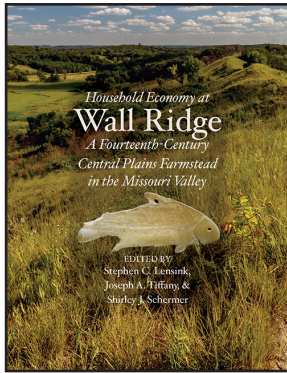


Household Economy at
Wall Ridge
A Fourteenth-Century
Central Plains Farmstead
in the Missouri Valley

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Reviewed by Lauren W. Ritterbush, Department of Sociology,

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Central Plains tradition sites have been the frequent focus of archaeological excavations in southwestern Iowa, Nebraska, northwestern Missouri, and Kansas over more than a century. Studies of the data recovered from these sites reveal that lodge occupants were the first sedentary farmers in the region. Unlike later Plains Villagers, these gardener-hunt-er-gatherers lived in scattered farmsteads and hamlets and had a very diverse subsistence base. Central Plains tradition societies mark an important stage in the development of Indigenous farming. Study of the Wall Ridge site (13ML176) expands our understanding of these early peoples in large part because of the modern excavation and recovery techniques applied followed by analyses by an interdisciplinary team of researchers with years of experience in the area. The site's situation in the Glenwood locality of western Iowa is important due to its location on the eastern edge of the Plains and its proximity to contemporary Oneota occupations. Understanding the relationship between these neighbors can only be addressed through detailed studies pertaining to both populations. This volume is a valuable addition to the archaeological literature pertaining to this region, as well as to methodological approaches to archaeological interpretation.

The authors address a series of issues, namely the paleoecology of a late prehistoric farmstead, duration of occupation, seasonality, economic and subsistence activities, household composition, interactions with others, and site abandonment. The application of current data recovery techniques resulted in a rich assemblage of ceramics, lithics, bone and shell, plant remains, and feature data that are described by appropriate experts. The environmental data are especially rich and allow a robust reconstruction of site setting, seasonality, and economy. Similar to other Central Plains tradition sites, the evidence suggests harvest of a wide variety of resources (e.g., large and small mammals, fish, crayfish, mussels, gastropods, birds, terrestrial and aquatic wild plants, native and introduced cultigens). However, Tiffany and Lensink suggest a somewhat altered view of Central Plains tradition subsistence overall and one they believe influenced site abandonment. These, and other interpretations may not be fully accepted by all (including not all researchers involved in this study), but this emphasizes a strength of the volume, which is to stimulate discussion and careful consideration of alternative hypotheses.

Those looking for fresh approaches to interpreting archaeological data of early farming

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communities will find certain presentations thought provoking. An example is the innovative quantitative analyses applied to estimating lodge duration. The final determination suggests a much shorter use life than often assumed for Central Plains tradition shelters (e.g., 7–20 years), but fits recent understandings developed for other Glenwood households. Although the conclusion is conceivable, the number of assumptions and estimates underlying the calculations raises concerns. Whether one finds the approach credible, the computational method and results inspire deeper reflections about archaeological analyses and understanding of early Indigenous farming communities. Further interpretations (e.g., size and composition of the household, gender-based activities) continue a long tradition of applying ethnographic analogies derived from later villagers. Analogy-based and other interpretations (e.g., vessel function) require testing with additional data, other analytical methods, and new perspectives that I hope will continue to invigorate archaeological investigations in the Plains and Midwest.

This study is especially useful for researchers in these regions. The authors of this volume compare their findings with other archaeological data sets, most drawn from selected Glenwood locality or other Nebraska variant sites. Discussions occasionally incorporate specific finds from more distant Central Plains tradition (and, less so, White Rock Oneota) sites, but this is largely left to others to apply methods and findings from Wall Ridge to understanding the Central Plains tradition broadly. This will expand insight into early farming societies and consideration of external relations, which are discussed briefly in the summary chapter. Oneota researchers, whether focused on the Midwest or Plains, will see ways to deepen the discussion of possible interaction between Glenwood locality farmers and neighboring Oneota. The authors raise important thoughts, but only scratch the surface of the rich archaeological literature pertaining to western Oneota. Broader and more nuanced ideas are left to be deliberated, for example, the indirect effects of Oneota and Glenwood neighbors on the social landscape of the region (e.g., did the presence of Oneota pioneers stimulate occupation of the rugged Western Loess Hills) and regional cultural dynamics (e.g., abandonment of the Glenwood locality).

I commend the University of Utah Press for their work with the editors in producing a valuable and attractive volume. The book is well organized and illustrated with clear maps, line drawings, and many color photographs. The format (8½ x 11¼ in.) allows sizable images and tables that are easy to read. Data are thoroughly presented within the book, as well as in a free digital supplement of appendices, whose contents are identified at the end of the book. Errors are minimal, but can be misleading. For example, the map of lithic material source areas (Figure 7.1) switches the location of the two Permian-age Flint Hills chert sources that are important to interpretations of extra-local relations. Information presented earlier is sometimes incorrectly repeated later in the text, such as mistakenly calling Florence B chert Florence A at the end of the lithics chapter (p. 80) and misreporting estimates for duration of occupation in a later chapter (p. 187). The calculated total of discarded pots, an important factor in figuring duration of occupation, also is listed incorrectly in various places in the text (pp. 159, 187, 191, 199).

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Despite some editorial errors, this data-rich reference is essential for comparative studies exploring variability among or between early farming societies, whether they be in the Central Plains, Midwest, or distant regions. The approaches to interpreting radiocarbon dates, length of occupation, subsistence and other aspects of economy stimulate useful critique, discussion, and fresh ideas that have utility beyond Wall Ridge. In sum, this book not only leads to understanding the Indigenous household represented at this site, but insights into different areas of research and provides a model for archaeological investigations and reporting.