

IANIR MILEVSKI & THOMAS E. LEVY (eds.), *Framing Archaeology in the Near East: The Application of Social Theory to Fieldwork*. Series: New Directions in Anthropological Archaeology. Sheffield, Bristol, Equinox Publishing, 2016. X+146. ISBN 978-1-78179-247-6. Hardback: £80.00 / \$100.00; Paperback: £30.00 / \$45.00

Almost 30 years ago, in a passage of their influential book *Social Theory and Archaeology*, M. Shanks and C. Tilley discussed Borges's archaeological-themed short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" as illustrating "a desire for the past in itself and for itself; a desire for an objective past, for primary originary objectivity, the essence of the past, the essential meaning, an ideal presence of the past."¹ The appropriation of social theory by archaeology since the 60s and 70s has been instrumental in supplanting such merely positivist approaches to the past, and more specifically, to retrieving and processing excavation data. The present volume illustrates and legitimizes in turn the diversity of approaches to Near Eastern archaeology, whether cognitive or cyber-archaeology, processual or post-processual. This is all the more welcome since Mesopotamia and the Levant (each the focus of three papers) are known to be lagging behind in this respect.

M.J. Harrower's opening paper surveys the literature on how spatial analysis-related technology could assist the application of a social theory framework to archaeological sites in the Near East. Occasionally this paper reads like an annotated list of books, most of which resort to computer capabilities—mainly geospatial technologies—to advance archaeological research. Some of their quite specialized topics, even when explained ("Modifiable Areal Unit Problem," p. 9, "Ripley's K-function multi-distance spatial cluster analysis," p. 11) might remain obscure to the readership this volume is otherwise bound to attract. This literature review (the valuable bibliography is longer than the article) concludes with a fine point: "new technologies... require new theory."²

An excellent article on Late Chalcolithic delivers J.S. Baldi, who deals with the pottery from Tell Feres Al-Sharqi and what it tells us about the so-called Uruk colonization of Northern Mesopotamia. Baldi's archaeological cultures are not "chrono-cultural boxes" (p. 84) but rather "polythetic and

¹ Shanks and Tilley 1988: 13.

² As to Harrower's moderate skepticism about the future of paper in recording, see Tripcevich and Wernke 2010: 380.

non-normative social fields, intended and unintended sets of interactions and social influences on a territory” (p. 85). He prefers to use the “way of doing” (or technical identity) as a more reliable lens through which to read colonial situations (case in point, chaff-faced tempered vs. mineral-tempered ceramic to point towards either “locals” or “civilization-bearers”). Thus, it becomes possible to highlight a whole new dynamic between local and foreign, ultimately suggesting that the hybridization of techniques speaks for a phenomenon more complex than colonialism. A. Di Ludovico contributes another Mesopotamian-themed article (one millennium later though). His contention is that an exponential increase in the use of writing under Ur III rulers, and especially from Sulgi’s reign onwards, is indicative of a “partly [...] deliberate pursuit of high-level abstraction in political and economic management by state authorities.” However, his search for some archaeological evidence to back this hypothesis yields only the fact that the dimensions of bricks in public buildings had also been standardized in this period. The theoretical framework adduced to illuminate this (research in schools in England showing that more educated schoolboys “show a particular aptitude for abstraction in thinking and communication,” p. 68) can hardly live up to the task. Di Ludovico certainly has a point that one of the ways for the ruling class to retain power is by controlling the “shared symbolic system” (p. 69). By the same token, the reader will not find it difficult to accept the author’s claim that Ur III “lower subaltern classes” acknowledged writing as “having a fundamental role and a special authority,” but might be left on his own as to the ways this actually happens. The third and final article on this area of the Near East is J. Mardas’ piece on the ambiguity of gender in ancient Mesopotamian myths (*Enuma Elish*, Epic of Atrahasis etc.). She sets out by proposing a very unusual “distinction between gender and sex: the former was perceived as biologically given, and the latter as a cultural construct” (p. 21). The consensus according to which this is the other way around is unlikely to be overturned. Her remarks on Gilgamesh’s “hegemonic” sexuality and on the femininity of widows (p. 24) have the merit of reminding one that Mesopotamian gender is not a straightforward concept. Archaeological implications of the article are, however, very few, although in her conclusion, Mardas does cite a couple works which have dealt with gender in Mesopotamia from various perspectives, including archaeological ones. Some, such as Croucher’s paper on queer archaeology, do not actually apply, as there it is simply talk of how

past audiences must have perceived things “differently,” rather than of people who were “sexually different.”³

E. Luneau discusses the way men and women were buried in Bronze Age Oxus civilization sites in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Following some of F. de Polignac’s observations on Greek cemeteries, she notes that funeral goods may not reflect the identity of the buried, but a social representation of their identity. There will of course be grave offerings patterned along lines that have been seen long before the advent of social theory and that will be seen in the future: combs, bangles and needles, as well as spindle whorls, are present only in female graves (p. 38). More intriguingly perhaps, “more than 80% of the items found with women are made of metal [...] whereas flint objects were predominantly in the graves of males” (p. 36) (here and elsewhere sex and gender are used interchangeably by Luneau). The reader might have expected this paper to focus on instances where grave offerings are made to say more about gender than in traditional archaeological literature, oblivious of social theory. The following situation would have been one of the few good such opportunities: some women’s graves included staffs and axes, usually associated with male burials. Luneau rather tersely comments that this “might suggest that some women perhaps held a powerful social position apparently rather attributed to men, such as being rulers” (p. 44). This comment runs the risk of implying, first, that for Luneau status is inevitably reflected in material culture (something she expressly questions in the next paragraph), and secondly, that material culture is *a priori* gendered. To conclude with some nit-picking: at 32, the dead body’s position is described as “on the belly” (p. 32) instead of “prone” or “ventral decubitus.”

Only one paper in this volume is dedicated to Anatolia, although work by I. Hodder on Çatalhöyük is cited elsewhere. The thought-provoking questions asked by P. Filipowicz pertain to the survival of Neolithic imagery in the Chalcolithic period. To answer them, she resorts to Peircean semiotics and submits that post-Çatalhöyük sites circulate replicas of the original imagery created in Çatalhöyük, although in time these images became replicas of replicas (*e.g.* the transformation of Neolithic bucrania in abstract ornaments on Hacilar decorated pottery). The article is well-organized: the general introduction prefaces the sequential presentation of Peirce’s relevance in archaeology and of Çatalhöyük facts, in order to subsequently make possible the actual application of a Peircean framework to the facts, followed by conclu-

³ Croucher 2005.

sions. This kind of separation between facts and theory can be faulted for didacticism, but here it has practical merit. At the same time, it also illustrates one peril in applying social theory in archaeology—namely, that researchers sometimes adduce a theoretical framework according to which they mete out new names to phenomena described in other frameworks, without truly enriching their meaning. In this case, post-early Neolithic Çatalhöyük imagery is described by Filipowicz as replicas (*sinsigns*) of the original imagery, seen as a *legisign*, Peirce's ideal template or "ideal concept." There is much potential in this, but it seems to be somewhat hampered by the fact that of the *legisign* it is said that, rather than being the originator of a fashion, it "cannot act until... embodied in a concrete instance," a "replica/token," the *sinsign* (p. 52), whereas in the article the original Çatalhöyük imagery is seen as concrete and as active as can be.

The last three papers in this volume are reserved for case studies in Syro-Palestinian archaeology. A. Greener deals with the Intermediate Bronze (IB) Age cemetery from Jericho as published by Kathleen Kenyon. This cemetery's paramount importance for understanding IB society in the southern Levant led to a number of important reassessments over the past 50 years. Like Mardas and Luneau for other geographical areas in this volume, Greener is interested mainly in gender, although his thesis is more generous: "I argue that an examination of mortuary practices provides us with an insight into the social structure of the community" (p. 102). Kenyon had noticed that tombs with daggers belonged to males and that the pins found in burials should be associated with female burials, and Greener confirms her analysis (p. 99). Of the 105 dagger-type tombs identified by Kenyon he states, oversimplifying, "[t]he men who were in charge of protecting the community were buried in these tombs" (p. 104). The situation of the disarticulated male skeleton found with a spindle whorl is mentioned without a comment. A nice paragraph on page 101 reads like a conclusion: "Mortuary rituals offer a sensuous (*sic*) arena in which people actively create and (re)assert social memories [...]." One could have added that the studies of pathologies in this cemetery may also open a window into social life: the tomb G-88 included grave goods of conspicuously low quantity and quality when compared to the other graves, as well as the skeleton of a 25-year-old male with four operations of trephining.⁴

⁴ Shay 1985: 229–234.

J.M. Tebes' substantial paper, with anthropological scope and excellent command of the material, contrasts different models of the Edomite state and proposes a new solution. After careful consideration, he discards the tribal kingdom model, not fearing accusations of being overly concerned with issues of classification, since, as he rightly points out, the terminology in which an analysis is couched sets its conceptual limits (p. 114). He engages with Porter's work on Iron Age Edom to establish the truth content of the claim that the Buseirah-based elite systematically tried to extend its authority over southern Transjordan and the Negev. Tebes succeeds in proving that the evidence for such a theory is tenuous and his findings are corroborated by independent work by Levy *et al.*⁵ The hierarchical society in Buseirah points rather to a chiefdom (p. 117–119), one where the Weberian monopoly on force is absent, and in whose hinterland Tebes proposes to recognize a peer polity interaction. Is this contradicted by the Biblical sources mentioning “kings” in Edom? Tebes' answer is that such mentions “tell us more about the ideology in which the scribes were embedded than about the real socio-political conditions in Edom” (p. 119), while Assyrian sources, by promoting the tribute-payers to the rank of kings of all the land of Edom may have been, through this rhetorical trick, tooting their own horn.

The concluding paper, by I. Milevski and B. Gandulla, is a review of literature rather than a case study of a particular site. It is a small synthesis in its own right, covering one of the most delicate subjects there is in archaeology—Biblical archaeology and politics. The authors propose that “archaeological tendencies or schools in southern Levantine archaeology were and are a reflection of the political and socio-economic developments of the Middle East and the international situation” (p. 123). Thus, new archaeology in Israel was a response to the purism of Biblical archaeology, eschewing economic and technological explanation, while post-processual archaeology developed there as a “political answer to the archaeology of “objective” (non-human) processes”. Itself born of (American) Protestant Old Testament scholarship, Syro-Palestinian archaeology has remained to this day to a large extent concerned with the historicity of the Bible, and carried on as processual (a little heavy on geographical models) or post-processual archaeology (a little heavy on structural Marxism) (p. 128–129). Understanding “mnemo-narratives” and other cultural memory mechanisms may ease the task of using archaeology to disentangle the meaning of Biblical stories. (To come full circle in this review,

⁵ Levy *et al.* 2014.

and in homage to the city where the present journal is published, I will say that a remarkable paper on cultural memory by A. Maeir⁶ also quotes a short story by Borges, *Funes el memorioso*). The overview of past research concludes by opening up towards future developments, by mentioning an archaeological project in the city of Lod, where “Jewish and Arab youths participated in the excavation and restoration of the Khan el Hillu, dated to a late Islamic period” (p. 132).

The seasoned editors’ choice of subject is spot-on. Nothing can protect Near Eastern archaeology better today from dangers as diverse as nationalism, antiquarianism, biases, and chaotic rescue excavations than the proper use of social theory. Quality-wise, the contributions in this volume vary, but the range of issues tackled is nevertheless formidable.

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⁶ Maeir 2015: 409–419.