

CHAPTER I

ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY AND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Cultural change or cultural evolution does not operate on isolated societies but always on interconnected systems in which societies are variously linked within wider 'social fields.'

E. R. Wolf (1982: 76)

Archaeologists gather data about the past and interpret it within distinct research traditions that structure the data they select to find and analyze, and that provide them with the necessary support to carry on their work. The activity of reconstructing the past through the analysis of material cultural remains is necessarily constrained by the social context in which the archaeologist must function. This observation is self-evident, but, during the past twenty years or so, there has been an increasing recognition that these separate traditions of research divide themselves along cultural, linguistic, and, most interestingly, national lines. This too is not surprising, particularly when one considers the very practical nature of conducting archaeological research, that is, obtaining financial support, typically or at least in part, from the state to excavate sites that are now nearly universally considered to form part of some state's – usually the archaeologist's own – national heritage or patrimony. That there exist national traditions of archaeological research also is not surprising when one examines the historical development of the discipline: rooting a people or a nation in the distant past was one of the main stimuli for the development of archaeology, particularly prehistoric archaeology, during the past two hundred years or, not coincidentally, during the period that witnessed the rise of modern nation-states as the world's fundamental unit of political organization.

These observations can be overstated. Clearly, communication across these traditions of research takes place. Archaeological methods and techniques and, even to some extent, theories diffuse throughout the discipline, and such sharing is likely only to increase in the age of electronic mail and the Internet. The process of sharing, however, is neither uniform nor pervasive. Most observers

would consider British and American, or hereafter Anglo–American, archaeology to have features distinctive from those characteristics of separate national traditions of research in continental Europe (e.g., cf. Coudart 1999; Schlanger 2002), Russia, or China. Although generally laudable, efforts to create a “world archaeology” (Ucko 1995) have been only partially realized, and the resistances to such attempts are themselves interesting and deserve further examination. What some like to see as an admirable universalism, others may resent as a new form of academic and linguistic imperialism.

There is another division of knowledge that crosscuts these national traditions of archaeological research and affects the current study: the area divisions of the discipline; specifically, those that divide Classical, Near Eastern or Middle Eastern/West Asian (*Vorderasiatische*) archaeology from European and Eurasian prehistory. Political factors here are also at work: the Cold War effectively cut off the Eurasian steppes from Southwest Asia. With the exception of Urartian sites in Armenia and the odd cuneiform inscription from Azerbaijan, the former Soviet Union, as vast as it was, lay beyond the distributional range of ancient Near Eastern historical sources – at least until the advent of the Achaemenids. The linguistic barrier, if you will, reinforced this historical accident: most Western scholars did not read Russian, which, in turn, was reinforced by the bipolar politics of the Cold War. The result was that scholars’ areas of expertise were arbitrarily circumscribed and unnecessarily and strangely not coincident. It can be argued, I believe, that this breakdown of knowledge was asymmetrical: more Russian/Soviet scholars were aware of research in West Asia than Western scholars were of their work, say, in the Caucasus, Central Asia, or on the Eurasian steppes. But this division adversely affected everyone, and our overall understanding of “what happened in history” suffered. This study hopes to provide a modest contribution to overcoming this unfortunate legacy.

This book, written in English, is to some extent necessarily addressed to the practitioners of Anglo–American archaeology. One basic goal is to present a mass of archaeological materials, largely recovered by archaeologists working within the former Soviet Union, that are not extensively discussed in the Anglo–American archaeological literature; at this level, its purpose is simply to make more accessible this incredibly rich database. (Figure 1.1 shows the general area and some of the archaeological sites discussed in this work.) This study, however, also self-consciously and critically situates itself within an archaeological dialogue that has taken place largely within the Anglo–American tradition of archaeological research, and the placement of this study within that dialogue is the principal aim of this introductory chapter.

ANGLO-AMERICAN THEORETICAL ARCHAEOLOGY FROM CA.1960 TO THE PRESENT – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

If the traditions of archaeological research, alluded to earlier, divide themselves most significantly and typically along national lines, then is it even appropriate

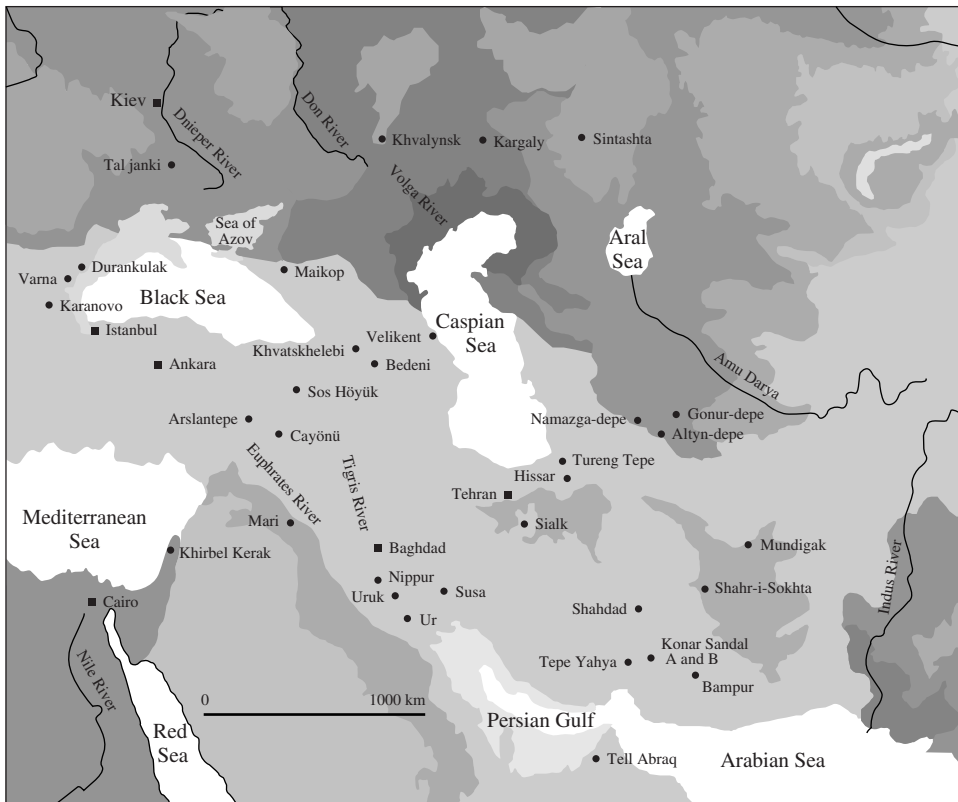


Figure 1.1. Western Eurasia, showing approximate location of selected archaeological sites.

to refer to an Anglo-American archaeology? Despite certain “special relationships” that may exist, most English-speaking nations – particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia – are politically independent from one another, and the way archaeological research takes place within each of these countries varies according to its specific national context. Such real differences are not the focus of the current discussion; rather, here the emphasis is on their *similarities*. Since the initial emergence of the then-new or processual archaeology in the early 1960s, an increasing dialogue has taken place largely across the North Atlantic. In the 1960s graduate students in the United States read not only their Lewis Binford and Kent Flannery, but also their David Clarke and Colin Renfrew; the converse was true in the United Kingdom. Today with the advent and establishment of post-processual archaeology as the competing or even possibly dominant paradigm, this process continues unabated and has even intensified with highly visible, leading practitioners assuming teaching positions on the other side of the Atlantic. The existence of a specific Anglo-American archaeology is recognized not only by archaeologists within it, but also by scholars working outside it (Biehl et al. 2002; Neustupny 2002). What are its common features? Certainly one is an increasing and explicit self-consciousness, a feature that means that much of this

ground is very well trodden, obviating a tedious discussion of what has been perhaps overly discussed in the literature. Nevertheless, some cursory review of the recent developments in Anglo-American archaeology is necessary to situate this book appropriately within (or, perhaps, outside) this tradition.

The new processual archaeology, which was proclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic and dominated the practice of Anglo-American archaeology from at least the late 1960s to the early 1980s, was characterized by its emphasis on developing rigorous methods of analyzing archaeological materials, analogous to those that were purported to characterize harder natural and physical sciences, such as biology, physics, and chemistry. The call for an explicitly scientific archaeology meant that archaeologists should adopt the scientific method and test in the field and in the laboratory the hypotheses they had formulated. The aim was both to reconstruct and model past societies and, as far as possible, to explain why the societies had developed or “processed” in the ways the archaeological record indicated that they had. It became much more important to model archaeological evidence than simply to describe and order it temporally and spatially.

For a variety of reasons both internal and external to the discipline, the advent of the explicitly scientific new archaeology coincided with and then subsumed a return to generalizing, comparative evolutionary analysis. All human societies could be ordered and compared as long as one avoided the pitfalls of simplistic late nineteenth-century evolutionary thought and proceeded in a fashion that was deemed sufficiently “multilinear.” The favorite scheme adopted – then modified and refined countless times – was to identify archaeological cultures as belonging to the increasingly complex levels of social organization: bands, tribes (now segmentary societies), chiefdoms, and states. This renaissance of neo-evolutionary thought had the virtue of forcing the archaeologist to get behind the artifacts and reconstruct the societies or, more famously, the System that had produced them (Fig. 1.2); it also consciously promoted general comparative analysis. One did not just study one’s society or archaeological culture but had to compare it with other societies throughout the world that were ranked at the same evolutionary level. In this sense, the neo-evolutionism of processual archaeology facilitated the development of world archaeology; Childe’s concerns with the unique development of European prehistory appeared outmoded and provincial, if not unwittingly imperialist. Since evolutionary ranking now was once more acceptable in social anthropology, one could turn freely to the ethnographic record to flesh out farther the interpretation of one’s own archaeological data. If the ethnologies were insufficiently focused on material remains, the archaeologist should go out and study contemporary societies ranked at the appropriate evolutionary level; the subfield of ethno-archaeology rapidly bloomed.

The insistence on a rigorous scientific methodology, the development of new archaeological techniques for recovering material remains, and the rebirth of

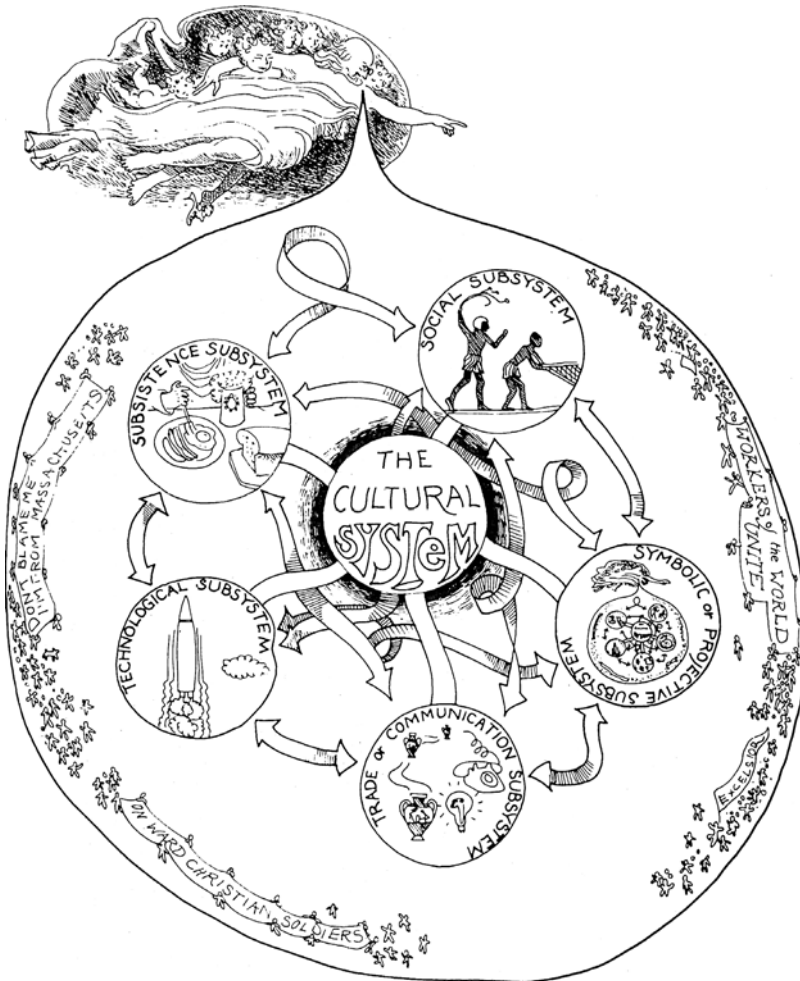


Figure 1.2. Beliefs of an earlier generation of the then-new Anglo-American archaeologists (adapted from Kohl 1974, vol. II, p. 392, original drawing by R.D. Timms).

evolutionary thought were all applied together and reinforced one another. The new processual archaeology had a strongly materialist focus and became increasingly interested in the reconstruction of past environments and past subsistence economies; ecofacts – ancient floral and faunal remains – were retrieved by new techniques and studied as intensively as, if not more intensively than, traditional archaeological features and artifacts. The neo-evolutionary perspective consciously focused on internal cultural development and generally downplayed external factors of change. Societies adapted to their local conditions and evolved; given enough time and a sufficiently favorable environment, the emergence of social complexity was virtually assured. One could still model systems of exchange, but concepts, such as diffusion or migration, were vague and unsatisfying, if not scientifically suspect. Evolutionary rigor was

opposed to historical imprecision and particularism. An incorrect and misleading dichotomy between evolution and science, on the one hand, and history, on the other, was celebrated (cf. Binford 1972) and remained enshrined in the literature until its critique and rejection by post-processual archaeologists.

A reaction against the particularly hard version of the new processual archaeology was inevitable for the simple reason that much was overstated, simplistic, and never realized, such as the claims for defining and developing laws of cultural change (cf. the original edition of Watson, Le Blanc, and Redman 1971). Such shortcomings, of course, were recognized and commented on at the time (e.g., Flannery 1973; Trigger 1973), but the full critique was articulated only by the self-named post-processual archaeologists whose writings became increasingly visible from the early 1980s on.

For many reasons, it is much harder to characterize post-processual archaeology. Diversity has been its trademark from the beginning with one of its only unifying features being the conscious rejection of what was perceived (and perhaps caricatured?) as the positivist processual program. Its development cannot be sufficiently explained as a response internal to Anglo-American archaeology but must also be set against the broader background of postmodern movements in literary criticism, philosophy, and social anthropology, which came into prominence at the same time and which were avidly read and adopted by post-processual archaeologists. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that post-processual archaeology hardly exists or has been very critically received outside the Anglo-American tradition (Coudart 1999). For our purposes, such lack of recognition and acceptance only underscores the reality of a distinct Anglo-American archaeology and its increasing (?) separation or isolation from continental European and other traditions.

If methods and techniques were the hallmarks and strengths of the new processual archaeology, then theoretical innovations have dominated post-processual archaeology. Various historical and social theories have been introduced, modified, and applied to archaeological data by the post-processualists – the outcome being sometimes more misleading and bewildering than enlightening (cf. Chippendale 1993). Unquestionably, the post-processual critique made many valid and important points: archaeology was perceived as a form of history and, as such, had a necessarily contingent and specific character; not everything could be explained in terms of impersonal structural or systemic features, but one also had to consider (and somehow model) the actions and decisions of individual personal agents actively engaged in making their own pasts. The opposition between evolutionary and historical approaches was rejected, and archaeologists were enjoined to interpret their data in all its rich specificity. Such exhortations should have led logically to detailed reexaminations of archaeological evidence, but the temptation to theorize, proselytize, and publish proved stronger. There was no single approach to reconstructing

the past; no one had an exclusive claim, a monopoly, on how to proceed – least of all the processual positivists constrained by their inadequate epistemologies.

Rather, diversity was celebrated, resulting sometimes in the articulation of poorly considered and dangerous forms of relativism. The extreme relativism of post-processual archaeology has been sufficiently criticized and has even now been begrudgingly repudiated by most of its practitioners (cf. *Archaeological Dialogues* 1998 and the essays critiquing hyperrelativism in Trigger 2003); there is no need to retread this excessively worn ground. Post-processual archaeology within the Anglo-American tradition has played a positive role in deflating some of the scientific pretensions and hyperbolic excesses of processual archaeology; that it too committed its share of blunders and overstatements is not surprising. What has not already been corrected or recognized will undoubtedly be addressed by a new generation of archaeologists who will reject features of the post-processual paradigm (if such a single paradigm exists) and develop their own theories as they find employment and gain recognition within the highly competitive Anglo-American academic setting.

Such an ongoing process of development is perfectly healthy and underscores the dynamic, ever-innovative character of Anglo-American archaeology over the past forty years. Whereas post-processual archaeology developed as a reaction to processual archaeology, both approaches share many features that are best understood by locating them within the specific academic context in which they are realized (Kohl 1993). It is also true that a similar contextualization of archaeological research is necessary to understand any national tradition of archaeological research, and the differences between traditions in this respect can be striking.

Two features common both to processual and post-processual Anglo-American archaeology are, however, troubling and must be at least mentioned here: 1) the provincialism of much of this literature; and 2) its sometimes surprising distance from actual archaeological evidence. These features are interrelated. During the last forty years Anglo-American archaeologists have demonstrated that they read – in English, at least – outside their discipline: philosophy, literary and social theory, mathematics, history (to some extent), and so forth; what is less clear is their degree of familiarity with the ever-accumulating archaeological record. Contemporary archaeology is necessarily interdisciplinary, and so this recourse to other fields for *both* methodological and theoretical inspiration is essential and constitutes one of the great strengths of the Anglo-American archaeological tradition. At the same time it is necessary to be aware of what other archaeologists working within other traditions – and not publishing in English – are actually doing. If many other archaeologists – and this picture itself is a caricature – are still engaged primarily in classifying and ordering their materials spatially and temporally, it is essential to be aware of their work and to be basically cognizant of the current state of accumulated

archaeological knowledge. One of the indirect aims of this study is to illustrate the need and value of overcoming these troubling tendencies.

BACK TO THE FUTURE – OR TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATIVE AND EXPLANATORY CULTURE HISTORY

Historians long have debated the value of “narrative history” (cf. Stone 1979; Hobsbawm 1980). Those historians who are more inclined to be analytical and quantitative in their reconstruction of the past tend to resist the notion that they just tell stories about the past and emphasize that their work is systematic and grounded in the collection of empirical evidence, and that it is this fundamental basis that distinguishes their work from, say, that of novelists. Nevertheless, even such an analytically and theoretically inclined historian as E. Hobsbawm concedes the value, indeed, the inevitability of the historical narrative if one is going to do more than gather evidence and just talk to oneself. His own justly famous accounts of the modern historical era are stories that are very well told and, of course, extremely well documented.

The concepts of storytelling and of “reading” the past – the archaeological record being a text to be “read” by the archaeologist and then retold as a story to one’s audience – are metaphors, of course, that have been widely adopted by post-processual archaeologists, and their adoption is consistent with the notion that multiple pasts (or stories) can be reconstructed from archaeological evidence. The relativism implicit in this perspective must, however, be constrained, and criteria, such as plausibility and coherence with accumulated archaeological evidence, exist to distinguish among different readings of the past. The metaphors of the archaeological record as a text to be read or the study of the past as a task akin to writing fiction are also misleading, as Trigger (1989: 380–382) and others have noted, for material cultural remains are rarely as explicit or as potentially unambiguous as the more complete information gleaned from written sources, and the creative instincts of the archaeologist are necessarily constrained to some extent by the nature of the archaeological evidence considered.

This book accepts these necessary caveats but still consciously tells a story or constructs a narrative account of the increasing integration of the Eurasian steppes into the “civilized” literate world of West Asia during the course of roughly two millennia, or from the Late Chalcolithic period through Middle to Late Bronze times. This reading of the past is just that: one way of looking at the archaeological record and attempting to make sense of it. Undoubtedly, other readings are possible and, in some cases, may be more plausible and consistent with the archaeological evidence than that presented here. The limitations of my understanding and lack of familiarity with the vast corpus of archaeological data so cursorily reviewed in this study are all too keenly felt. Reviewing the literature, however, is also emboldening in that it highlights the

lack of consensus that often exists among the specialists who have assembled this record. Although some reconstructions may be rejected on grounds of plausibility, coherence, or basic lack of awareness of archaeological evidence, other accounts, even contradictory ones, may be equally plausible, coherent, and consistent with the archaeological record. As post-processualists emphasize, archaeological data are often “underdetermined” and multiple acceptable readings of the past are possible given the inherent limitations of the evidence. This book clearly represents only one possible “reading” of the vast, inevitably incomplete, and problematic archaeological record.

Interpretation is not opposed to explanation – the former constituting a subjective search for a personally satisfying account of the past, and the latter aspiring to an understanding based on the use of universally recognized causal principles and procedures. This dichotomy too is false, like that already mentioned between evolution and history or that dichotomy once so numbingly discussed in the processual archaeological literature between deduction and induction. One accounts for the prehistoric past by carefully examining and ordering the archaeological record and seeking to discern recurrent patterns or processes – often necessarily at a coarse-grained or macrohistorical level – that one then invokes to construct the prehistory. Meaning is ascribed, and explanations are offered.

Because this attempt to reconstruct the past is necessarily interpretative, reflecting the perspective and biases of the author, it is incumbent on me to sketch the values that inform the present study. Archaeologists should reconstruct the past on the basis of the evidence they best control. Given the nature of *material* culture remains, this means primary emphasis should be placed on the reconstruction of ancient technologies, environments, subsistence and exchange economies, and, as far as the evidence permits, social organization and structure as indirectly reflected in landscape and settlement patterns, architecture, mortuary evidence, and the like. The symbols, beliefs, and ideologies of the Bronze Age peoples who created the archaeological record cannot be ignored; such beliefs may have been incredibly important for understanding a particular course of development. What people today think and believe informs what they do, and the essential assumption of uniformitarianism, intrinsic to archaeology, dictates that this conscious, ideologically driven, and symbolic production and manipulation of materials must have been true during the Bronze Age as well. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence is more ambiguous in relation to the reconstruction of past belief systems and ideologies; by their very nature symbols are polyvalent, and a given material symbol can be “read” in a variety of different ways, the criteria for preferring one interpretation over another being correspondingly harder to establish. The models archaeologists devise, however elegant and theoretically satisfying, must be constrained ultimately by the very refractory and mute *material* culture remains that constitute the archaeological record.

The limitations of the archaeological record are real but not so deficient, I believe, to prevent reconstructing the broad contours of large-scale historical developments. As Childe recognized, archaeological data usually do not deliberately misinform, and the archaeologists' peculiar ability to reconstruct ancient technologies, environments, and, to some extent, ancient subsistence and exchange economies is sufficient to detect specific large-scale patterns and processes, to write, in essence, an empirically grounded prehistory. This book tells a story, but it does so from the materialist perspective demanded by the archaeological record. Part of its theoretical inspiration is derived from the tenets of processual archaeology sketched earlier, that is, a focus on environmental constraints and economic adaptation to local conditions; where possible, it attempts to reconstruct the less tangible but incredibly important social structural features of the cultures that produced the examined archaeological record. Deviating from the processualist paradigm, it also traces the eminently documentable interconnections among different regions and interprets them as evidence for the diffusion of technologies and ideas, the exchange of materials, and the movements of peoples. Regularity and pattern are sought more in these interconnections than in making cross-cultural comparisons or typing various archaeological phenomena according to elaborately defined evolutionary levels. The prehistoric story that is told exhibits certain recurring features, some of which change imperceptibly with time, and all of which remain at the same time highly specific and contingent.

THE DEVOLUTION OF URBAN SOCIETY – MOVING BEYOND NEO-EVOLUTIONARY ACCOUNTS

The book's title consciously invokes, of course, the historian's emphasis on different peoples actively constructing their own pasts. It also is deliberately meant to place this study outside the neo-evolutionary tradition of processual archaeology, a tradition that with few exceptions has focused more on the internal growth and development of early complex polities than their recurrent collapse (cf. Yoffee 2005: 131–140). The periodic breakdowns of social complexity, as well as the emergence of more advanced social formations, are both traced in the present work. The evolution of specific technologies, such as metallurgy and advances in the means of transportation, which had far-reaching consequences, are described, but many of the societies or archaeological cultures and, indeed, entire regions recounted here exhibit a more complicated pattern of elaboration and development followed by breakdown and collapse. Societies devolve or become less complex, as well as evolve.

One of the aims of the book is to account for these breakdowns in social complexity by considering them first within a larger network of historical interconnections, rather than by accounting for them in terms of the internal structural contradictions and weaknesses of the polities concerned. In part, this