CHAPTER ONE

PRIMARY ORALITY IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The American sociologist Carl Couch titled his 1989 paper with a critical question which deserves far more attention than it has to date received. He asked: 'Oral technologies: a cornerstone of ancient civilizations?' (1989). Couch went on to write that '[i]f only a limited amount of information is available, a highly differentiated society cannot emerge nor be sustained' (1989, p. 588). In a later work, Couch argued 'that all preliterate ancient societies with a complex social structure made extensive use of orality to preserve information' (Couch 1996, p. 29). The cross-cultural generalisations developed over the subsequent chapters indicate that not only are Couch's arguments of the essence, but that the fundamental role of oral technologies can be detected in the archaeological record. The British archaeologist Colin Renfrew writes that we 'need to understand more adequately the mechanisms of learning, and the way we humans manage to store what we have learnt' (2007, p. 107). In light of the goal that Renfrew sets, it is hoped that the analysis offered here may be of value to archaeologists.

Whether talking about contemporary non-literate cultures, contemporary literate cultures, or speculating about oral cultures in the distant past, the sociopolitical cohesion of the society must depend on the media used to communicate and store information. As McLuhan argues, social and cultural changes can only be understood through the workings of media used to

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communicate information (McLuhan 1964; 1967; McLuhan & Fiore 1967). Hence the communication of information is considered a critical aspect of the interpretation of ancient cultural sites.

Within this book, terms will be used as defined by Goody (1987, p. x), whereby 'non-literate' refers to the absence of a written tradition, while 'illiterate' refers to someone with a low level of literacy within a written tradition. The term 'oral culture' will be used for non-literate cultures only. It is essential, when looking for the structures of primary oral cultures, that the researcher be constantly aware of the influence and proximity of literacy, even when the culture itself has no written form. Goody warns about the Islamic literate influence on many of the South East Asian and African cultures, commenting that they 'require an analytic treatment different from that given to an Australian tribe' (1968, p. 5). It is the more recent contact date for Australian cultures, in particular the Western Desert and Arnhem Land cultures, which is the reason this book draws more heavily on Australian hunter-gatherer experiences than those from Africa.

Tewa-born sociologist Tessie Naranjo questions how archaeologists would deal with an important person in oral tradition when the only material clues are items such as feathers, rattles, turtle shells, drums and kivas. An archaeologist would need 'to listen carefully to our stories and our songs in order to find him' (Naranjo 2008, p. 260). Without the stories and songs, the meaning behind many enigmatic aspects of the archaeological record can never be known. However, although the content of the information system can only be guessed at, the fundamental role of the information system can be detected.

Fentress and Wickham (1992) discuss many aspects of social memory from a wide range of cultures, but the emphasis is always on memory of past events. From this perception of social memory, Mason (2000) argues that there is little value in oral tradition for archaeology, considering only the value in recall of historical events. He does not consider the value to archaeological interpretation of understanding the fundamental role of oral tradition in non-literate cultures, a misconception it is hoped this book will correct. There is also a misconception that cultures without writing do not have highly developed memory practices (see, for example, Olick & Robbins 1998, p. 115) which, it is hoped, the next few chapters of this book will dispel. In fact, d'Errico argues that artificial memory systems were developed and used in Europe at least from the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic, perhaps earlier in other parts of the world (1998, p. 43), with individuals specialising in storing memory (1998, p. 47).

Van Dyke and Alcock's book *Archaeologies of memory* (2003) drew studies of social memory firmly into the archaeological context. The book had a significant impact on my research, in particular by indicating the role of memory in two of the sites chosen for further exploration, Poverty Point (Pauketat &

Alt 2003) and Chaco Canyon (Van Dyke 2003a). The emphasis in the book is primarily on oral tradition as history, but makes the move towards a broader context which this book addresses.

This chapter will present a set of ten indicators for identifying prehistoric memory theatres and the presence of a 'knowledge elite' through material remains. A full analysis is clearly beyond the scope of this book; in fact, it is beyond the possibility of any single work. However, this chapter will offer a new interpretation tool with which to start. Although the ideas presented here are closely related to the field of cognitive archaeology, reference to formal knowledge systems and mnemonics has not been found in that literature[1]. Further analysis of this field is beyond the scope of this book, as is an analysis of theories about the role of information processing in the evolution of societies (see, for example, Flannery 1972; Sebastian 1992, pp. 65–8), although this study could clearly add a new perspective to that debate.

KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN PREHISTORIC CULTURES

Lévi-Strauss, in his seminal work, the title of which is usually translated as *The Savage Mind* (1966), asks that ethnographers reconsider the representation of the low intellectual level of 'primitives', writing that scientific thought is 'extremely widespread in so-called primitive societies. We must therefore alter our traditional picture of this primitiveness' (1966, p. 41). Havelock extrapolates this into the prehistoric realm, arguing for a recognition that prehistoric cultures should be interpreted not as primitive cultures but through their orality when he writes:

> It is accepted that prehistoric human societies formed on the basis of intercommunication through language, whether the members were hunter–gatherers, farmers, or something in between . . . . What Lévi-Strauss was investigating was not La pensée sauvage, but La pensée oraliste (Havelock 1991, pp. 20–1).

The goal of this chapter is to consider pre-state archaeological sites through the lens of their orality. 'It is difficult or impossible for individuals from a background of literacy to understand people who derived from primary orality' (Varien et al. 1999, p. 404). It is essential that we try, because any reconstruction of their culture, without consideration of their orality, must surely be deficient.

Oral specialists are granted a great deal of power in oral cultures because there is a generally accepted belief that knowledge is beneficial to all (Couch 1990, p. 166). It is reasonable to assume that a knowledge elite existed in powerful roles in non-literate cultures in the past, acknowledging that there is a wealth of variation in the roles and the nature of the knowledge they kept. The question then needs to be asked: how could these formal oral structures,

and a sociopolitical structure based on the control of knowledge, be identified in a purely material archaeological record?

KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN TRANSITION

It is proposed here that if hunter–gatherer bands accumulate into larger populations and start to reside more permanently in a given location, they would still have the same requirement for ordered mnemonic structures as were once embedded in the landscape they travelled. As will be shown in Chapter 4, the landscape is universally used by oral cultures to provide an ordered set of sacred locations, each becoming the site for rituals involving songs and dances enmeshed in mythology. These rituals serve, in part, to encode the knowledge of the culture. Power in those early settled cultures was still in the hands of those who controlled the esoteric knowledge, much of which was pragmatic information on which their survival depended. It is proposed here that the mnemonic needs of a hunter–gatherer knowledge elite continued into early settlement, dictating the physical structure of Neolithic and Archaic ceremonial complexes during that transitional phase.

Although an analysis of the debate about the evolution of societies is beyond the scope of this book (see, for example, Service 1960; Pauketat 2007; Yoffee 2005), the need to consider the development of symbolism in the transition to agriculture is argued by Davidson (2010b). The assumption here is that as a mobile hunter–gatherer culture develops into a sedentary agricultural society, there is an imperative to retain knowledge stored in the songs, ceremonies and rituals, as well as to incorporate new knowledge related to agriculture and the legal requirements of a larger community living in close proximity. As agriculture becomes more dominant and the dependence on wild resources reduces, so the knowledge system adjusts.

> The first farmers were heirs to that knowledge, accumulated through tens of thousands of years of nature observation by biologically modern humans living in intimate dependence on the natural world (Diamond 1997, p. 144).

Based on theories of human information processing, it is reasonable to associate greater ritual specialisation with larger aggregations (Adler & Wilshusen 1990, p. 136). As the integrated knowledge system becomes segmented into specialisations such as law, medicine, genealogies, navigation, farming and so on, reliance on a generalised knowledge elite controlling an integrated knowledge system will dissipate. The power of this elite, and the justification of enormous labour input into constructing the monuments, would gradually disappear. Consequently, I will argue that such monumental sites as the mound–building sites of the southeastern American Archaic and

the stone and timber circles of the British and Irish Neolithic, described in Chapters 10 and 11, served a purpose only during the transition from hunter-gatherer to large-scale sedentary agricultural societies. Larger settlements, such as the Chacoan culture described in Chapter 9, required knowledge centres in which a knowledge elite could train the knowledge keepers of the smaller outlier communities. However, this analysis in no way implies that all hunter-gatherer cultures are on a linear pathway towards statehood, nor that for any culture, the transition from hunter-gatherer to agriculture was a simple linear progression.

I do not believe that there is any culture within the historic timeframe which matches the transitional stage described above. Consequently, there are no direct ethnographic analogies, only cross–cultural generalisations and inference.

CLARIFYING SOME FREQUENTLY USED TERMS

The troublesome term 'ritual'

There is a 'simplistic tendency of explaining any prehistoric artefacts, constructions, or cultural expressions whose purpose is unknown and hence mysterious, as necessarily having a ritualistic or religious function' (Turnbull 2002, p. 130). Insoll describes 'ritual' as 'the archaeologists' favourite catch-all for "odd" or otherwise not understood behaviour' (2004, p. 1). Acts and beliefs have 'somewhat indiscriminately been described as ritual, ceremonial or religious phenomena' when dealing with non-literate societies (Goody 1961, p. 143). Fleming (1973, p. 178) argues that many pre-historians fall into the trap of saying if it is to do with ritual, then it is connected with both unknowable and irrational ideas which cannot therefore be understood.

There is every reason to assume that prehistoric cultures used ritual for pragmatic purposes, such as Rappaport discussed in his seminal writings about the New Guinean Tsembaga:

> It has been argued that the regulatory function of ritual among the Tsembaga and other Maring helps to maintain an undegraded environment, limits fighting to frequencies that do not endanger the existence of the regional population, adjusts man-land ratios, facilitates trade, distributes local surpluses of peak in the form of pork throughout the regional population, and assures people of high-quality protein when they most need it (1967, p. 224).

It is the pragmatic aspects of ritual which will be addressed in this book, with the religious aspects understood to be part of any integrated knowledge system. Hence the term 'ritual' must also be equated with the maintenance and transmission of information, not merely as a religious rite.

A confusion of ancestors

The problematical use of the term 'ancestors' in interpreting the archaeological record has been widely discussed[2]. The issue arises when writers are not clear whether the ancestors being invoked are mythological beings or forebears. Rarotongan peoples will give their genealogy in two parts: their descent from a founding ancestor in the mythic past, and as a record of births, deaths and marriages which establishes status and rights (Campbell 2006). This is very like the Australian Aboriginal concepts of totemic ties to their Dreamtime ancestors held concurrently with their complex family ties (Rose 1992). Similar ancestral complexity can be found in Native American cultures (Sobel & Bettles 2000). Finnegan writes that the expression 'we learnt this from the ancestors' is not necessarily to be taken literally, but as a way of raising the song or narrative above the ordinary level of communication (1988, p. 66).

Care should be taken to clarify whether the ancestors are mythological or forebears, or some combination.

A note about shamans

'Shamanism' is a controversial term usually referring to some form of contact with the spirits using an ecstatic state which may be brought on by a wide variety of methods from alcohol, rapid overbreathing, dancing, rapid breathing or the inhalation of drugs, fasting and through the release of natural opiates (Bradley 2000, pp. 30–2). Among hunter-gatherers such as Australian cultures and the !Kung of the Kalahari, trance-like states are achieved through drumming, singing, dance and physical exhaustion, without the use of hallucinogenic substances (Flood 2006, p. 145; Marshall 2009). For the LoDagaa, revelation is associated with sleep, with trance possession playing little or no part (Goody 1987, p. 153).

Reference is made to American Hopi using Datura for medicinal and hallucinogenic purposes (Ford 1978a, p. 30) but in the great deal of material read about the Pueblo cultures, trance-like states and the use of hallucinogens were barely mentioned. The emphasis on the exotic by some ethnographers should not influence archaeological interpretation to favour shamanic explanations at the expense of the pragmatic and didactic purposes of ritual.

The concept of rock art being produced through trance-like states in shamanistic practices is widely disseminated (see, for example, Lewis–Williams 2001, Lewis–Williams & Pearce 2005) and debated (see, for example, Helvenston et al. 2003). I do not find the arguments presented convincing enough for shamanistic practices to be assumed in prehistory. I find the rebuttals by Noble and Davidson (1993, pp. 126–9) much more convincing and for this reason shamanism is not an assumed practice for the purpose of this

book. Critically, Ross and Davidson write that they 'know of no ethnographic literature that describes the production of art during ritual, nor evidence that ties art produced after altered states of consciousness to the images witnessed during trance' (2006, p. 308).

I find it disturbing that researchers are so willing to ascribe the purpose of enigmatic objects, paintings and monuments to almost anything, no matter how speculative, other than human intellect.

mnemonic monuments – the ten indicators

It is argued throughout this book that some structures are built with a primary purpose of aiding memory of the formal knowledge stored by a powerful knowledge elite. They are not monuments *to* memory or knowledge, but specifically *for* mnemonic purposes. In order to assess whether a structure is a 'mnemonic monument', ten indicators are presented here to enable readers to evaluate them as the justification for each is presented throughout the following chapters. Some of the indicators play a more essential role in oral cultures than others. The ten indicators are briefly described here in approximately ranked order of importance.

For example, Indicator 1, that of a stratified society with no sign of individual wealth or coercion, is considered a prerequisite for a society to be considered one in which the primary source of power was the control of information. Hence, if a few individuals are buried with valuable grave goods, then wealth has most likely become a source of individual power. Should there be signs of a chief supported by a warrior class, then it is likely that control of the society was in some way linked to violence. However, should there be signs of control, such as the organisation of a work force which can construct monumental sites, without signs of individual wealth or coercion, then it is argued over the following chapters that power was afforded those who controlled information.

The tenth indicator, rock art as mnemonic, is critical for some cultures, but the lack of suitable surfaces, or the loss of paintwork due to weathering, may make rock art impossible to detect for some prehistoric societies.

1. A stratified society with no sign of individual wealth or coercion

The use of oral technologies led to specialists who were focal persons of their communities. These knowledge specialists maintained their elite position by command of information, not through the use of coercive powers (Couch 1989, p. 597).

As will be seen in Chapter 2, in small-scale societies such as the mobile Australian Aboriginal and sedentary Pueblo cultures, those who control

knowledge are not normally differentiated from the rest of the community in terms of material wealth. Nor is there need of coercion as power 'is afforded to oral specialists because there is a generally accepted belief that knowledge is beneficial to all' (Couch 1990, p. 166). Invoking the image of Australian Aboriginal songlines, Renfrew and Bahn talk about 'constructed landscapes, with meaning as well as utility' (2008, p. 403), arguing that

> societies which appear to have had a corporate structure rather than a powerful central leader, were capable of major public works – the temples of Malta and the megalithic centers of Carnac and of Orkney are good examples, as well as Stonehenge and Chaco Canyon (2008, p. 403).

2. Public and restricted ceremonial sites

'The establishment of ceremonial centres was the watershed to the emergence of civilisations' (Couch 1996, p. 10). If ceremonial centres are to be considered as memory spaces, then there should be evidence of the dichotomy found in most, if not all, oral cultures, as elaborated in Chapter 2 – that of public and restricted knowledge. Small as well as large sites need to be available within a given culture, for public and restricted performances.

The imperative to perform the knowledge repetitively should leave an archaeological record in the prominence of a combination of public and restricted performance spaces. Platforms, mounds, enclosed spaces, plazas and even flat-bottomed ditches can act as suitable performance spaces. It is important that archaeological interpretation sees beyond the naïve description of the performance of songs and dances simply as 'these entertainments' (Lévi-Strauss 1992, p. 282).

3. Large investment of labour for no obvious reason

Akinnaso (1992, p. 81) argues that institutionalised education is highly valued by contemporary oral cultures and hence they are willing to invest a great deal of labour and resources to this end. There is no reason to believe that oral cultures in prehistoric times were any different.

Monumental sites built, maintained and altered for growing populations on the cusp of settlement, or in the early stages of farming, are seen here as addressing the requirement to localise knowledge space when people are no longer visiting the dispersed landscape sites used as mnemonic by mobile cultures. Laws for maintaining social structures in a larger population, plus knowledge of domesticates, would become increasingly important. Knowledge of wild plant and animal species, genealogies, navigation and means to maintain a calendar would still be required. Although the reason

may not be immediately obvious, it is reasonable to expect that the building of monuments to fulfil the requirements of a knowledge space would be an imperative.

4. Signs of a prescribed order – the Method of Loci

If a monument is to serve as a knowledge space, then it is essential that there is some way of structuring the knowledge. There needs to be a prescribed order to the memory locations so that information is not lost through lack of reference. As will be described in Chapter 4, the ancient Greeks left record of the optimum artificial memory site. Such a place should include a set of locations in a definite sequence, should be in a location away from distracting passers-by, be well lit, with loci not too much like one another, of moderate size, with a moderate distance between them (Yates 1966, pp. 4–9). The argument here is that memory theatres such as Yates describes from the Ancient Greece into the European Renaissance greatly predate pre-literate Greece.

Circles or lines of stones or posts, ditches or mounds enclosing open space, or large, non-domestic 'buildings' would serve as memory theatres beautifully. Stones may reference mythical ancestors, and hence their stories, while posts can be painted or carved, as described in Chapter 4, each post acting as mnemonic to a particular mythological or historical story. A circle would be the natural arrangement to represent the annual cycle of rituals. Alignments with solstices would further strengthen the case. As will be shown in Chapter 11, a combination of smaller stone circles and larger knowledge centres, such as those known from Neolithic Britain and Ireland, would serve particularly well. Consequently, it is not surprising to find stone circles in the unrelated hunter-gatherer site of Gobekli Tëpe, Turkey, adorned with engravings of animals (Curry 2008).

Circles of posts, as found in British Neolithic sites, are also found in Native American mound building sites such as at Poverty Point (Greenlee 2009, pers. comm., [email] 8 September), the Great Post Circle and the Moorehead Circle (Rippl 2009, Riordan 2007) and Cahokia. The archaeologists at Cahokia even nicknamed their massive timber circle 'Woodhenge' after a similar circle about three kilometres from Stonehenge (Pauketat 2004, p. 75). De Jong (1998) concluded that timber circles in the Netherlands served both ritual and calendric functions.

5. Enigmatic decorated objects

Designs on portable objects may be purely representational, but the relationship to stories, and thus to encoded information, needs to be considered

when assessing their purpose. Just as etchings on the back of an Australian coolamon and the beads of the African *lukasa*, described in Chapter 4, act as mnemonic to knowledge, representational or non-symmetrical abstract designs on utilitarian objects may also have a mnemonic role. Inscribed stones, notched or decorated wooden sticks or boards, inscribed bark, decorated hides, dance costumes, masks, props and representations of mythological ancestors on a wide variety of media should all be considered, depending on context, as possible mnemonics for the knowledge system.

The items described in Chapter 4 also include collections of curated human and animal bones and bundles of non-utilitarian or symbolic objects. A collection of shells or nuts, such as used by the Yoruba (Bascom 1980; McClelland 1982), are often assessed simply as divination tools, but further examination shows that they were a method by which various aspects of the knowledge system could be referenced. By creating a hierarchy to the items, an index to the system could be invoked.

As described in Chapter 4, Inca khipus/quipus were long believed to be tally devices, but recent research (Brokaw 2010, pp. 2–21) has shown that they also encode a much broader range of information. Similarly, wampum strings, belts and the Luba strings of beads all act as mnemonic devices. It is unlikely, however, that such items would remain in the archaeological record in a form which would indicate their mnemonic properties.

6. An imbalance in trade

Knowledge is a commodity which can be traded, as will be described in the following chapter. Taking knowledge into account may well balance the trade equation for a ceremonial site in which the archaeological record appears to indicate a material trade imbalance. As with contemporary oral cultures, great distances may be travelled to gain learning. These journeys may well show up in the archaeological record as burials of people from distant locations.

7. Astronomical observations and calendrical devices

The individual, or group, who maintains the calendar holds a very powerful role in oral cultures, as discussed in Chapter 6. There is broad agreement among archaeologists that prehistoric peoples were observing the heavens and noting the patterns of movement of the sun and moon and, in some cases, stars (Ruggles & Barclay 2000; Renfrew and Bahn 2008, p. 405). Hayden and Villeneuvre take this analysis much further back in time than that assumed for the analysis in this book.