SOCIAL THEORY IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANCIENT HISTORY

At a time when archaeology has turned away from questions of the long term and large scale, this collection of essays reflects on some of the big questions in archaeology and ancient history: how and why societies have grown in scale and complexity; how they have maintained and discarded aspects of their own cultural heritage; and how they have collapsed. In addressing these long-standing questions of broad interest and importance, the authors develop counternarratives – new ways of understanding what used to be termed cultural evolution. In essays that encompass the Middle East and Egypt, India, Southeast Asia, Australia, the American Southwest, and Mesoamerica, the fourteen essays offer perspectives on long-term cultural trajectories; on cities, states, and empires; on collapse; and on the relationship between archaeology and history. The book concludes with a commentary by one of the major voices in archaeological theory: Norman Yoffee.

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Social Theory in Archaeology and Ancient History

The Present and Future of Counternarratives

Edited by

GEOFF EMBERLING

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Contents

List of figures page vii
List of tables xi
Contributors xii
Preface xv

PART I INTRODUCTION

1 Counternarratives: The Archaeology of the Long Term and the Large Scale
GEOFF EMBERLING 3

PART II CULTURAL TRAJECTORIES

2 Social Evolutionary Theory and the Fifth Continent: History Without Transformation?
TIM MURRAY 19

3 Structures of Authority: Feasting and Political Practice in the Earliest Mesopotamian States
GEOFF EMBERLING 34

4 Counternarratives and Counterintuition: Accommodating the Unpredicted in the Archaeology of Complexity
STEVEN E. FALCONER 60

5 Inscribing Legitimacy and Building Power in the Mekong Delta
MIRIAM T. STARK 75

PART III CITIES, STATES, AND EMPIRES

6 The City in the State
CARLA M. SINOPOLI AND UTHARA SUVRATHAN 109
Table of Contents

7 Cities and Ideology: The Case of Assur in the Neo-Assyrian Period 129
  PETER MACHINIST
8 City and Countryside – Image and Text: Balancing Rural and Urban Values in Third-Millennium Egypt 161
  JOHN BAINES
9 Local Courts in Centralizing States: The Case of Ur III Mesopotamia 185
  LAURA CULBERTSON

PART IV COLLAPSE AND RESILIENCE

10 Writing Collapse 205
  SEVERIN FOWLES
11 Objects in Crisis: Curation, Repair, and the Historicity of Things in the South Caucasus (1500–300 BCE) 231
  ADAM T. SMITH AND LORI KHATCHADOURIAN
12 Leaving Classic Maya Cities: Agent-Based Modeling and the Dynamics of Diaspora 259
  PATRICIA A. MCANANY, JEREMY A. SABLOFF, MAXIME LAMOUREUX ST-HILAIRE, AND GYLES IANNONE

PART V ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

13 Settling on the Ruins of Xia: Archaeology of Social Memory in Early China 291
  LI MIN
14 Anti-History 328
  SHANNON LEE DAWDY

PART VI COMMENTARY

15 The Present and Future of Counternarratives 345
  NORMAN YOFFEE

Index 358
Figures

3.1 Map of Greater Mesopotamia

3.2 Contour plan of Tell Brak

3.3 The Niched Building at Tell Brak, TW Level 16, LC 3 period

3.4 Limestone mace heads from the Niched Building at Tell Brak, TW Level 16, LC 3 period

3.5 The Niched Building and nearby houses at Tell Brak, TW Level 16, LC 3 period

3.6 Coarse, shallow plates, LC 3 period

3.7 Bead cache from Tell Brak, TW Level 16, LC 3 period

4.1 Bronze Age settlement clusters in the Southern Levant

4.2 Map of the Eastern Mediterranean showing the locations of Bronze Age settlements

4.3 Relative bone frequencies for domesticated sheep/goat and pig

4.4 Semi-subterranean house at Middle Bronze Age Zahrat adh-Dhra’ 1, Jordan

4.5 Politiko-Troullia, Cyprus, facing south toward the Troodos Mountains

5.1 Map of the Mekong River and its delta

5.2 Brick architectural features from the Mekong Delta

5.3 Distribution of dated archaeological localities in the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project (LOMAP) survey area

5.4 Distribution of Phase 2 localities (ca. 200 BCE–200 CE) in LOMAP survey area
### List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Distribution of Phase 3 localities (ca. 300–750 CE) in LOMAP survey area</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Major early historic cities in India</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Banavasi and its hinterland</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>The Vijayanagara empire</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Map of Egypt</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Chronological table</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Tomb of Ptahhotep II at Saqqara, offering chapel, north wall, east section</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Tomb of Ptahhotep II at Saqqara, offering chapel, north wall, west section</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Detail of the lower part of Figure 8.4</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Procession of estates in the chapel of the tomb of Ti at Saqqara</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Section of the façade of the mastaba tomb of Merauakhtinisut from Giza</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Interaction among court actors from Shulgi’s thirty-second year into Amar-Sin’s reign</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Interaction among court actors from the middle of Amar-Sin’s reign to the middle of Shu-Sin’s reign</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Interaction among court actors in the last phases of Ur III documentation at Girsu</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>Chetro Ketl ruin, in Chaco Canyon</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Passage, Purification by Victor Masayesva, accompanying his essay “Opticalypse”.</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>“Nature” attacks, reducing New York City to ruin. Still from the 2004 film The Day After Tomorrow.</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Relative positions of nature and culture in the collapse narratives of the modern West and the contemporary pueblos</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Map of the Tsaghkahovit Plain</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Topographic map of the site of Gegharot</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Plan of Tsaghkahovit</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Photo of the east citadel shrine at Gegharot</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

11.5 Heirloomed late Middle Bronze Age storage jar from the Late Bronze Age west terrace shrine at Gegharot 246
11.6 Destruction debris from the first destruction of Gegharot underneath the east wall of the reconstructed west terrace shrine 246
11.7 Photo of the Tsaghkahovit fortress 249
11.8 Plan of the Tsaghkahovit citadel 252
11.9 Distribution of Iron 3 pottery from the Tsaghkahovit citadel 253
11.10 Comparison of ceramic distribution between Tsaghkahovit citadel and Precinct A 253
12.1 The Maya region showing the key locations and Classic-period royal courts mentioned in text 260
12.2 NetLogo control panel and field of view for “Leaving Maya Cities” simulation 274
12.3 Time 1: Low-intensity land issues plague the royal court and sustainers in NE sector, but there is little movement away from the court 275
12.4 Time 2: High-intensity land issues in the NE sector result in significant movement of sustaining population away from the royal court. 275
12.5 Time 3: High-intensity martial conflict added to simulation results in movement out of sphere of royal court in NE sector and toward NW sector court 276
12.6 Time 4: The third variable – weather – is added to the simulation at a low-intensity. More agents leave the NE sector, but many still cluster around the royal court 276
12.7 Time 5: The implosion of the SW sector royal court leaves only a cluster of sustainer agents 277
12.8 Time 6: Agents from the SW sector migrate north to the royal court in the NW sector 277
12.9 Time 7: The royal court in the NW sector collapses 278
12.10 Time 8: Refugees from the NW court migrate to the challenged but enduring royal court in the NE sector 278
13.1 Major sites and regions in the Circum-Songshan region and the Jinnan basin in northeastern China, with adjacent highlands 293
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>The Longshan site of Taosi on the northern slope of Mt. Chong in the Jinnan Basin</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>The three-dimensional representation of archaeological landscape of Shimao in the Tuwei River valley, Shenmu, Shaanxi</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>The Zhou political landscape at the turn of the first millennium BCE</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>The spatial correlation between important Zhou centers and the important pre-Zhou sites from the late third to the late second millennium BCE</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>Archaeological landscape of the Quwo basin</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables

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List of Contributors

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Preface

Geoff Emberling

There is no hiding the origin of this volume: It grew out of papers given at a session of the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting in New Orleans in 2010. The session, entitled “Counternarratives of State, Civilization, and History: Papers in Honor of Norman Yoffee,” was co-organized by Lori Khatchadourian, Adam Smith, and me in the year of Norm’s retirement from the University of Michigan. And the session itself grew out of Norm’s inspiring teaching and admirable breadth of intellectual interests, drawing on his former students and current colleagues working in regions around the world. A session including all of Norm’s former students and colleagues would have taken days, and we organizers hope that other former students, colleagues, and friends of Norm’s will not be disconcerted for not being asked to write and that they will derive some pleasure from the essays.

At the same time, we did not want to write a Festschrift in the usual sense of short articles that present a small aspect of a question of interest to the honoree. Rather, we wanted to engage with the future of Norm’s scholarship in more extended ways: How has his work stimulated our thinking and how will it continue to do so? Thus, we forego the biographical sketch and list of all his publications here (for the latter, one can consult https://sites.google.com/a/umich.edu/norman-yoffee).

The title and methodological connection of the essays come from a telling observation by Sev Fowles, who pointed out that much of Norm’s work has been devoted to building “counternarratives” (and, of course, continues to be; few scholars have been more active after retirement!). Sev put it well:
I think I’m most impressed by Norm’s distinctive engagement with the grand narrative, which never took the easy route of naive rejection that has led so many into inane specificity or bland truisms about identity, embodiment, power, agency, etc. Even though he taught on these latter themes at Michigan, he was always most brilliant when he was building counter-narratives. He loved talking about collapse rather than rise. He loved discussing negara and the inversion of pomp and power in historical trajectories. And he loved going on and on about the evolutionary implications of Jones’s article on why the Tasmanians didn’t eat fish.

Thus, this volume represents our collective efforts to follow Norm’s lead and to build on his many insights.

It is a pleasure to thank all the contributors to the volume. I’ve learned a great deal from reading and thinking about their chapters, and I hope other readers will too.

Note

1 The title of this book was originally intended to be Counternarratives and Macrohistories: New Agendas in Archaeology and Ancient History. My introduction and several of the chapters respond to this title. The “new agendas” part of the title was meant to recall the book edited by Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt: Archaeological Theory: Who Sets the Agenda? (Cambridge University Press, 1993). Alas, the original title was altered in the production process by the press. The cover of the book, showing the historic minaret at Samarra, was meant to be juxtaposed with a line drawing of an Assyrian ziggurat, connecting two cultures widely separated in time yet rarely connected in scholarship or popular thought.