

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the middle Wadi Sana of the highlands of Southern Arabia rises a rock inselberg today named by the Al-‘Ali bedouin nomads “Khuzma-as-Shumlya.” It takes its name from the nose-ring of a camel that pierces the nasal septum, and indeed geographically, the isolated mountain does serve as a septum severing the watercourse of the Wadi Shumlya as it feeds into the main drainage. Evidently people thought so long ago, for on the Khuzma’s eastern face, a caravaneer scribbled “Khuzmūm” (or “Place of Khuzma”) in Old South Arabic (AD 300) alongside a few camel pictographs. But the place was significant for far longer. Close archaeological scrutiny has revealed a concentration of platformed structures, each with a standing stone before it and evidence of ritual sacrifice dating back 6,500 years. Before Khuzma was the septum, it probably housed a god, and the location was the site of tribal gatherings, sacrifices, and feasts in Arabia’s oldest and certainly most important meta-structure, here called Pilgrimage.

A substantial part of this book documents Pilgrimage as one example of a wider phenomenon of long-term cultural continuities. Household is another example. Pilgrimage and Household are convenient terms in a new nomenclature for meta-structures that persisted through the emergence of social complexities and despite transformational changes in societies, economies, and ideologies. The core of Pilgrimage (Chapter 2) can be traced through the historical and archaeological records of Arabia and endured for most of the time Arabia is known to have been continuously occupied (Chapters 3 and 4). With 6,500 years of practice, Pilgrimage represents a persistent phenomenon that outspans



the gaze of most anthropological inquiry (except for archaeology), yet its very persistence raises some interesting anthropological issues for which new theoretical approaches need to be explored.

Anthropology, Archaeology, and Theories of Change

It is perhaps surprising that there remain obvious meta-structural cultural phenomena like Pilgrimage that require description and explanation in a region as richly studied as the Near East, but the gaps can be traced to an epistemological focus on change. Study of change has been the engine driving most anthropological, sociological, and historical theory. Influential archaeologists like Gordon Childe, who set the agenda for Near Eastern pre-history, have been deeply influenced by wider sociological debates, including subjective and discursive Orientalist perspectives that framed Near Eastern pre-history as the precursor to European. But Childe, like his successors, above all sought explanation in the great biological and historical theories of Darwin and Marx, all about change.

Pre-historians came to the Near East looking for evidence of change. Their agenda for studying the ancient Near East was set by Gordon Childe, himself deeply influenced by the writings of Karl Marx. Marx transformed Lewis Henry Morgan's (1877: 3–18) model for the passage of societies through a complex of social stages – “Savagery” preceding “Barbarism” preceding “Civilization” (attained by Europeans). Morgan had suggested that humans acquired social graces for communal living and manifested social development at each stage. After a 1935 sojourn in the newly formed Soviet Union, Childe adopted a materialist focus on an economic base for societies (Klejn 1994: 76) and, in deference to Morgan's influential scheme, suggested that the economic attributes of hunting and foraging characterized Savage society; agriculture was associated with Barbarism and craft production with Civilization (Morgan 1877: 41, Childe [1936] 1951, [1942] 1950). Childe's scheme appropriated one of the great biases of his time – an Orientalizing narrative that situates European civilization at the climax of human achievement (Said 1979). Thus, his works highlighted great transitions that led through economic “revolutions” (the term stems from Marxist praxis rather than

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actual archaeological data) to European civilization. Childe established a theoretical agenda drawing on historical materialism with the result that intervening periods and cultures in the Near East have merited scientific study only as they contributed to greater themes – the Neolithic Revolution, the Urban Revolution, *Civilization Comes to Us*. History is the “science of change” (Knapp 1992: 16, after Bloch in Lyon 1987), and by setting the tone with Marx’s theoretical model explaining history, Childe wedded pre-history to an explanation of change. There has been considerably less curiosity about explaining continuity.

Long dominated by the Childean agenda and by questions about the emergence of modern humans rooted in biological evolution, pre-historians have inherited a research agenda focused on change. Most of this work has been conducted by Western scholars with more recent and significant entry of Israeli, Arab, and Asian researchers. Theoretical approaches in archaeology followed different traditions in Anglo-American and Continental European scholarship. For example, French archaeology in the Near East has remained largely independent from anthropological traditions and ironically also shows little influence from the important structural and poststructural French contributions to sociological and anthropological theory. German archaeologists in Europe and abroad similarly regard archaeology as historical science for the reconstruction of the history of Mankind (Bittel 1980: 277). Biblical archaeologists, searching for wider context in which to interpret Biblical text, have also played a significant role in generating culture histories in the Near East (Dever 1990, Finkelstein and Silberman 2001), but ultimately such studies are rooted in humanism as an outgrowth of exegetic literary analysis. Such archaeological area studies, while deeply informative about the past, often lack the generalizing perspective attached to anthropological and sociological theory and are firmly rooted in a humanistic epistemology, one that seeks to describe Great Traditions but not to explain them as phenomena of a universal human experience. On the other hand, North American and British approaches have been notably more directly influenced by social theory. And of this, much social theory, despite an era of functionalism and structuralism (1950s–1960s), has been dedicated to the explanation of culture change (e.g., Marx 1973, Steward 1968, Sahlins and Service 1960, Renfrew, 1973, Giddens 1979, Boyd and Richerson 1985, Knapp 1992, Sewell 1992, 1996).



Anthropology and sociology draw theoretical models from two great sources: history (historical materialism) and biology (evolution). Both models inimically and intrinsically focus on change, so there is little surprise that explanation of change, rather than explanation of continuity, has dominated explicitly scientific anthropological archaeology.

Pilgrimage and Household as Continuities

This book argues that long-term cultural continuities existed as Pilgrimage and Household in the Near East and that they have not been adequately recognized or described as meta-structures worthy of scientific, anthropological study. In the past, anthropologists have characterized practices like pilgrimages as “ritual” and have examined them in the context of studying ritual (ideology) and its role in social identity and history (Kelly and Kaplan 1990). Anthropologists have recognized a durability of ideas and have struggled to define what pilgrimage, as a ritual, really signifies. Ritual is “ancient and unchanging,” yet it is dynamic and transposable as actors chose from a repertoire of forms to engage in present circumstances (Sahlins 1985, Gell 1992, Bell 1992, Kertzer 1988). It is difficult to classify ritual, and the effort has raised many questions. What is ritual and what is not? Is all social identity structured by ritual? Is ritual designed to assimilate the shocking, the disjunctive, and the paranormal violations of daily life (Boyer 2001, Burkert [1972] 1983, Mack 1987, Turner 1974a, 1974b)? Is ritual a universal of human experience (Van Gennep 1909, Eliade [1949] 1954)? Maurice Bloch (1989: 18) defined as ritual everything epiphenomenal to socioeconomy; then he argued that ritual does not matter to social life (Kelly and Kaplan 1990: 125). But others disagree and have sought in ritual the key organizing principles of social life (e.g., Durkheim 1915, Valeri 1985). Is ritual an ideology – a set of common ideas socially shared for the maintenance of social order (Leone 1982)? Is ritual practice (Bell 1992, Bourdieu [1972] 1977)? What about routine practices that structure social order, like living in houses and sharing food? How does one separate ritual from the practical (cf. Turner 1969)? Or should it be done at all (Bell 1992)?

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These are interesting questions but not the ones that this book addresses. Such approaches to ritual have sidelined a larger issue that is the extremely long continuities of some cultural traditions – like pilgrimage – as meta-structures over long time frames and throughout major changes in process and history. This book focuses on such continuity and the problems in explaining it. Everyone recognizes something quintessentially Egyptian in the 3,000-year-old culture that flourished in the Nile valley and delta areas of modern-day Egypt, but Egyptologists seldom seem to feel a need to explain why Egyptian culture is distinct or why it continued for so long (cf. Wengrow 2006). That such continuity existed and can be readily appreciated through linguistic, iconographic, religious, and epigraphic traditions is evident in even the most casual visit to any museum gallery or textbook. Likewise Mesopotamia persisted as a civilization writing cuneiform and holding a “Great Tradition” of city-dwelling for about 3,000 years. Norman Yoffee (1988, 1993, 2005: 53–90) has made a persuasive case that changing political circumstances – the rise and collapse of empires and dynasties – cannot be viewed as a truncation of essential Mesopotamian culture. Yet of what abstract features did these civilizations consist? What made Mesopotamia recognizably Mesopotamian and Egypt Egyptian? That question has been largely overlooked by social and behavioral scientists obsessed with the explanation of culture change but can be addressed through understanding their core cultural meta-structures like Pilgrimage and Household.

This project therefore focuses on Pilgrimage and Household not only because they persist, but because they do so as enduring frameworks for social, economic, political, and ideological constitution despite changes in all these aspects. In some respects, Pilgrimage and Household resemble theoretical constructs of culture already identified – by Bourdieu ([1972] 1977: 72) as “structuring structures,” by Giddens (1984: 35) as “institutions,” and as “structures” in history (Sahlins 1985, 1981, Knapp 1992). But as revealed through archaeological analysis, the longevity of Pilgrimage and Household over more than 5,000 years and the evolution of complex societies are meta-structural beyond the intergenerational or even historical span envisioned by sociologists and anthropologists. As such, these meta-structures deserve a new nomenclature, which here is introduced and captures the epochal integrity of their duration (Chapter 7).



The Science of Culture

Of course a study of long-term cultural traditions has anthropological and historical precedence. In the first half of the last century, many explored the Great Traditions or Great Civilizations of world history (e.g., Spengler [1922] 1926, Kroeber 1944, Toynbee 1934–1954, Redfield [1955] 1967, Redfield in Singer 1974, Bagby 1959), usually setting them off from lesser, more primitive societies whose trajectories truncated or fed into present-day stagnations (Yoffee 2005, Service 1962). The criteria of what makes a Great Civilization have differed according to historian or epistemological bias (yet they always include Western European Civilization) (Bagby 1959: 159–182). With its long temporal reach, archaeology has unique potential to document and describe long-term cultural traditions, yet where archaeology follows anthropological and sociological theoretical agendas, it has focused on change. For the past half-century, anthropological archaeologists with a disciplinary commitment to a universal human condition have relied on neo-evolutionism (derived from the historical materialist model) and biological evolution to define their objects of study. Therefore, scientific archaeology has dismissed meta-structures, which do not change, as epiphenomenal and not significant explanatory factors of a universal human condition.

Are Pilgrimage, Household, and other meta-structures indeed worthy of such study? That they are becomes evident when one compares meta-structures across time and space, invoking the well-practiced observational science of cross-cultural comparison. This has long been an epistemological mainstay of anthropological method (e.g., Kroeber 1944, Murdock 1981, Trigger 2003). In contemporary scientific anthropology, long-term developmental cases drawn from archaeology have been compared to discriminate pattern from noise in the process of change. A cross-cultural comparative approach argues that the structural regularities underlying common patterns of change can be elucidated through comparison and that they reveal universal aspects of the human condition (Gibbon 1984: 311–312, e.g., Nichols and Charlton 1997, Trigger 1993, 2003, Joyce and Gillespie 2000, Yoffee and Cowgill 1988, Kirch 1994, Beck et al. 2007). For example, Bruce Trigger (1993, 2003) argued that Egypt and Mesopotamia emerged as different types of state – territorial and city – differentiated by underlying geopolitical frameworks in broader global patterns.

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Nevertheless there remain long-term and distinctive continuities – usually discarded as noise – that differentiate these cultures into diversities not so easily parsed (cf. Trigger 2003: 658–661, Boyd and Richerson 1985: 95–116). One city-state is not like another. Although both were city-states, Mesopotamian culture cannot be confused with Greek; indeed the advent of Hellenism best defines the end of Mesopotamian civilization (Yoffee 1988, cf. 2005: 53). Too often the cross-cultural observational science approach discards as explanatorily irrelevant what appears as difference. The aesthetics that separate diverse cultures are usually left to the descriptive and emotive realm of humanistic studies. For example, both the Classic Maya and Sumerians inhabited competing city-states with wealth-based social hierarchies and extracted wealth from an agricultural surplus. It seemingly matters little in explaining the evolution of city-states that the Maya thought themselves made of corn or preferred textiles to tattoos while Mesopotamians descended from clay and attached little significance to the body alive or dead. Thus, anachronistic cultural adhesion to idiom has seemed but a quirk of historical inheritance, and as such belongs to the realm of culture studies but not to scientific explanatory anthropology.

A comparative approach is not everywhere averse to historical idiom (e.g., Kirch 1994). In biology, neo-Darwinian evolutionary ecology makes full use of comparison between similar ecosystems and shows that no ecosystem functioning, nor mutualistic interaction, nor adaptive trait, nor population diversity can be divorced from the influence of historical contingency (Gould 1986). The comparison of structurally comparable ecosystems has underscored the significance of history in explaining differences in organisms and in their natural contexts, as can be readily grasped from the many case studies of mediterranean-type ecosystems worldwide (Raven 1973, Aschmann and Bahre 1977, Mooney and Dunn 1970, Naveh 1975, Trabaud 1981, Pignatti 1979, McCriston 1992). The point is not to suggest that cultures are like plants and animals but to emphasize the importance of historical constraints on the processes of change. One must recognize and treat as significant the historical traditions of cultures. In evolutionary ecology, history has infused environmental determinism with explanatory power, a point not lost in the historical ecology approaches in archaeology (Crumley 1994, Crumley and Marquardt 1987, Knapp 1992, Kirch 1994). Yet in many cross-cultural



comparative studies, archaeologists have taken an alternative path, focusing not on the historical contingencies that explain differences but on the structural parameters that produce similar social frameworks. Historical contingency – wherein lies the continuity of ideas and cultural practices – is long overdue for similar scientific treatment in archaeology (Kirch and Green 2001: 1–9).

Some have turned the lens of cross-cultural comparison on cultural idiom. Observational methods of cross-cultural comparison pointed the way for Trigger (2003: 656–660) to recognize “idiosyncratic patterns” as a regularity of cultures. He explained these different cultural traditions with the observation drawn from evolutionary theory (Boyd and Richerson 1985: 95–116, 276) that they are ideas that change slowly because of the slower rate of change in preindustrial societies (e.g., Urban 2001) and that the ideas themselves were adaptive outcomes of selective processes. Despite its rich use of archaeological time frames, Trigger’s study is nevertheless relatively static in its comparison of structure and detail in fully emerged and emergent states. What Trigger did not emphasize was that the archaeological record shows a duration of cultural traditions reaching far back to the Neolithic. Moreover, such duration may prove difficult to explain with theories of change. Nevertheless, the cross-cultural comparative method is a valuable approach and will be used here to study the problem of epochal meta-structure.

Explaining Continuity

This book compares meta-structures in Arabia and Mesopotamia under the nomenclature of Pilgrimage and Household (Chapters 5 and 6). When one engages in cross-cultural comparison of a long duration of ideas that is epochal and meta-structural, it becomes evident that there is indeed something worthy of anthropological study – that is, these are significant universal aspects of the human condition – but the very definition of *ethnoepochs* (Chapter 7) opens the problem of how to explain them. A new theoretical foundation apart from theory focused on change is essential if one is to understand the causality and meaning of such meta-structures.

Where will such a theoretical foundation be found? The second major point of this book is a theoretical one, arguing that one can only explain

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the persistence of long-term cultural idiosyncratic patterns – Pilgrimage and Household – through the approaches of landscape analysis. “Landscape” has been called “a usefully ambiguous term” (Gosden and Head 1994), and the multiple disciplinary contributions to landscape analysis are here acknowledged and embraced (Crumley 1994). Landscape by its very definition(s) across the social sciences and beyond embraces an interplay of space, time, and bodily experience. In this interplay, the notion of landscape interweaves temporal and spatial perspectives of differing scales (Knapp 1992, Tilley 1994) and is an appropriate starting point for understanding the adherence of specific Near Eastern societies to long-term cultural traditions.

The relatively long time frames of archaeological cultures call for long-term perspectives on cultural continuity not found in the ethnographic approaches of sociocultural anthropology. Of course there exists significant and diverse sociological and anthropological theory dedicated to explaining the maintenance and transmission of culture (e.g., Durkheim 1915, Bloch 1977, Bourdieu [1980] 1990, [1972] 1977, Giddens 1979, 1984, Boyd and Richerson 1985, Connerton 1989). One inevitable outcome of the short-term temporal perspective afforded by traditional ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, the core tools of anthropological method, is that cultural transmission is for the most part dedicated to short-term maintenance and change. Consequently, long time frames are outside the perspective of the observer. It is one thing, and an essential one, to understand how practices and ideas are transmitted from one generation to another in the microcosm of an ethnographic experience. It is quite another, and yet not unrelated problem, to explain the persistence of culturally distinct worldviews across many thousands of years, a perspective that only unfolds, moreover, with archaeological study and time depth (e.g., Crumley and Marquardt 1987, Barker 1991, Kirch 1994, cf. Hodder 1990). One may suggest along scientific principles that processes observable in the short term are the only processes that may account for long-term cultural continuities, but such arguments have not been specifically advanced because the long-term cultural frameworks in question have not been widely recognized as phenomena requiring explanation. (Perhaps exceptionally, the question of whether “function” (that is, the necessities of maintaining societies) or “structure” (that is, the way the past shapes or



controls the present) best accounts for long-term continuities has characterized debates about archaeologically manifest Pacific political systems (Kirch 1994, Kirch and Green 2001, Terrell 1986: 222.)

Where can theoretical explanations be found? It is possible to modify two sets of theory: poststructuralist theory and landscape theory (which in turn relies on poststructuralist theory). Landscape analysis does offer important insights for explaining long-term persistence in cultural diversities and continuities. The concept of landscape has generally been used as a tool or analytical approach in archaeology, often as the spatially organizing principle or perspective for field research and analytical description (e.g., Higgs and Vita-Finzi 1972, Butzer 1982, Cherry et al. 1991). Nevertheless landscape has a theoretical sense to which archaeology has been successfully applied (Crumley 1994, Kirch and Hunt 1997, Knapp 1992, Butzer 1996, Leone 1984, Anschuetz, Wilshusen, and Scheick 2001, Tilley 1994, Bradley 2006). This theoretical concept of landscape has the sense envisioned by Pierre Bourdieu ([1972] 1977: 72) when he defined “habitus” as the durable and transposable dispositions that generate and are reproduced by practice. The relationship between Bourdieu’s habitus and landscape is largely but not entirely moderated by temporal parameters, an idea to be explored in greater detail. Chapter 7 introduces into theoretical nomenclature the term “ethnoepoch” to represent the essential temporal and especially cultural coherence of what *Annales* historian Ferdinand Braudel historically and empirically recognized as a qualitatively integral “*longue duree*” (Knapp 1992: 13). Braudel’s ([1966] 1972) conceptual *longue duree* has been heuristically melded with landscape in archaeological approaches (e.g., Barker 1991, Kirch 1994, Butzer 1996), but there is good reason to insist upon a new terminology. Braudel’s *longue duree* is objectively described and implies a universality of perception (Moreland 1992: 115), whereas an ethnoepoch is bodily translated, a quality fundamental to its long continuity.

Pilgrimage, Household, and the Social Constitution of Near Eastern Societies

To address the problem of how ethnoepochs endure while civilizations rise and fall, one must first describe and document some examples. In