

# The Prehistory of Home

Our trowels scrape through time. A dozen of us—archaeologists, students, and workmen—are excavating in far northern Peru. Digging through hard layers of ash-black clay and past thick jumbles of ancient oyster shells, we carefully scoop up the loosened midden and sieve it through dry shaker screens, trapping durable potsherds and glinting flakes of obsidian. We watch for traces of archaic structures: postholes from long-gone timbers, subtle variations in soil color and texture, a slightly more compacted surface. We speak in low voices as we dig, afraid that any distraction will cause us to miss the ancient traces of home.

Various animals build shelters, but only humans build homes. Humans build dwellings in different environments, constructed with diverse materials and in distinct forms, and associated with nuanced meanings. We have done this for millennia.

No other species lives in such a variety of shelters. Despite the diversity of the constructions that other animals create—the pendulous baskets of oriole nests, the intricate dens of prairie dogs, or the decorated nests of bowerbirds—humans construct the broadest array of dwellings on Earth.

Our words for “dwelling” point to this diversity:

Palace, hovel, hogan, ranch house, croft.

Tipi, chalet, duplex, kraal.

Igloo, bungalow, billet, cabin.

Cottage, crannog, adobe, manor.

Wickiup, villa, lean-to, abbey.

Hacienda, barrack, lodge, shanty.

Pithouse, penthouse, pueblo, condo.

In the Kalahari Desert, !Kung San women construct veldt-brush windbreaks for their families in less than an hour, a dwelling abandoned in a few days when the foraging band moves on.

Among the Toraja of Sulawesi, the saddleback roof and sweeping facades of noble “origin houses” (*tongkonan*) link generations of kinfolk and spatially anchor rituals shared by members of “house societies.”

And in Beverly Hills, the home of the late television producer Aaron Spelling was put up for sale in March 2009 and finally sold in July 2011 for a discounted price of \$85 million to the 22-year-old British heiress, Petra Ecclestone. Generally considered the largest home in Los Angeles County, the 56,500-square-foot, 123-room mansion on six acres includes such amenities as four wet-bars, a screening room, a bowling alley, a gift-wrapping room, parking for one hundred cars, and a 17,000-square-foot attic containing a beauty salon and a barbershop. Built in a “French chateau style,” the Spelling house is nonetheless only one-fourth the size of the Palace of Versailles.

All these places are homes.

The social anthropologist Timothy Ingold has written about the difference between “animal architecture” and our buildings. Comparing, as an example, beaver lodges to human dwellings, Ingold notes that “wherever they are, beavers construct the same kinds of lodges. . . . Human beings, by contrast, build houses of very diverse kinds, and although certain house forms have persisted for long periods, there is unequivocal evidence that these forms have also undergone significant historical change.” As the instinctual expression of the beaver’s evolutionary legacy, “the beaver is no more the designer of the lodge than is the mollusk the designer of its shell. . . . Human beings, on the other hand, are the authors of their own designs, constructed through a self-conscious decision process—an intentional selection of ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

The human creation of home—as dwelling, as social unit, as metaphor—is extraordinarily varied; every home is a constructed compromise. As the architectural historian Joseph Rykwert has written, “Unlike even the most elaborate animal construction, human building involves decision and choice, always and inevitably; it therefore involves a project.”<sup>2</sup>

Such projects counterpoise decisions about different issues—cost, material constraints, environmental stresses, functions, style, social statuses, and symbolic contents, among others—and then express a specific resolution of those issues in architectural form. This is true of all buildings, whenever and wherever humans have constructed them.

And this is particularly true of homes. In addition to their basic and fundamental function of providing shelter from natural elements, dwellings are powerful and complex concentrates of human existence. More than passive backdrops to human actions, our dwellings reflect and shape our lives. Dwellings are powerful condensers of meanings, second only to the human body as a model for thinking about the world. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” and those webs thickly drape our homes.<sup>3</sup>

This is all relatively obvious: humans build and occupy a diversity of dwellings, those constructions require assessing multiple factors, and dwellings are a pivotal place around which humans construct cultural meanings. Yet, two facts make these relatively noncontentious propositions challenging.

First, the specific constellations of dimensions and meanings encoded by dwellings are extraordinarily variable and complex. And this truth was made abundantly clear to me during a long and confused conversation with a campesino in far northern Peru.

Since 1996 I have conducted archaeological investigations in the Department of Tumbes, on Peru’s tropical northern frontier. A distinctive type of vernacular architecture is built in Tumbes known as *tabique*. The building technique uses natural materials from the dry scrub forest, a thicket of thorn-covered shrubs, vines, and cacti interspersed with kapok and algarobbo trees. Although the vegetation is dense, few trees grow sufficiently tall or straight to be sawn into boards.

Tabique buildings accommodate these material constraints. The dwellings are rectangular in plan, framed by upright posts planted in the corners and at 1- to 2-meter intervals along the wall. Horizontal paired lengths of split bamboo are tied or nailed onto the inside and outside of the uprights posts, leaving a 5- to 10-centimeter gap into which sticks are jammed. The wedged sticks form the fabric of the wall, which may be left as a ragged comb of sticks or—if the residents can afford it—a plasterer is hired to slather the tabique wall with daub mixed from clay and steer manure.

In 2003 we were excavating a small site, and I was walking near the



FIGURE 1. A *tabique* house, Tumbes, Peru, 2003.

site when I saw a man making adobe bricks. The man recognized me as the gringo archaeologist, and we began to chat.

The man already had a house made from *tabique*, so I was curious why he was preparing to build another house of adobes. In the tropics, wooden structures are usually felled by rot and termites, so I assumed that the *tabique* house was approaching the end of its use-life. This simple assumption was profoundly wrong.

The man and I exchanged “buenos días” and then I said the obvious: “I see you’re making adobes.”

“Yes, señor.”

“Is your *tabique* house very old?”

“No, señor, it is only a few years old. It’s a good, solid house.”

“So, why are you making adobe bricks?”

"Because there is no work around here."

I paused to digest this information. "Are you going to sell the bricks?"

"No, I am going to build a new house. My wife left me."

Another pause.

"Do you think she will come back if you build a new house for her?"

"No, señor. She ran off with that son-of-a-bitch, Guillermo Flores.<sup>4</sup> She's never coming back." He shook his head in disgust.

"So, why are you building a new house?"

"Because there is no work around here."

At this point I was completely confused: "I'm sorry—I don't understand. *Why* are you building a new house?"

The man gave me a look reserved for the mentally challenged: "There is no work around here. I have to go to town to find work. My wife left me, so there will be no one here to watch over my belongings. Anyone can break into a tabique house. So I have to build a stronger house of adobe bricks."

It was an ethnographic encounter reminiscent of the story of the Three Little Pigs.

In a marvelously pragmatic but complex way, this man's decision to build a house of adobes was based on his own technical expertise, his access to raw materials, regional socioeconomic factors, security concerns, and his matrimonial tumults. Far from being a straightforward matter of imposing a mental construct onto passive raw materials, this house reflected multiple decision domains.

And every house always does.

Thus, the first factor that makes understanding human dwellings so interesting and challenging is that they are the material expressions of intersecting considerations. Our homes provide shelter and they express our identities. Dwellings enclose social groups of various sizes, from single individuals to entire religious communities. Houses vary in size, permanence, symbolic valence, functions, and so on, reflecting the varieties of the domestic experience.

And the second challenge to understanding home is this: We have been building homes longer than we have been *Homo sapiens*.

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For the last thirty years, I have been digging into people's homes. Working in the dry desert coast of Peru, I have excavated ancient houses built from river canes in A.D. 1400–1500 and uncovered a large work camp built circa A.D. 1350. I studied a small eighteenth-century native

Chumash hut in Southern California built during the cultural penumbra between initial contact with Europeans and the full onslaught of Spanish colonialism. As a member of my wife's archaeological project in southern Mexico, I excavated the remnants of pole and thatch houses from the Colonial period and studied architecturally similar modern pole and thatch houses to understand the dynamics of construction and decay in the hot tropics. In Baja California, I have mapped open-air encampments and rock shelters of hunters and gatherers who occupied the peninsula from 4500 B.C. to A.D. 1800. In my recent expeditions in far northern Peru, I have excavated small elliptical pole and thatch houses that date to 4700–4300 B.C., large structures that probably housed extended families at 3500–3100 B.C., rectangular houses built from wattle and daub after 900–500 B.C., and the remnants of tabique houses occupied when the Inca Empire expanded into the region after A.D. 1470.

Although all my archaeological fieldwork has been in the Americas—Southern California, Baja California, southern Mexico, and Peru—these projects explored various prehistoric and historic cultures, occupying distinct environments, organized as diverse societies, and pursuing different livelihoods. The common element among them is that home was central to all these divergent lives.

I am endlessly intrigued by the prehistory of home. The creativity invested in dwellings is astounding. But beyond this, I must confess to a somewhat personal and what some might see as a less-than-scholarly interest in the prehistory of home: I deeply love my home.

My family and I live in a modest house in Long Beach, California. Long Beach is notable among Southern California beach communities for its lack of pretension. It is known as “Iowa by the Sea,” in part because of the large number of Midwesterners who settled here in the decades flanking World War II, but also because of its lack of flash. It is a comfortable but unprepossessing community.

The main part of our house was built in 1913; we are the fourth family to live in it. The wall studs are century-old redwood, the window glass has settled with age, and the oak floors have the patina of good sherry. This original part of the house was small, only 900 square feet, and after five years of living in very close quarters, my wife, my son, and I added a new wing to the house in 1999, but one that maintained the architectural lines and building materials used in 1913. While we wanted to be a little more comfortable, we wanted to do so in an unobtrusive way—much like the city where we live.

Beyond this, though, our house anchors our lives. It is where our son

has grown from toddler to man. It is where we have hosted a score of Thanksgiving dinners and dozens of parties. It is where we write books, prepare lectures, read, and think. It is where we have been at our best and at our worst. It is our home.

I am acutely aware that my experience of home differs from that of ancient people living in different cultures in other dwellings, but a line of empathy threads through my archaeological inquiries into the prehistory of home. I look at a curve of cobblestones that mark the edge of a five thousand year old house in Tumbes, and I want to know about the families who lived under its thatched roof. If I come across an ancient campsite in Baja California, I strain to hear its occupants' voices, now muted by time. If I am excavating the faint traces of an ancient hut, I am acutely aware that for someone at sometime this too was home.

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Multiple meanings reside in "home." In modern English usage, the term may refer to the place where one lives, the house or dwelling one lives in, the family or residence group living in a dwelling or place, one's country or birthplace, a person's or animal's typical range or habitat, the place where something was invented or created ("Atlanta, Georgia—the home of Coca-Cola"), a place of ease distinct from one's normal dwelling ("a home away from home,") a sense of familiarity ("at home with"), a sense of recognition or responsibility (as in "this brought home the consequences") or finally an orphanage, asylum, or retirement community that takes the place of "home."<sup>5</sup>

The etymology of the English "home" untangles some of its strands of meaning.<sup>6</sup> *Home*, from the Old English *hām*, has cognates in other Germanic languages: the Old Saxon *hēm*, Old High German *heima*, and the Old Scandinavian *heimr*. In turn these words are probably derived from the proto-Germanic \**χaim-* which comes from the Lithuanian *kiēmas* and *kāima*. These older versions of home imply distinct meanings and concepts. The Old English *hām* refers to a collection of dwellings or village (a "homestead"), while the Old High German and Old Scandinavian words couple the notion of a residence with the idea of "the world." The earlier Lithuanian terms connote a village or farm as opposed to a town, and link back to the Sanskrit *ksēmas*, which denotes a safe or secure dwelling, abode, or refuge.

These Gothic notions of home are rooted in the expansion of Neolithic societies into temperate Europe beginning at circa 5500–5300 B.C. Reliant on crops (wheat, barley, peas, and flax) and livestock (predom-

inantly cattle, but also sheep and pigs) first domesticated in the Near East, these agriculturalists had colonized mainland Europe and the British Isles by 3800 B.C. The initial farming communities of temperate Europe were small clusters of households, not towns or cities. As late as A.D. 98 the Roman urbanite and historian Tacitus wrote:

That none of the several people in Germany live together in cities, is abundantly known; nay, that amongst them none of their dwellings are suffered to be contiguous. They inhabit apart and distinct, just as a fountain, or a field, or a wood happened to invite them to settle. They raise their villages in opposite rows, but not in our manner with the houses joined one to another. Every man has a vacant space quite round his own, whether for security against accidents from fire, or that they want the art of building.<sup>7</sup>

The original English “home” refers not only to a house—and explicitly not to an urban existence—but to a small cluster of buildings hacked from a temperate forest, a constructed oasis that defined one’s world. Due to this prehistoric agrarian legacy, the meanings embedded in the English word and its Germanic cognates are distinct from those in other Indo-European languages.

As Joseph Rykwert has noted, ancient Romans distinguished between overlapping concepts of constructed domesticity.<sup>8</sup> *Domus* referred to the house as household, a sense combining architectural and social units. In contrast, Romans used *aedus* to refer to the constructed building and *mansio* for a place of rest and comfort. A humble rural hut—as different from a country estate or villa—was a *casa* and was applied to the Gauls of Iberia, which led to the Spanish word for house and was transformed into the rustic informality implied by the French *chez moi*.

The Greek *domos* (δῶμος), although apparently similar to the Latin *domus*, refers explicitly to the constructed house or building, and is derived from the verb *demō* (δέμω) to build or construct. Distinct from the *domos*, the household was the *oikos*, a meaning retained in “economy” (the study of the law, *nomos*, of the household, *oikos*). The process of building a home for a household was *oikodomein*, a term that united those distinct meanings into a single process.

One could pursue such etymological strands further, but there would come a point for which we have no written records that hint at domestic variations. Beyond the border of literacy, only archaeology illuminates the deep human experience of home.

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In general, the public receives a distorted vision of what archaeology is and what archaeologists do. Television documentaries breathlessly describe the hidden riches of long-lost tombs, the moldering glories of ancient temples. With astounding luck, major discoveries are made during the three days the film crew is on site—and this happens week after week! An archaeologist directs a major excavation in the humid tropics of Guatemala, yet appears on camera in a clean shirt free of sweat stains. Archaeological research projects are presented as yet another spin-off of *Survivor*.

An admission is in order: I am profoundly susceptible to the romance of archaeology. I fell in love with archaeology as an eighteen-year-old, and I am still passionate about it decades later. I own copies of every Indiana Jones movie. I married an archaeologist, my best friends are archaeologists, and when I go on vacation I tend to visit archaeological sites. And I watch the documentaries just like everybody else.

But the “treasure and temple” emphasis does not really reflect what archaeologists generally do. For all the dazzle and excitement of gilded discoveries, most archaeologists actually engage in an intellectual project that is substantially more profound: “What does it mean to be human?”

Mentally traversing a path of inferential steps that would surprise Sherlock Holmes, archaeologists connect the material traces of the past to reconstruct the nature of the human experience. In his classic book, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, the historical archaeologist James Deetz argued that even in literate societies with written histories, archaeology uncovers aspects of human life that are so fundamental and quotidian that no one bothered to record them.

As the adage “history is written by the victors” implies, the historical record often overlooks the lives and voices of the powerless, the subjugated, or the ignored—in short, the majority of human beings. Written history unevenly illuminates human experience. The earliest written records from Mesopotamia are cuneiform tablets dating to 2800 B.C. that principally record economic transactions and administrative matters. The oldest Egyptian hieroglyphs date to 2920–2680 B.C., texts that proclaimed the pharaohs’ authority and implemented his will. The written record from Asia dates to circa 1300–1000 B.C. and comes from Shang China; it is a historical record that, not surprisingly, highlights Shang accomplishments over those of rival kingdoms.

Contemporary with the developments in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Harappan civilization employed the Indus script by circa 2800–2600 B.C., although scholars cannot read it nor are they certain what language family it relates to (Indo-European vs. Dravidian).

In the Aegean, hieroglyphic writing was used by circa 2000 B.C.; it remains undeciphered. The equally unreadable Linear A script was employed around 1700 B.C., while Linear B was used by Mycenaean Greeks at 1450–1000 B.C., at which point the Aegean devolved into a nonliterate Dark Age that lasted until 750 B.C.

Turning to the Americas, the recently discovered Cascajal Block is associated with the Olmec culture of Veracruz and dates to 900 B.C., thus making it the earliest known Mesoamerican writing system, followed by Zapotec (ca. 600 B.C.), the phonic system associated with Mixteca-Puebla, and Teotihuacan, Mayan, and Aztec writing systems.<sup>9</sup>

These are the regions in the world with the longest literary traditions, yet the written record covers a small fraction of these areas' histories. A few temporal reference points illustrate this.

Detailed historical materials for Ancient Greece exist for the Archaic and Classical Eras of circa 750–400 B.C., yet archaeological sites containing stone choppers and scrapers that date to 400,000 to 200,000 years ago have been found in gravel deposits in the Thessaly region, Lower Paleolithic artifacts probably associated with Neanderthals. Subsequent sites associated with modern humans in the region date to 60,000 to 30,000 years ago. In the prefecture of Argolis, southwest of Athens, Franchthi Cave has a remarkable occupation that spans from at least 20,000 to 3000 B.C., the longest archaeological sequence currently known from Greece.<sup>10</sup> This means that approximately 98% of Greek history falls outside of the written record.

The archaeological record from China extends back to *Homo erectus*, and the famous site of Zhoukoudian (the place where “Peking Man” was discovered) has archaeological layers dating from 670,000–400,000 years ago.<sup>11</sup> Between 99.1% and 99.5% of Chinese history occurred before the first Shang scribe picked up a paintbrush.

And so it goes. Australia has been occupied for at least 50,000 years; its written history begins in the late seventeenth century A.D. Humans occupied South America by some 14,000 to 12,000 years ago; the written record covers less than the last 600 years. New Guinea was occupied 40,000 years ago; its written history begins in the 1930s.

Most of human experience has slipped through the lines of texts. Archaeology is the only way those ancient lives can be recovered and added to the consultable record of what it means to be human.

The human past is a vast and fascinating domain. Archaeology is more than the pursuit of temples and tombs.

Archaeology is a way to learn who we are.

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Home is central to the human experience, and the following chapters explore the antiquity and diversity of human domestic life. In this, the range of *The Prehistory of Home* is broader than Witold Rybczynski's wonderful 1985 book, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, with its emphasis on comfort and dwelling in the Western European tradition, or the engaging sprawl of Bill Bryson's 2010 *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*, which focuses on the United Kingdom and the United States. Neither is this a complete compendium of prehistoric structures, which would require an encyclopedic coverage similar to the magnificent, three-volume 1997 *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture* edited by Paul Oliver.

My objective is simultaneously broader and more circumscribed. The goal of this book is to survey the ways that small, forgotten things from the past illuminate the varieties of the domestic experience. *The Prehistory of Home* explores how the broad archaeological goal of understanding the past intersects with the continuing human domestic project.<sup>12</sup>

Although integral to human experience, our hominid ancestors did not always make dwellings, and the archaeological evidence for the earliest domesticities is the subject of chapter 2, "Starter Homes." Since the times of ancient Greece, architects and philosophers have proposed what Rykwert calls "fabulized prehistories," imaginary reconstructions about the evolution of homes like those put forth by the Roman architect Vitruvius or centuries later by Enlightenment philosophers. The archaeological evidence suggests a developmental path that was more complex and divergent, as two of our ancestral species—*Homo ergaster* and *Homo erectus*—emerged from Africa to explore and settle Europe and Asia. These early hominid pioneers were replaced by us, *Homo sapiens*, who left Africa in a second great wave of migration approximately 100,000 to 50,000 years ago, colonizing the areas occupied by earlier hominids, but also moving into previously unoccupied regions of Australia, the Americas, and the islands of the Pacific Ocean.

The peripatetic nature of *Homo sapiens* is reflected in the archaeology of impermanent dwellings, the topic of chapter 3, "Mobile Homes." Humans occupied a diverse array of environments, in part because dwellings were elements of their cultural toolkit. The dwellings of hunters and gatherers reflect their nomadism, whether it occurred 20,000 years on the periglacial steppes of Palaeolithic Ukraine or over the last 6,000 years in Baja California in the desert between the seas.

The development of more sedentary life is discussed in chapter 4,

“Durable Goods.” While today most people live in relatively permanent houses, the process towards sedentism occurred rather late in human prehistory. In the Near East, archaeological sites dating between 18,000 and 8,000 B.C. mark waypoints on the path to settled life, when dwellings became more substantial and rooted as humans relied more on intensively collected foods and ultimately made the transition towards agriculture. Parallel trajectories are discernible in archaeological sites around the world. In Japan, for example, the abundant resources of forest and sea allowed Jomon cultures to build substantial dwellings 8000 years before wet-rice agriculture became the basis of economy, but after gathered foods had to be stored and large objects were necessary to process them. The connection between sedentism and our possessions is not new, although the problems of having “too much stuff” are faced by modern human societies around the globe, particularly in the United States. And finally, the connections between dwellings and identity are transformed when our possessions include the reliquiae of our dead kin.

Our homes are more than simple shelters or storage sheds. We imbue our dwellings with complex meanings, and our houses serve as metaphoric templates of the cosmos, a broad set of topics discussed in chapter 5, “Model Homes.” Houses become architectonic models for diverse and fundamental meanings about cosmic order and social distinctions. Whether we think about the creation of male vs. female spaces in a Navaho hogan or the implications of the term “master bedroom” in an American suburban house, humans use their dwellings as models. The symbolic analogies between house and cosmos are derived from earlier human efforts to give symbolic concepts material form, a process that began at least 70,000 years ago. However, the domestic expressions of cosmologies only occurred after the dwelling became a recurrent experience for social groups—either when nomads erected the same tents in different places or when sedentary households lived in the same dwelling for extended periods. At that point the symbolic associations of home become breathtakingly complex.

Bees live in hives, prairie dogs in colonies, and humans in apartment buildings. The origins and implications of densely settled group life are explored in chapter 6, “Apartment Living.” In eastern Anatolia, the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük was a dense warren of tightly packed buildings holding residences and shrines between ca 7300–6000 B.C. Examples of multifamily dwellings consist of Banderkeramik long houses of temperate Europe (5300–4900 B.C.), Native American plank houses in the Pacific Northwest (A.D. 200/500–1950), and Iroquois longhouses (A.D.

1350–1800). In the American Southwest, similarly dense constructions include the “Great Houses” at Chaco Canyon (A.D. 900–1150), the cliff houses of the Colorado Plateau (A.D. 1150–1300), the Classic Period Hohokam complex at Casa Grande (A.D. 1150–1350), or Zuni Pueblo (A.D. 1500–present). In each of these cases, apartment life posed problems of density and dissent.

At various times and for a variety of reasons, humans have lived behind walls, the topic explored in chapter 7, “Gated Communities.” Although walled cities first emerged in ancient Mesopotamia amidst a landscape of conflict, humans build walls for different reasons: to defend, to define, to hide, or to separate. Though the medieval walled city and the Benedictine monastery were both walled communities, those similar architectural constructions referenced different social realities. In ancient Persia and on the North Coast of Peru, kings lived behind the tall walls of royal compounds to hide their humanity from their subjects. Walls are built to separate genders, and the archaeology of Christian convents and the architecture of Swahili houses are similarly designed to ensure the chaste purity of women. Not only a common domestic practice in the ancient world, today gated communities are the fastest growing human settlement form, a global phenomenon known as the “New Enclavism.”

The domestic and the political realms can intersect in our dwellings, a topic explored in chapter 8, “Noble Houses.” Noble houses frequently combine multiple functions—they are seats of authority, warehouses and treasuries, arenas for political display and religious rituals—such as at the House of Tiles (2500–2000 B.C.), located on the Greek mainland, or in elaborate palace complexes of Knossos and other Minoan palace polities (2200–1450 B.C.) of Crete. This intersection of roles occurs among small-scale societies living in the Ecuadorian Amazon, among Nootka living in British Columbia in large plank houses in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in the fifteenth-century Palace of Chilimassa on the far north coast of Peru. In all of these cases, politics, hospitality, and ritual intersected at home.

Just as dwellings may encode cosmological symbols, the structures may themselves be transformed into “Sacred Houses” (chapter 9). The Tabernacle was the “House of the Lord,” a tented dwelling built for Yahweh by a migratory pastoral society. In many cultures, past and present, domestic altars are one terminus of an axis between house and temple, functioning “variously as satellite, extension and miniaturization of the local temple.”<sup>13</sup> In other cultures, the sacred may literally be incorporated into the walls of a dwelling as rituals surround the collection

of construction materials, building, and completion of a house. Alternatively, supernatural beings may be invited into the home (at least to visit), transforming the house by their presence.

It may seem an ironic contradiction, but one way to preserve a home is to burn it. In chapter 10, I discuss the different manners and cultural logics reflected in “Home Fires.” The houses of Pompeii and of Cerén, El Salvador, were preserved in ashes. Across a broad swath of south-eastern Europe, houses were consistently burned during the Neolithic, apparently not by raiders or accidents but by their own inhabitants, even though this required stacking kindling and firewood within the structure. This did not mean the end of the house, but its regeneration, and new dwellings were built on or nearby the house’s charred remains. Analogous practices in distant archaeological sites—including historic Cherokee villages in the southeastern United States—demonstrate that preservation and remembrance do not require permanent constructions.

Our homes encompass and demarcate our lives, and dwellings may provide analogous shelters for souls in the afterlife. Chapter 11, “Going Home,” examines the cultural creation of parallel domesticities in lives after death. The astounding mortuary complexes constructed in the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt were predicated on earlier funerary architecture in which a subterranean home was created and equipped for life after death. In Neolithic Europe, long houses metamorphosed into long barrows, becoming commemorative constructions that anchored identity. In a broad array of human societies, the ancestors dwell in villages of the dead. Similarly diverse conceptions of the relationship between death and home characterize American society in different points in our history, as our ideas have changed about the corpse and the soul, the graveyard and the home.

A final note: each of these chapters contains a brief description from my own archaeological investigations into the prehistory of home. Whether excavating an Archaic house in far northern Peru, investigating an impermanent campsite in Baja California, or documenting the labyrinthine patterns of royal Chimú palaces, I am fascinated by the archaeology of home. Thus, my specific investigations intersect with the broader themes that run through this book, and those broader themes recursively inform the way I approach my specific investigations. As the following chapters traverse different centuries and distant places, I am acutely aware of my task as an archaeologist: to recover the past and to make it part of the consultable record of the human experience.

And much of that experience occurred at home.