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INTRODUCTION

This book is an act of permuting, which Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines as "to change the order or arrangement of; to arrange in all possible ways."[1] It takes a wide range of archaeological and cuneiform sources – some well discussed in ancient Near Eastern scholarship, some less thoroughly treated – and extracts them from current paradigms in order to put them in a fresh relationship with each other. In order to do this, I start from a different perspective: that of mobile pastoralism. But the book is not about mobile pastoralists themselves. There is no search for the material traces of herders' lifeways or study of animal husbandry practices. Instead, the book is about the ways in which archaeologists and historians construct models and reconstruct the past, and it is also about the other possibilities always implicit in the evidence.

I choose the lens of mobile pastoralism because while it is increasingly recognized as a significant component in the economic systems of the ancient Near East, especially in the formative period of 4000–1500 BCE (when cities, governments, writing, law, and art all came into being), mobile pastoralism has often been relegated to a cultural, if not geographic and environmental, periphery by the very nature of the period's innovations. That periphery, however, is in actuality the dominant landscape of the region, and the thought that it was not particularly relevant bears examination. Sometimes reconstructions of this period convey, unintentionally no doubt, an image of beleaguered groups of people clinging somewhat desperately to narrow ribbons of land constituted by river valleys and circumscribed by a vast and frightening terra incognita. And yet hostile environments everywhere – untenable climates and arid landscapes – are full of people doing things and living ordinary human lives. To think that these people have no impact on the nature of the worlds in which they live is to

1 http://mw2.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/permuting.

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deny them not only agency but also connections with those who live in more congenial climes.

If there are two theoretical perspectives that undergird this work, therefore, they are that human beings in all times and places do have agency (if agency is consciousness, the ability to make choices, and some degree or kind of power) and that there are very few groups of people in this world, past or present, who are completely isolated. Indeed, most of us are networked together in multiple series of relationships that render us – that *should* render us – resistant to classification. And all sorts of sometimes surprising things are interconnected. I do not explicitly develop these positions, which by now are rather well-worn in any case, but they are woven, and demonstrated, I hope, throughout a narrative that addresses one fundamental question: what happens to our reconstructions of the past when the mobile[2] and sedentary components of the ancient world are thoroughly interrelated parts of the same societies?

Asking this question requires the rearrangement of a number of matters. Instead of looking at pastoralists in the steppe, I look for ways we may see their presence in the settlements of the societies of which they were part. This, of course, at some level becomes a hypothetical exercise. There are no signs saying "pastoralists live here." But there are signs, at various points in time and space, indicating that certain kinds of issues and certain kinds of relationships are at stake that would seem to transcend a fully sedentary existence; so instead of delineating sociopolitical organization, I search for evidence of the practices that establish those relationships or speak to those issues. The outcome of these tasks is a rearrangement of some deeply embedded principles of Near Eastern archaeology and history: instead of understanding that sedentary agriculture, and specifically cereal cultivation, is the source of civilization, I find that some of the key attributes of this period – the development of urbanism, the nature of political organization and structure, the origins of writing – arise from the tensions implicit in societies that have significant mobile components. Those tensions, however, lie not in an incipient violence created when two fundamentally different ways of life are forced to exist side-by-side, but in the constant risk of fragmentation and dispersal of a social group when large parts of it constantly move.

So, on another level, this book is about structures and practices of integration and differentiation; it is about the nature of kinship, boundaries and identities – the things people do to maintain and change them and the forces that act on them that are beyond anyone's control. It is about how the way people

2 Of course mobility is not restricted to pastoralists, nor are pastoralists necessarily mobile (Bernbeck 2008a: 45–6). However, this book is restricted to mobile pastoralists as both the dominant mobile group and the dominant form of pastoralism during the periods under study.

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think about the world and its organization and operation – cosmology – shapes what they do, whether ancient Mesopotamian or modern scholar. It is concerned with archaeological and historical methodologies and the blurring of domains of existence, as well as study. No doubt it is a little unwieldy at times, but I wish to maintain the interconnectedness of all the various elements that comprise the record of the past.

I begin this project, then, by arguing that the pervasive sense of a profound social as well as physical separation between mobile pastoralists and sedentary farmers/urban citizens is a theoretical construct and not an inevitable condition of animal husbandry. It is sometimes a political construct as well, a product of specific historical circumstances and/or of intellectual histories. Chapter 1 traces the origins of various archaeological interpretations of the role of mobility in the ancient world and the various ways in which certain fundamental tenets guide the reconstructions of Near Eastern scholarship. Dominant among these ideas is the relationship between mobility and sociopolitical organization, between pastoralist and tribe. An uncritical use of sociological theory and anthropological analogy has led practitioners of archaeology and Near Eastern studies into a corner in this regard, at the same time as some of the foundational premises of anthropology itself are under review. The pivotal question is this: if pastoralists and farmers belong to the same sociopolitical entities, how is the existence of these two apparently divergent political forms, tribe and state, to be reconciled? An answer requires the delineation of the long history of use and abuse of these two terms, "tribe" and "state."

There is another dimension to the problem. For fragmentation not to occur within groups dispersed over time and space, it would seem that something happens to counter the disintegrating potential of mobility. The structures and processes that inhibit disintegration are in and of themselves dynamic and have an impact on the eventuation of what we consider the fundamentals of civilization, so that not only do the empirical specifics of the origin of civilization change, but there is a larger theoretical outcome. Basic evolutionary precepts are undermined and other approaches to thinking about these shifts have to be developed, because if pastoralists and farmers belong to the same sociopolitical entities, organizational and administrative systems and structures must transcend – indeed counter – distance and separation or soon there is no group to administer; they must stretch.

Chapter 2 brings these approaches to the fore when considering the role of pastoralism in the context of a prominent problem in Near Eastern archaeology, the Uruk expansion. In the mid-fourth millennium BCE, a distinctive material culture argued to have disseminated from the very first city, Uruk of southern Mesopotamia, is found spread throughout a broad swath of the Near East. Long thought to be the material residue of the processes of colonization by a superior civilization of lesser ones, pastoralism may be demonstrated to

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have played a far more critical role in the expansion than any desire to appropriate land, raw materials, or political power. The complex distribution patterns of Uruk material culture speak to a specific set of problems wrought by the increasing mobility of significant sections of the populace – how to combat the disintegrating forces of fragmentation and dispersal so that key primary producers would remain an integral part of the sociopolitical system from which they originally derived. The means employed to this end shaped the ways in which some of the key transformations of this time took place and the forms they assumed, just as other transformations contributed to this new mobility by shifting how traditional subsistence practices worked in Mesopotamia and how the people who practiced them interacted. Religion and kinship emerge as dual and interconnected means of configuring sociopolitical relationships that transcend time and space.

But the dynamic significance of pastoralism is not confined to this one time of change; it is of enduring power in the ancient world. In order to demonstrate this, Chapter 4 focuses on a specific historical problem: the origins of those most famous of supposed nomads in the ancient Near East, the Amorrites,[3] the people who gave us Hammurabi and who dominated Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BCE. This chapter, however, is based on literary analysis rather than traditional historical methodologies and is offered as a complement to the rigorous studies of linguistic and textual detail more commonly utilized to understand this problem. Again, externality is the central issue: the Amorrites seem by all accounts to have been alien to the river valleys of Mesopotamia that they eventually came to dominate, because pastoralism is a key component of their economic and hence, to many scholars, political system, and at certain points some Amorrites actively claimed a history of mobility. And yet there are anomalies that confound us, hints of a long historical presence in Mesopotamia and associations with the sedentary world, at the same time as there is no trace of an indigenous Amorrite culture, since they did not even use their own language to write the official documents of their rule. This lack of written Amorrite, the fact that the Amorrites employed Akkadian, the language of their predecessors in political dominance, has led many to view them as cultureless nomads greedy for the superior civilization of the sedentary world. Such views impede our ability to realize fully the political nature of social and ethnic identities, and especially the activities of history making and storytelling – all factors that play into the construction of the sometimes enigmatic sources on the Amorrites.

However, a thousand years intervene between the end of the Uruk expansion and the emergence of the Amorrites, a thousand years in which all we think we know about the nature of society, polity, and culture is the antithesis of mobile

3 Following Fleming (2004), I use the Akkadian spelling with doubled "r," also thereby distinguishing the second-millennium group from the biblical Amorites.

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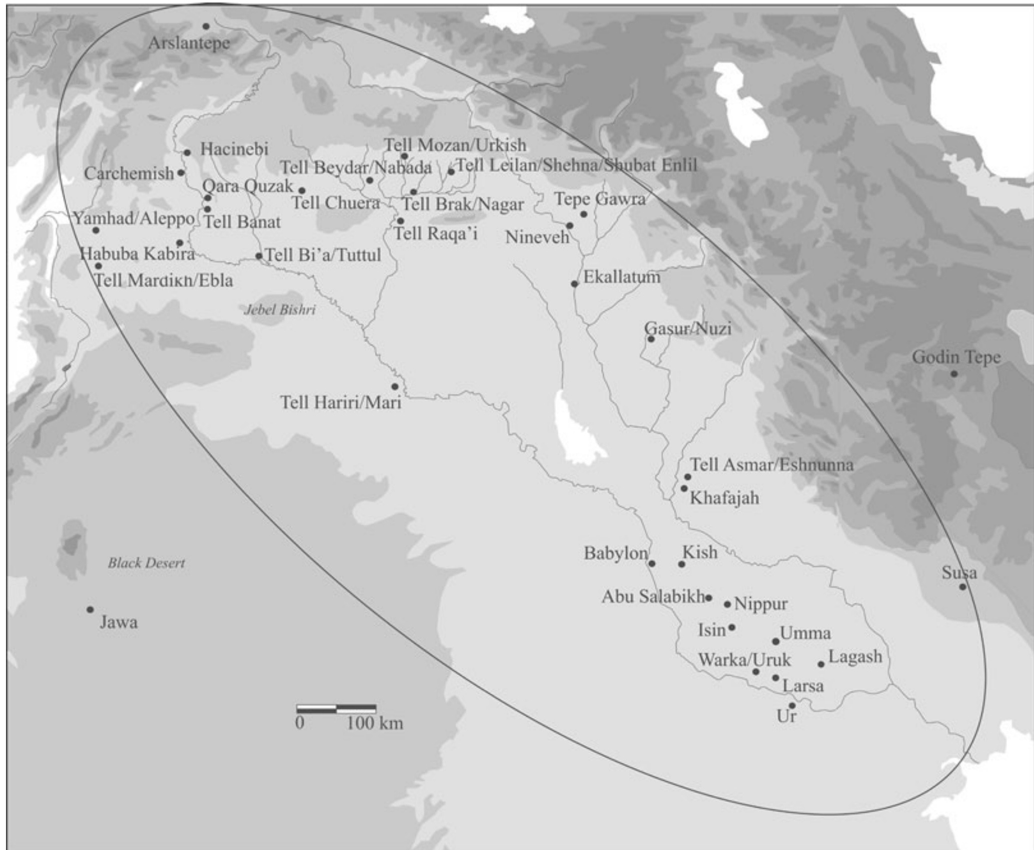

1. Map of the "land of the four riverbanks" with key sites.

pastoralism. This is the time of urban explosion across the land of the four riverbanks, the area around and between the Euphrates and Tigris from their headwaters in Turkey through to the Persian Gulf. It is the time when complex polities become more than that, when even "empires" are said to come into being. At the same time this was not a uniform process. There were regional differences in sociopolitical organization, usually characterized as between north and south, which seem to have had something to do with differences in environment and landscape, as long ago argued by Robert McCormack Adams (1974, 1981). An examination in Chapter 3 of settlement during the third millennium in the northern part of the land of the four riverbanks,[4] in Syria and Turkey (Fig. 1), shows how, rather than diverging trajectories resulting not

4 I have adapted the term "the four riverbanks" from Buccellati (1990a), since it expresses the geographic focus of this discussion without implying in any way the cultural or political priority of one region over the other and is thus to be preferred to terms such as Northern and Southern Mesopotamia, or Mesopotamia and the Jazireh. I extend its compass a little farther than Buccellati, however, to include all of the land between the rivers and, for their outer perimeters, the steppe beyond only the river valley itself as far as Ebla to the west

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only in unlike organization but in differential levels of complexity, the third-millennium histories of north and south arose from the same set of processes, and more particularly, practices, set in motion in the fourth millennium. There are further outcomes to this situation: the association of certain kinds of structure with political form or levels of complexity; that is, kinship with tribes, civic ties with state, are obviated. In the ancient world, "tribe" and "state" were not fundamental oppositions, for both were configured through actual and philosophical/ideological concepts of kinship and had much in common operationally and organizationally. They operated similarly, in order to achieve similar ends. Significant variation is found, however, in the way social structure is perpetuated across society. Sometimes it is hidden and implicit, carried through and within the social knowledge of the individual; sometimes it is codified as an external entity, imposed from outside the individual. What are commonly interpreted as self-perpetuating and independent institutions are simply concretized versions of otherwise abstract social principles.

The relationship really under consideration here though is that of modern models and ancient experience. I think we have, by and large, nicely reconstructed an understanding of what life would have been like if *we* had existed in the past. That is to say, none of the categories that currently dominate our thinking are quite real for antiquity. They are based on our own experiences and our own histories. Our sources tell us that there are distinctions in these sorts of categories that people in the ancient world were well aware of – differences in ethnicity perhaps, differences in subsistence, differences in political functioning and organization. But are those differences the same as ours? In terms of the political categories we apply to the past, I will venture to say they are not. "Tribe" and "state" are both inappropriate frameworks, at least as we currently comprehend these words, to use in understanding the sociopolitical organization of the period from 4000 to 1500 BCE (Table 1).

and the Diyala on the east because, in emic terms, these regions constitute key parts of the interconnected world this study is about – an interconnectedness that is facilitated by pastoralism.

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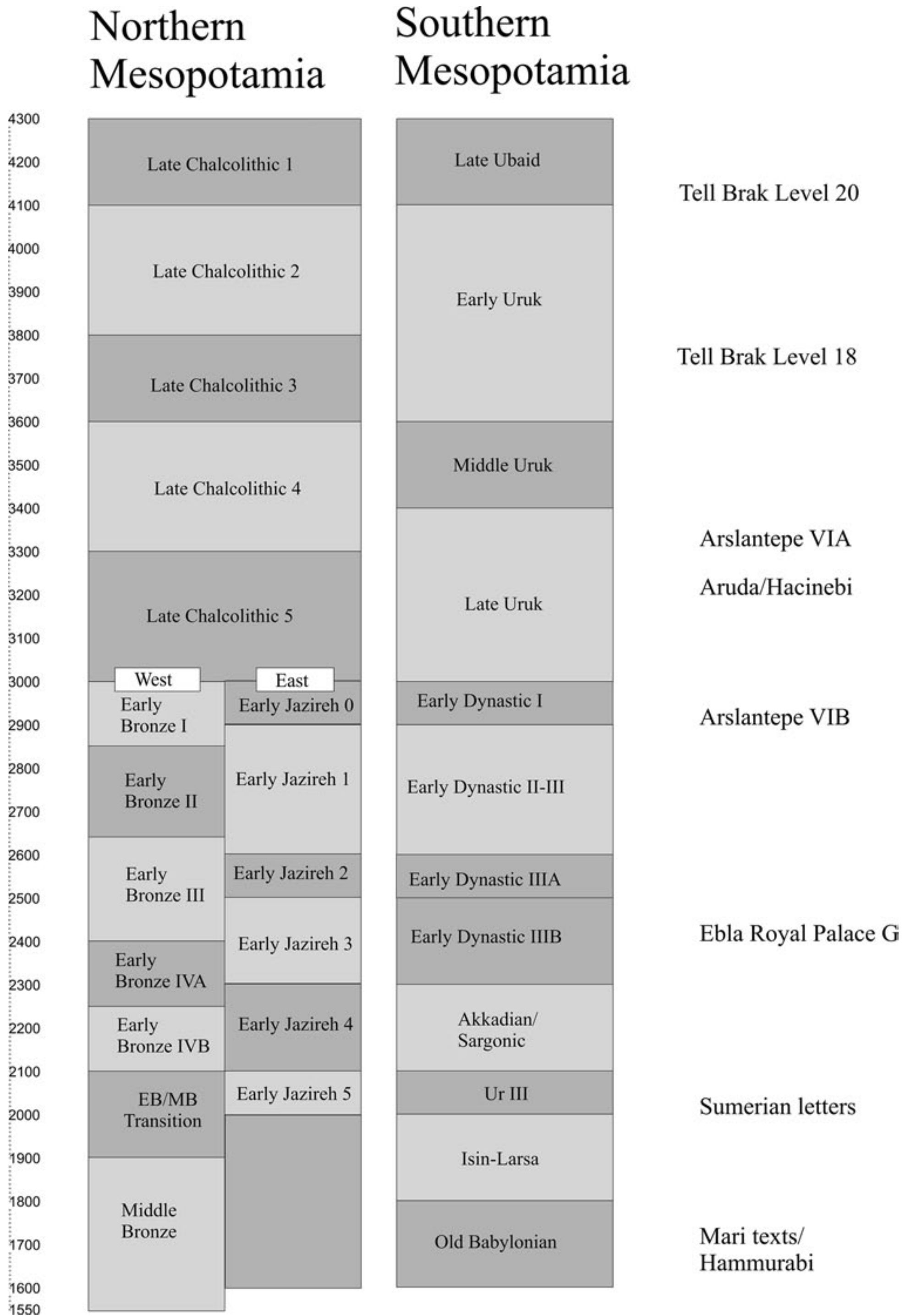
Table 1. Chronology 4000–1500 BCE.



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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM WITH PASTORALISTS

One of the most exotic experiences of my life as an archaeologist was presaged by a faint susurration swelling to a slow yet steady drumbeat in an otherwise eerie silence, a drumbeat that was made by the padding of thousands of camel feet wending their way to water at Qasr Burqu in the Black Desert of Jordan (Fig. 1). The camels belonged to the Rwala Bedouin, and when they finally came within sight, no camera could have captured the multisensory experience of dust rising from the ground with each hoof's thud to merge with the heat's haze through which these enigmatic creatures loomed, then faded, in a rhythm timed to their gait.

But my interest in pastoralists began long before that moment, with the book *Jawa: Lost City of the Black Desert* by Svend Helms (1981) and the reason I was at Qasr Burqu in the first place. Controversial because of its popular nature, where technical discussions of hydrology and stratigraphy were interwoven with personal anecdote and imaginative reconstruction, and, too, because of the connections drawn to the biblical stories of the Israelites, Helms's book did something I had not encountered before during my education in the archaeology of well-watered river valleys and rain-fed plains. It presented a world *without* much water or, in fact, as I realized when I went to work in the region, without anything at all – a remarkably barren world, yet one in which people lived. A world, one would think, best suited only to the hardiest of mobile pastoralists. At least, that was my interpretation in the master's thesis I wrote on the topic. But Helms also presented a bifurcated world in which those who built the settlement of Jawa were, by the very fact that a settlement existed, necessarily at odds in every respect with what he/we knew of mobile pastoralists and therefore could not *be* pastoralists.[1] I have been intrigued ever since by the relationship of pastoralists not only to settlement but to all aspects of materiality.

1 For an example of the continuing prevalence of this view, see Meyer 2010a.

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The reader might, then, expect a study of Bedouin material culture to follow, as is often the case with archaeologists considering pastoralism. But my concerns here are instead with why we think what we do about pastoralism, in the mental constructs that enable model to defy not only logic but all too often evidence. Because it seemed to me then, in 1984 when I wrote the thesis on Jawa, and still today, that Helms was far from alone in his understanding that pastoralists were simply not capable of doing the things that settled people do, if only because they lacked the ability to organize in the same way. The reasons for that lack were thought somehow inherent in the nature of pastoralism itself, so that a situation observable in the modern world was, naturally, in place in the ancient world. Of course many factors contribute to this view, but the essential line of argument, deriving from anthropological research, was that animal husbandry and mobility both preclude the accumulation of differentials in wealth that leads to social stratification and that in turn leads to complexity. Mobility also constrains social interactions and organization so that to be pastoralist is essentially to be tribal.[2] And tribe is always something other than the state.

The reasoning goes as follows: as the tribe is based on kinship, the group is considered to have a low level of integration and centralization, is egalitarian in organization (Swidler 1972: 119; Gellner 1969, 1984: xiii; cf. Digard 1990: 97–8), and lacks institutional structure (Khoury and Kostiner 1990: 10) intrinsic to its very nature as an aggregation of small, self-contained groups of families bound together by a system of blood relationships that determine loyalties, degree of connection, and the nature of interaction (Evans-Pritchard 1969 [first published 1940]; Sahlins 1968) and that give rise to a moral economy of sharing (McGuire 1992: 182; Yoffee 1993: 69). But such groups are also divided by self-interest because the individual family controls the means of production (Khazanov 1978: 122; Lefébure 1979: 6; Johnson and Earle 1987: 241; Cribb 1991: 49), and pastoralism is such an unstable basis for an economy (Kuznar and Sedlmeyer 2008: 561) that it cannot generate the long-term reserves necessary for the development of social inequality (Childe 1951 [1936]; Asad 1979: 420; Cole 1981: 130; Gellner 1984: xi). There is no larger institutional entity that ensures connections through collection and/or redistribution of production. Tribally organized pastoralists are therefore usually unable or unwilling to sustain the concerted action necessary for state formation and state continuance. Successful and long-term state formation occurs primarily through conquest and only when large components of the pastoralist group, particularly the elite, settle and adopt institutions of leadership transmission, administration (Khazanov 1978: 124–5; Nissen 1980: 289; Kafadar 1995; Khoury and Kostiner 1990: 11; Postgate 1992: 86), and especially formalized militarization (Gellner 1990) from sedentary society. And, of course, a classic aspect of most theories of state formation is still – and above

2 See Porter 2000 for comprehensive discussion.

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all else, as recently reiterated (Ur 2010) – the dissolution or suppression of the kinship ties that are the essence of the tribe. Explanations for the success or failure of the transition from tribe to state rely upon characteristics of the tribal system, such as its militaristic, expansionist nature (Sahlins 1961; Beck 1986: 14; Lapidus 1990: 34; Digard 1990: 102–3), bonds of loyalty (Digard 1990: 104), egalitarianism (Hall and Ikenberry 1989: 31), and, often, greed (Seaman 1991) or brutality (Gellner 1984: xii; Kuznar and Sedlmeyer 2008).[3]

As can be seen from the extensive references in the above passage, this understanding was developed through the explosion of ethnographic work on pastoralist groups that took place primarily from the late 1960s through mid-1980s, when certain issues dominated because of the larger geopolitical situation, one of which was the conflictual relationship between tribes and the states that were seeking to subordinate them. This material is very influential in archaeological interpretations, especially in the evolutionary archaeology still ascendant in the United States, and it sets the tone for that work in two ways, one material and one conceptual. In the first instance, the search for traces of ancient pastoralist presence is presumed rather fruitless, if only because nomads possess little material culture and have but an ephemeral presence in the landscape, and thus do not leave behind detectable residues of their existence.[4] In the second, pastoralism, and especially its political corollary, the tribe, is seen as either an earlier *stage* in the development of human societies, one that is then sidelined as the state develops, or as a *type* of society that is less sophisticated in its workings than the state. Either as stage or type, then, pastoralist tribes are not included as part of the physical or ideological environment of the state.

The upshot of both these positions, material and conceptual, is that archaeologists rarely consider the possibility that pastoralists were present in, or had any part in shaping, the settlements they excavate and the societies that inhabited them, especially once urbanism is present. Pastoralist and settlement are assumed to be mutually exclusive in every way. If for some reason pastoralists are recognized as intrinsic to the urban record, then they are thought to have sedentarized, which by definition means they have abandoned pastoralism (while perhaps claiming a lingering pastoralist identity) and, by implication, have chosen civilization.

But while ethnographic analogy is very useful for understanding some aspects of pastoralism, it is highly problematic for characterizing the nature and place of pastoralists in the ancient world (Bernbeck 2008a; Khazanov

3 For an explanation of the Islamic state that incorporates all these attributes, see Hall and Ikenberry 1989.

4 The alternative too often takes the form of simplistic correlations of material culture attributes such as crude handmade pottery (e.g., Alizadeh 2008: 103) or circular architecture with mobile ways of life, but see Berelov 2006 for an exception.

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