Household archaeology, as a subfield of the larger field of archaeology, has been slow to influence the more mainstream archaeology of the Levant. Its impact, however, has increased recently in this area of the world. This paper will examine some methodological and theoretical developments within household archaeology generally. This examination includes the household’s usefulness for understanding past societies; a brief history of household archaeology; approaches to understanding houses, households, and the archaeological record of the Levant; and how the Levantine archaeological record and extra-archaeological data sources make the Levant particularly well suited for household research.

Household Archaeology

The Levant is not the only part of the world where household archaeology has been slow to make an impact. For many years archaeologists working in most geographical areas overlooked the more ordinary and humble domestic structures of the majority of the population—the most common remains in nearly all archaeological sites. Archaeologists were drawn instead to remains left by political and religious authorities and elites, including monumental constructions such as palatial and storage complexes, cultic complexes, cemeteries, and fortification systems. However, archaeologists increasingly realized that to understand fully ancient settlements it was necessary to investigate the structures where the majority of the population lived. It was in the New World that household archaeology came into its own in the 1970s and 80s when it enjoyed an intense period of development of methodological and theoretical concepts, including the emergence of a number of working approaches.

New World archaeologists were among the first to realize that the household is the particular environment in which individuals are made
aware of their culture’s rules. The household embodies and underlies the organization of a society at its most basic level (Wilk and Ashmore 1988: 1). It can be viewed as a culture in microcosm where few, if any, aspects of its activities, behavior, or thought are at odds with those of the greater society (Deetz 1982: 724). Households can serve as very sensitive indicators of many facets of social organization and can reflect social stratification and the material conditions of life for the majority of a population (Rathje and McGuire 1982: 707). When well understood, the household can be seen as a higher analytical unit used to reconstruct more complex societal organizations and identify behavioral processes of interest (Reid and Whittlesey 1982: 696). As noted by Deetz,

It might simply be the case that the household, family, or any social unit of similar size is a suitable vehicle for the examination of the relations between physical and mental worlds, and since families and households are the commonest, they are potentially the most productive source. Their suitability is a function of their size, small enough in scale to permit efficient and dependable study, and of their universality and availability, which at least somewhat mitigates problems of sampling (1982: 719).

Household Archaeology in the New World

While household archaeology blossomed in the 1970s and 80s, its beginnings can be traced through activity-area research to cultural ecology via settlement archaeology, and perhaps a little more indirectly to Taylor’s conjunctive approach to archaeology (Taylor 1948). In the Americas, cultural ecology played a primary role in the development of settlement archaeology as humans were seen to interact spatially, economically, and socially within the environmental matrix into which they adaptively networked (see, e.g., Butzer 1982: Chapters 1 and 12). However, the use of ecological adaptation as the sole determinant for human behavior (à la Steward 1937, 1953) was quickly jettisoned as more functional interpretations of prehistoric social organization appeared. These included, in addition to ecological determinants, the level of technology and various social and cultural institutions and factors (see, especially, Willey 1953: 1). To understand prehistoric social organization, settlement archaeology studied the distribution of traceable human activities across the landscape, viewing sites not in a