mesoamerica, yet the significance of infant burials is often overlooked in the absence of adult burials. However, it is unlikely that children were buried under house floors simply because it was convenient. As Joyce argues, “Burials can be viewed as particularly charged sites where living survivors inscribed the dead into social memory in particular ways, as part of an ongoing process of spinning webs of social relations between themselves and others” (2001:13). Burying infants and young children under house floors would allow for a continued relationship between the souls of the dead and living household members (Gillespie 2002). Dead children were kept nearby as a means of curating the soul and, in the case of infants, as a means of ensuring that they would return as new babies, thus guaranteeing the durability of the household across future generations.

Children were not only buried under house floors but also incorporated into house walls. Five of the seven burials from Structure 1 were excavated directly into adobe walls with niches carved out of the walls to accommodate the graves. This practice was also identified in “Casa G,” “Casa Y,” and “Casa Zoc.” Ethnographically, physical structures are important to the construction and maintenance of social identities in Mesoamerica (Furst 1995; Gillespie 2002; Sandstrom 2000). The association of the deceased and their spirits with house walls symbolically linked the individual with the household, creating an additional means of constructing group identity. According to Susan Gillespie (2002), the association of burials with a dwelling denotes group regeneration and immortality. Thus, the purposeful incorporation of infants into the architecture of the house eternally anchored them to the household (the members of which still resided between those same walls) and made infants essential to the social memory, unity, and continuity of the social group.

Archaeological evidence further suggests that houses in Early Postclassic Xaltocan were sites for the construction of social memory and group continuity. When adobe houses needed to be rebuilt, new walls were constructed directly on top of old ones. As families grew and contracted over generations, walls were added or removed as necessary, but the central walls of the house, overall design pattern, and general orientation were maintained throughout the entire occupational history of the structure. Ian Kuijt (2001) argues that stability in physical house form throughout remodeling events in Near Eastern Neolithic houses served as a means to develop collective memory across generations. Thus, while the reutilization of walls through time might be partially functional in nature, the continued occupation of the same space through generations would nevertheless create a social memory and provide the inhabitants with a sense of social continuity.

In addition, socially valued objects were incorporated into the construction of the house. For example, a single stone block with plaster on one face was incorporated into a central adobe wall. As there is no known stone architecture in Xaltocan dating to this period, it seems that the block was taken from monumental architecture elsewhere and integrated into the physical structure of the house. The renovation of another wall was associated with a cache of tools including five decorated spindle whorls, a spinning bowl, and a pestle (Brumfiel 2007a). These objects...
may have been heirlooms that functioned to actively create household identity and social memory (Joyce 2000b). According to Julia Hendon (2000), burials and caches both serve to inscribe a space with meaning and are important to the creation of social memory by groups. Thus, children and heirlooms interred in house walls at Xaltocan would have played an important role in the negotiation of identity, household reproduction, and transmission of social memory across generations.

The importance of infants and children to the construction of social memory is further evidenced archaeologically by the reuse over time of the southwest corner of Cuarto 6 for the burial of infants. Four infant burials were recovered from this one corner, none of which were contemporaneous, which we know because the pits intruded into one another or were overlapping. This corner was used over and over again, suggesting that this was a commemorative space and that the infants, the youngest of whom was only six months old, were held dear to the adults that buried them, as great care was taken not to disturb the graves. It is also significant that all of the burials from Structure 1 (but not other structures) were located along the southern walls or in the southwest corners of rooms (see Table 1). The repeated practice of burying children in one corner and the pattern of burying children along southern room walls were practices that worked to create memories or memory work (Mills and Walker 2008) through the continued engagement of the living with the dead, as well as the structure itself, long after the burial event took place. I argue that houses could be seen as living entities and children as central to the transmission of tonalli throughout generations. The burials of children under house floors, into walls, and in other select locations acted to construct social memory as the still-living household members interacted with the structure through the practices of everyday life.

Social Roles and Identities of Children

Children’s grave assemblages in Xaltocan are unique compared to those of adults, telling us that children were not considered mini adults but, rather, had unique social roles and identities in pre-Aztec Mexico. Adults were more likely to be buried with tools (57 percent) while only three out of 26 subadult burials from Xaltocan had tools (11.5 percent). Similarly, McCafferty and McCafferty (2006) found that at Cholula young children were not buried with utilitarian tools. Although socialization occurred early in life with the presentation of gender-specific tools to newborns (Berdan and Anawalt 1992; Durán 1971:124), it appears that gender was not a salient marker of identity among young children in Xaltocan as gender identities and adult social roles were rarely deemed significant to distinguish in death.

Children also had child-specific material culture as suggested by the association of miniature vessels with subadult burials. Four out of five child burials with grave goods from Structure 1 (56 percent of subadult burials with grave goods across the site) contained miniature vessels. In contrast, adults were only buried with full-size ceramic vessels. The association of miniature vessels specifically with child burials suggests that they were associated with children. Commonly interpreted as toys, miniature objects might also represent stages of learning, such as in the case of small ceramics (Kamp 2001a) or tools scaled down to sizes appropriate for use by children (Park 2005). Although at Cholula (McCafferty and McCafferty 2006) miniature vessels were recovered with adult male burials, at Xaltocan miniature vessels were associated exclusively with children, suggesting that variation in burial practices existed within the Valley of Mexico.

Fingerprint analyses and ethnographic analogy have demonstrated cross-culturally that poorly made, crudely decorated miniature vessels are typically produced by children and used as toys (Crown 2002; Kamp 2001a). With the exception of Aztec I Black-on-Orange bowls (discussed below), the miniature vessels incorporated into children’s mortuary contexts tend to be poorly crafted, toylike objects. For example, a miniature basin with bilobed handles recovered from Burial 4 (see Figure 5) was lopsided and decorated with crudely executed, uneven, incised triangles, a motif not found in full-sized pottery. The vessel had wear and tear on the handles and the rim. This burial also had two asymmetrical miniature jars, both with wear on the rims. In addition, Burial 8 had a lopsided miniature jar with sloppily painted red horizontal bands around the body (see Figure 6), another unusual motif for full-sized pots. Similar crudely made miniature vessels and tiny pinch pots have also been recovered from middens. The crude forms, unusual and poorly executed designs, and wear and tear suggest that these miniature vessels were made by children and used as toys. Although infants would have been too young to have made the miniature vessels recovered in their graves, it is possible that siblings or young relatives made these objects and included them with the burial. Thus, contrary to the common assumption that the mortuary context reflects adult ideals and conceptions of childhood (Baxter 2005a:94), it is quite possible that adults were not wholly responsible for the formation of the burial assemblage, as siblings may have also contributed objects that they valued and deemed essential for the afterworld.

Miniature Aztec I Black-on-Orange bowls recovered from children’s burials may have held special ritual significance. These bowls are better crafted than the other miniature vessels described above: they are symmetrical, burnished, and standardized in size, ranging 10 to 11.5 centimeters in diameter (see Figure 7). The designs, while simple, are skillfully executed. These vessels do not appear to have been made by children. Similar miniature Black-on-Orange bowls have also been associated with midden contexts, but they are never associated with adult burials. Three burials from Structure 1 and one burial from Casa Zoc also had miniature Black-on-Orange bowls. The interior decorated bowls all had sun motifs or quadripartite divisions as the central design element. Solar symbolism has been widely associated with sacrifice in Aztec monumental art.
(Matos Moctezuma and Solis 2004); however, in pre-Aztec contexts at Xaltocan, solar symbolism is a common motif found on spindle whorls used by women (Brumfiel 2007b). Elizabeth Brumfiel (2007b) argues that Aztec rulers appropriated solar symbolism from Aztec commoners’ households and that in pre-Aztec contexts solar and quadripartite motifs instead represent a concern with the sun’s cycles, tonalli, and cosmological concepts related to the solar calendar. In the case of infant burials, solar motifs on Black-on-Orange bowls may have been associated with the protection of the newborn’s tonalli (Furst 1995) or a way of guiding its return. However, it is unlikely that the bowls reference sacrifices, as the skeletons lack evidence of trauma yet have many indicators of natural death, including severe nutritional deficiencies, tooth abscesses, and other pathologies. Thus, the inclusion of Black-on-Orange bowls with solar symbolism in child burials may have been one means that adults sought to protect their children in the afterworld or, perhaps, how they coped with the uncertainty and disorder caused by the death of a child.

**FIGURINES AS CHILDREN’S MATERIAL CULTURE**

Although archaeologists remain reluctant to attribute material culture to children, children certainly used material culture. Although rare, figurines, ceramic balls, and miniature vessels are associated exclusively with children’s burials at Xaltocan. The incorporation of these objects into children’s burials by no means precludes their use by adults, but their association exclusively with children suggests that they held meaning specific to childhood. Figurines are the most commonly recovered of the abovementioned artifacts in household contexts; thus, the following discussion will focus on the types and distribution of figurines.

Children likely used or interacted with figurines on a daily basis. At Xaltocan, the only two figurines recovered in burial contexts were associated with infants. Figurines were also associated with children’s burials at Cholula. Further, McCafferty and McCafferty (2006) look at the distributions of figurines in household contexts at Cholula and conclude that they were probably used by children given that they were
found in spaces associated with children, such as porches and outdoor spaces, rather than ceremonial areas, as would be expected if they served ritual functions. Ethnohistorical evidence further indicates that figurines were used by children. Durán (1971:420) notes that children wore necklaces with hanging figurines around their necks to protect them from illness, and Benito María de Moxó (1839:260) notes that ceramic figurines served as toys for children. Ruiz de Alarcón (1984:52) also suggests that figurines were worn by children as adornment. Even figurines that were not intended to be used by children would have been seen by children on a daily basis resting on the household altar or being used in household rituals. Ancient Mexican children would no doubt have been intrigued by these small, colorfully painted, and textured objects. If we consider children as one of the potential recipients of the information portrayed by figurines, we may gain a different understanding of their functions and meanings.

A total of 80 figurines were recovered from Early Postclassic contexts in Structure 1 (see Table 3). Mold-made figurines were the most common type, representing 46 percent ($n = 37$) of figurines. As no molds were recovered from Structure 1, figurines were likely purchased from the market. Of mold-made figurines for which gender could be identified, approximately half are female ($n = 10$) and half are male ($n = 13$). The detail in costume, gender, and social status depicted on mold-made figurines reflected and reproduced broader cultural constructs, ideologies, and social roles. For example, four male figurines represented warriors and others wore distinctive headdresses and costumes depicting social rank or ethnicity; whereas two female figurines held infants and others wore distinctive female dress. Whether or not these figurines were intended to be used by children, adults socialized their children by exposing them to idealized gender roles (warrior vs. mother) as well as ethnic and economic distinctions depicted on figurines.

Eight percent ($n = 6$) of figurines from Structure 1 had perforations that suggested they were worn as pendants, including four female figurines and two masks. Supporting the hypothesis that figurine pendants were used as protective amulets for children (Cyphers Guillén 1993; Klein and Victoria Lona 2009), one of the figurines found with an infant burial at Xaltocan was a pendant in the shape of a bird, probably worn around the neck as it was recovered from under the cranium. Although mold-made figurines represented women and men equally, pendants depicted women and animals but not men. In addition, curated Teotihuacan-style figurines represented 14 percent ($n = 11$) of figurines, and one was also recovered from an infant burial at Xaltocan, directly linking them to children. Interestingly, two of the less common types of figurines (pendant and curated) were recovered from burials while the most common type (molded flat-back) was not. I suggest that the presence of these figurines in children’s burials reflects their particular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Figurine Types from Phase 1 Structure 1</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mold made*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mud man</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curated</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toy figurines</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pendant</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/unknown</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*excluding curated, animal, and perforated.
association with children (for protection or play), rather than happenstance.

We must not rule out the possibility that some figurines were made and used by children specifically as toys. Cross-culturally young children learn how to work with clay by making figurines and miniature vessels used as toys (Ferguson 1992; Kamp 2001a, 2002b; Lopiparo 2006). Kathryn Kamp’s (2002b) fingerprint analysis found that while adults and older children could make full-size ceramic vessels, children as young as four were capable of making figurines. The absence of molds from Structure 1 suggests that mold-made figurines were made elsewhere; however, children could have made crude figurines on site. I divide crude figurines into two categories: “mud men” and “toys.” “Mud men,” as dubbed by Brumfiel and Hodge (1996), represent 14 percent ($n = 11$) of figurines from Structure 1 and are small, crude, unburnished, unpainted, simple anthropomorphic figures (see Figure 8). Typically made from a small wad of clay, they have impressed facial features and buds for legs or arms. They lack clothing except for occasional impressed dots representing ornamentation. Although mud men vary in style, they are recognizable as a type and can be found across Xaltocan and the Valley of Mexico during the Early Postclassic. Crude figurines that I refer to as “toys” vary in form and style—no two are alike. They form a group only in that they are very small, very crude, and look like toys (see Figure 9). Toy figurines ($n = 10$, 12.5 percent) included several miniature pinch pots, a bird, a face, and a miniature censor. The crudeness of these figurines places them within the realm of children’s creative capabilities, and their small size, generally smaller than other types of figurines, would place them comfortably into small hands for play. Further, crude figurines were made from local clays (Overholtzer 2009), suggesting they could have been made by household inhabitants. Thus, if children made and played with figurines, crude figurines are a likely candidate.

Although it is impossible to prove that crude figurines were made or used by children, there is no supporting evidence to indicate that they were made or used by adults, yet this is almost always assumed to be the case. Below I pose an alternative interpretation to standard adult-centric perspectives. Although mold-made figurines highlight social distinctions through variations in costume and depictions of gender roles, crude figurines lack such distinctions. Gender is typically ambiguous, and I suggest that occasional protrusions at the midsection, which are usually interpreted as breasts (Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009), may actually represent arms because they tend to be asymmetrical and legs are formed using similar bulges (see Figure 8b). One “toy” anthropomorphic figurine recovered from Structure 1 does have a simple headdress and ear ornament, but this is the only example. The remaining “toy” figurines are vessels or...
animals. If crude figurines were made by children, they may represent children’s attempts to reject social distinctions and ascribed social roles by creating generic and genderless figures, animals, and vessels. Yet children probably also mimicked the roles of their parents in their play as indicated by the recovery of several miniature pinch pots (n = 8). Thus, multiple levels of communication would be represented by figurines and children’s play including children’s conceptions, and rejections, of social norms and cultural knowledge.

**SPACE AND PLACE OF CHILDHOOD**

We can gain a better understanding of the roles and activities of children by looking for evidence of their play. As figurines and miniatures were likely used by children, the distribution of figurines across household space may lend further insight into children’s activities. Structure 1 provides a unique opportunity to study figurine contexts because it is the first time figurines were recovered from primary floor contexts in Xaltocan. Over 13 floors were excavated in Structure 1, and figurine clusters were recovered from four primary floor contact deposits (see Figure 10). One cluster of four figurines (two mold-made, one curated, one unidentified) was associated with a floor in Cuarto 4, likely a workspace based on the quantity of obsidian and types of ceramics recovered. Several worked ceramic sherds (possibly game pieces or weights used in net hunting) were also associated with this floor. A second cluster of figurines was associated with a floor in Cuarto 7, including one mud man, one miniature pinch pot, and one curated figurine (see Figure 11).

This area appears to have been a space dedicated to weaving activities. The third floor associated with figurines was a patio with a small stone block altar in the center but an absence of other tools. Two figurines, including a mud man and a pendant, were recovered from this floor along an adobe wall that bordered the patio rather than near the altar. Lastly, a cluster of four figurines was associated with a floor in Locus 2, including two miniature vessels, one curated figurine, and a mold-made warrior figurine. Curated figurines, miniature pinch pots, and mold-made figurines each represent 23 percent of the figurines from floor contexts, followed by mud men (15 percent), pendants (8 percent), and unknown (8 percent). Curated figurines and miniature pinch pots are overrepresented in floor contexts whereas mold-made figurines are underrepresented.

Figurines were recovered from most other contexts as well (see Table 4). An interesting cluster of six figurines including four toy figurines (the largest cluster of toy figurines), one curated, and one mold-made figurine was recovered from the fill above a child burial in a small storage room. It is possible that the figurines were intentionally placed on top of the burial as part of the burial ritual. In addition, 28 percent of figurines were recovered from outdoor contexts including lakebed deposits, outdoor workspaces, and a midden. A ritual deposit including many smashed vessels and unusual ritual objects contained 14 percent (n = 11) of the figurines from Structure 1, including mold-made figurines, a mud man, pendants, and a rare temple figurine. The diversity of figurines suggests that many types of figurines could be involved in ritual activities; yet, in contrast to floor contexts, over 45 percent of figurines from the ritual deposit were mold made, only nine percent were toys, and zero were curated. Thus, while curated and crude figurines are overrepresented in floor contexts and mold-made figurines are underrepresented, the reverse is true in ritual contexts. The remaining figurines from Structure 1 were recovered from room fill and thus provide little contextual information. The only location that completely lacked figurines was a large outdoor hearth or kiln, despite having a high density of ceramics. Therefore, the distribution of figurines suggests a difference in the functions of figurine types.

Archaeologists have found that children tend to play in specific locales, and consequently children’s artifacts accumulate in locations of play (Baxter 2005b). This might explain why figurines on floors are either found in multiples or not at all. The association of curated figurines and crude toys in two out of four separate floor contexts, along with their underrepresentation in ritual contexts, supports the hypothesis that these figurines were used by children. If figurines were strictly for ritual use, we would expect to find them concentrated in ceremonial locations such as in ritual deposits or near the altar. Although we do find figurines in ritual areas, they are also recovered outdoors, from middens, and on room floors. The lack of figurines in hazardous areas such as the hearth might suggest that children avoided or were forbidden from dangerous locations,
FIGURE 10. Plan map of Structure 1 showing the locations of figurines recovered from floor contexts.
FIGURE 11. Cluster of figurines associated with floor context, Cuarto 7, including a mud man, curated figurine, and miniature pinch pot.

while the presence of figurines in workspaces might reflect the observation or participation by children in production activities. Thus, the distribution of figurines better supports a hypothesis of children’s play activities than one of strictly ceremonial activities. To conclude, the data from Structure 1 suggest that figurines served diverse purposes, were used in multiple contexts, and produce a pattern of concentrations reminiscent of successive episodes of children’s activities.

CONCLUSIONS
The study of children and their material culture provides a fundamentally different understanding of the past than can be obtained from adult-centered perspectives. Following the approach of archaeologists such as Baxter (2005a) and Baker (1997), I view the study of childhood as central to understanding broader mechanisms of continuity and change and argue that we must challenge our assumptions so that we do not treat children as inconsequential to our interpretations of the past. A close analysis of children’s burials from Xaltocan revealed that social constructions of childhood based on ethnohistory alone can be problematic. Distinctions in children’s burials during infancy, toddlerhood, and later childhood suggest that these were culturally recognized life stages. Although infants tended to lack grave goods, toddlers were frequently buried with offerings. Moreover, although documents indicate that gender identities were important from birth, burials from Xaltocan suggest that gender was not a salient marker of identity among young children. Although adults were commonly buried with gender specific tools such as spindle whorls, children were instead buried with child-specific objects suggesting that in pre-Aztec Xaltocan children were not perceived as miniature adults; rather, children had unique identities and social roles in society.

Children’s burials at Xaltocan also provide insight into mechanisms of social reproduction, continuity, and social memory among households that might otherwise be imperceptible to archaeologists. Infant burials under house floors were essential to the transmission of tonalli across generations and encouraged the return of souls, thereby furthering the durability of the household across future generations. Child burials may have been an occasion for the formation of household identities as unique practices were employed in individual households, and the incorporation of children into house walls linked household members to the physical structure of the house. Adults used the death of a child as an occasion for memory work by interring children into walls, under floors, and in select locations that were remembered by living household inhabitants. Houses were thus transformed into living entities that worked to construct and reconstruct social identities across generations.

The presence of miniature vessels in infant burials indicates that we need to rethink our preconceptions about household ritual. Miniature vessels were crudely formed and decorated, depicted unique motifs, and were exclusively associated with children’s burials—traits indicating they were more likely made and used by children than adults. In

TABLE 4. Structure 1 Figurine Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figurine location</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor contexts</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room fill</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room floors</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patio floor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual deposit</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (walls, pits, etc.)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearth/kiln</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Phase 1 figurines  80  100%
contrast, miniature Black-on-Orange bowls reproduce motifs found on spindle whorls and full-size vessels, likely representing the contributions of adults. Archaeological models often focus on ritual as a mechanism for power building or forging social ties among adults but rarely consider the roles of children or more personal motivations such as protecting one’s family and strengthening corporate ties. If children participated in mortuary rituals, then we must consider mortuary ritual to represent the contributions of all household members.

Finally, by challenging assumptions that figurines and miniature vessels must have been made and used by adults, we can gain an alternative understanding of the meaning and function of this important data set commonly recovered from household contexts in ancient Mexico. The analysis of the types and distribution of figurines from Structure 1 demonstrates that certain types of figurines (curated and crude) were likely used and deposited by children during play activities. In contrast to mold-made figurines, crude figurines are more likely to represent gender-neutral figures, animals, and vessels; rarely do they depict social roles or status. Hence, figurines used by children may represent children’s attempts to create and negotiate their own social roles and identities. Similarly, the unusual design motifs on miniature vessels indicate that adults did not heavily regulate the production of small vessels by children, providing pre-Aztec children with an opportunity for stylistic and cultural innovation and independence. Changing stylistic motifs and regional variation of pottery through time may very well be a consequence of such experimentation. Children’s play thus represented the transmission of cultural norms, as well as the interpretation, rejection, and redefinition of adult cultural constructs and social definitions. To regard artifacts such as figurines as the material culture of children in no way makes them less relevant to studies of broader social and cultural systems. One needs only to browse the local toy store to see how children and their playthings reflect, create, reproduce, and reinvent the very social structures and ideologies that are of interest to archaeologists (Pearson and Mullins 1999; Wilkie 2000).

In sum, thinking of households as places of children highlights that central Mexican households were not just economic and political systems seeking to maximize profits but also social systems focused on promoting household health and security, minimizing risk, raising and socializing children, and marking and preserving household identity. Children were essential to the functioning and continuity of the household. In life, children were vital to household economic production and thereby represented the promise of future economic success. In death, children were fundamental to household reproduction and social continuity. More importantly, by asking “who used these artifacts?” and “how did they get here?” we are forced to consider children’s contributions and, consequently, avoid adult-centered interpretations in our analyses. When we begin to look at artifacts and archaeological deposits as the products of individuals, rather than abstract forces, we find that children both used and created material culture, as is reflected in many of the archaeological deposits typically assumed to be the products of adult behavior. Any parent knows the affect that children have on the distribution and deposition of material culture: children are messy and more likely to drop, break, or lose objects than adults. Thus, an archaeology of households that does not consider children cannot really be an archaeology of households at all.

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NOTES

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Lastly, thanks to my daughter, Sophia, for enabling me to see households in an entirely new light.

1. Households clearly went through developmental cycles and would not have always had children; however, the common occurrence of infant burials under house floors at Xaltocan tells us that children were present in most houses most of the time.

2. Nahuatl terms reveal that for the youngest ages, gender was distinguished by the gender of the parent, while from 12 and up it was distinguished by the gender of the child. For example, pilontli (man’s of woman’s baby), conetontli (woman’s baby); pilzintli (man’s of woman’s child), conetzintli (woman’s child); telpuchiti (youth), ichpuchiti (maiden; see Sahagún 1997).

3. Motolinia states, “Dabanles cuatro años leche ... En destetando los niños, o a los cinco años” [They gave them milk until four years...In weaning the children, or until five years old] (1971:308).

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Löfek, Michael  

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