Apa Tanis and the Ancient Near East: an alternative model of complex society

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The conception of chiefdom

For two or three decades, the word 'chiefdom' has been included in the basic vocabulary of American anthropologists interested in problems of social organization of pre-state societies. 'Chiefdom: precursor of the state' (Carneiro 1981). 'In any particular cultural system trajectory the evolutionary precursor of a pristine state is the chiefdom' (Spencer 1987, p. 378). 'Chiefdoms are intermediate level societies providing an evolutionary bridge between acephalous societies and bureaucratic states' (Earle 1987, p. 279). These and similar definitions predominated in the 1980s. Although other categorial systems were sometimes suggested (e.g. Smith 1985), the chiefdom-based classifications supported by extensive ethno-historic material have been elaborated in greatest detail. C. Spencer even considers the chiefdom to be one of the few fundamental forms of cultural evolution (Spencer 1987, pp. 377–8). Such forms (*bauplane*) are adopted by different societies just as similar animal and plant forms evolve independently in the unrelated biological taxons.

Many chiefdoms shared similar economic and ideological traits, but the concept itself is relevant, strictly speaking, exclusively to political-administrative relations and corresponds to a social unit with a certain degree of centralization and a particular balance of power between the ruling centre and the members of the society (Adams 1975, pp. 213, 243, 262). I accept the revision of traditional evolutionary scheme ('band – tribe – chiefdom – state') made by R. Carneiro (1981, p. 71; 1987, pp. 760–1) who has replaced 'tribe' by 'autonomous village'. Unlike the amorphous tribe, all the other above mentioned terms designate integrated units, but which are different in scale and in level of centralization. Chiefdoms, together with states, have an institutionalized centre of leadership and – together with the bands and village communities – they lack specialists in charge of administration (apart from the leader himself). There could be up to three levels of administrative hierarchy in big chiefdoms (the paramount – local chiefs – heads of communities), but no delegation of power inside one and the same level is possible.

The political systems organized in this way have specific demographic dimensions: from about one thousand people in simple chiefdoms till a few tens of thousands in complex ones. Centralized societies without specialized administrations and with populations of about a hundred thousand are unknown while those with populations of about fifty thousand seem to be very

unstable (Baker & Sanders 1972, p. 163; Carneiro 1987, p. 762; Upham 1987). On the other hand, autonomous social units with less than one thousand members usually lack institutionalized leadership. Demographic parameters, together with the degree of development of the means of transportation and communication, delimit the approximate territorial extension of chiefdoms to a few dozen miles across at the most (any region that needs more than a day to be reached from the paramount headquarters tends to go out of control: Helms 1979, p. 53; Spencer 1982, p. 6).

In this chapter, I address the problem of reconstruction of prehistoric organizational units. Although any particular case of research 'beyond subsistence and dating' is a unique challenge, some categories of archaeological facts are almost inevitably reviewed during any such discussion. Two groups of evidence are generally recognized as indicators of social complexity (e.g. Renfrew 1973, p. 267; Renfrew 1974, p. 74; Rick 1990, p. 480): (1) the remains of labour intensive, non utilitarian corporate works unevenly distributed across the respective cultural territory, suggests the existence of some centre of power that would direct the working activity beyond household and village community levels and (2) not just any rich or unusual interments, but funeral complexes of really extraordinary wealth with thousands of times more precious goods than in graves of the commoners, can be interpreted as belonging to such members of the society who were considered by others as incarnations and symbols of corporate power and identity.

The term 'chiefdom', originally coined by Oberg (1955), began by being systematically applied to a particular kind of social reality (Steward & Faron 1959; Service 1962), it was then critically revised, and finally adopted for general usage just in the United States. One of the possible reasons behind this was that American anthropologists conduct much of their field research in the New World and in the Pacific basin. These are the areas where not only the great majority of historically known chiefdoms are recorded, but also the prehistoric ones are easy to recognize on the basis of archaeological evidence. Rich graves including tombs with human sacrifices as well as the remains of monumental earth works, architecture and sculpture, are widely distributed in those areas of the New World and in those time periods for which the state level organization does not seem plausible. C. Renfrew was the first who made an attempt to apply classificatory systems that were created by American social anthropology to the Mediterranean and western Europe neolithic and bronze age material (Harding 1983; Renfrew 1973; Renfrew 1974). Though some of his reconstructions are not unanimously recognized, the procedure in general proved to be fruitful and the interpretation of many fourth-third, not to say second millennium BC European societies as chiefdoms looks like a good approximation to reality (e.g. Coles 1982, p. 309). However, such an explanation of social and political organization of early agricultural communities in the Near and Middle East continues to be more controversial.

Near Eastern social transformations

In the late ninth millennium BC with the transition from the Natufian to PPNA, the size of the largest Levantine settlements increased between two and sixfold and their population reached *c.* 375–450 people or more, which corresponds to a settled macro-band (Bar-Yosef & Belfer-Cohen 1991, pp. 190–1). During the eighth millennium BC, under influence from the Levant, or independently, a similar process was taking place in the Syrian-Mesopotamian piedmont and inter-mountain valleys of Taurus and Zagros (Fig. 1). In the seventh to early sixth millennia, along with the further dispersal of agricultural communities to the east (Merhgarh) and northeast (Jeitun), the concentration of population in the Near East itself continued to progress. The largest settlements now occupied 10–15 ha. Among the best known are 'Ain-Ghazal and other late PPNB sites in Middle Levant, Abu Hureira in northern Levant, and Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia (Moore 1985, pp. 19, 34; Bar-Yosef & Belfer-Cohen 1989, p. 62; Rollefson 1989a, pp. 136–7; Rollefson 1989b). The same size of about 15 ha was probably reached by the biggest Halaf settlements of the late sixth to early fifth millennia BC (Akkermans 1989, p. 133).

Demography

Archaeologists often provide inflated estimates of the population of excavated settlements, mainly because all the households of the same building horizon are considered to function permanently and simultaneously. Ethnographic evidence suggests that only 40–50 per cent of the households of traditional Iranian and Mesopotamian settlements are inhabited in any given time and that this percentage is similar in towns, villages, and hamlets (Aurenche 1981, p. 99). On the other hand, the conservative assessment made by O. Aurenche of demographic density for ancient villages and towns larger than 10 ha as approximately 50 persons/ha, and for 10/ha villages as 75–85 persons/ha (Aurenche 1981, pp. 95-6) seems implausible. Most of the excavated settlements were built more densely than modern ones, so the reasonable indices for all categories of ancient sites could be something like 180-200 persons/ha: these currently are densities characteristic of the smallest hamlets with an area less than 1 ha (Aurenche 1981, p. 97), with the consequence that 'Ain Ghazal, Çatal Hüyük (Fig. 1), or the largest Syro-Mesopotamian centres of the sixth to seventh millennia BC, each had a population of 2000–2500 inhabitants.

In the third millennium BC, the population of Middle Eastern regional capitals such as Altyn-depe (26 ha) and Namazga-depe (50 ha) in southern Turkmenistan (Lyapin 1971) or Shahr-i Sokhta in Sistan (75 ha without a graveyard: Lamberg-Karlovsky & Tosi 1973, p. 24; Tosi 1978, p. 59; Mariani 1992) could reach at least 5000–15,000 and including nearby hamlets (about 30 known sites of this category surround Shahr-i Sokhta) even 20,000 and more.

If we compare these southwestern Asian demographic estimates with the data from New World societies, it would be logical to conclude that settlements with 1000–3000 dwellers are organized as simple chiefdoms, while towns with populations of about 10,000 were the residences

of paramount chiefs. Of course, acephalic units with 1000–3000 members are ethno-historically known also in the Americas, but they did not preserve their integrity on a year-round basis. The villages of some groups of Gê Indians of eastern Brazil were inhabited only seasonally during the time that was needed to till the garden plots. Inner stability of these big but ephemeral social units was maintained thanks to the tensions and permanency ritual activity. Participation in the ceremonies and competitions provided every member of every kin group with a programme that dictated the person's behaviour for all the time spent in the village. When agricultural works and religious festivals were over, large settlements were abandoned and the population dispersed again around the country (Gross 1979; Maybury-Lewis 1979).

We possess no data in support of non-permanent occupation of neolithic Near Eastern settlements. The chalcolithic and bronze age regional capitals of the Middle East were definitely not occupied only periodically. From the point of view of traditional evolutionary schemes, the sites under discussion are anomalous: too big to be just 'autonomous villages', they lack features which would indicate the existence of ruling chiefs. Unlike most of the equally large and together with many much smaller settlements of pre-Columbian America which also occupied central positions in the regional settlement patterns, neolithic towns of Anatolia and Levant as well as proto-cities of Sistan and Turkmenistan, have quite insignificant corporate architecture, if any, and lack burial complexes that would demonstrate concentration of wealth and power in the hands of small and restricted elite groups. These sites preserve no evidence of the existence of any powerful centre that would systematically coordinate activity of the separate households.

Comparisons with the New World

It is commonplace in popular books to compare Mesopotamian *sikkuratz* with the New World pyramids. But if in Mesoamerica, for example, the tradition of the temple mound building goes well back to pre-state Early and Middle Formative, the truly monumental architecture in Sumer is unknown before the Late Uruk to the Jemdet Nasr periods (Eanna precinct). Judging by their respective size, at least, not only Ubaid temples of Eridu (Safar, Ali Mustafa & Lloyd 1981, Fig. 39), but also proto-Literature and Early Dynastic temples of Khafaje (Delougaz & Lloyd 1942, pp. 3–132) required less effort for their construction than e.g. artificial mounds AD 500–1500 in the Llanos of Orinoco, the Mojo area of eastern Bolivia, the Marajo island, or the Mississippi valley (even excluding the special case of Cahokia with its enormous pyramid platforms: Peebles 1987, p. 23; Roosevelt 1991, p. 38; Myers 1992, p. 87; Spencer & Redmond 1992, p. 144). All of these examples of corporate works are overshadowed by the monumental sculpture and architecture of the Olmecs and by Caballo Muerto and other late second millennium BC coastal Peruvian temples that are also believed to be the product of chiefdoms rather than state level societies (Drennan

1976, pp. 358–63; Earle 1976, p. 221; Sanders & Webster 1978, p. 290; Pozorski 1980; Pozorski 1982; Spencer 1982, pp. 14–16).

The population of Olmec San Lorenzo at 1200–900 BC and of Peruvian Chavin de Huantar at 390–200 BC did not surpass 2000–3000 people (Marcus 1976, p. 85; Burger 1984, pp. 247, 277). Even if we suggest that tenfold greater rural populations supported monumental construction and other non utilitarian activities in these capitals, the respective pre-Columbian chiefdoms would be demographically comparable with the early bronze age Shahr-i Sokhta in eastern Iran, where no communal buildings and no examples of monumental art were found. Certainly most of the other ancient American centralized pre-state polities had a lower population. The total number of inhabitants of Oaxaca valley 600–500 BC was probably no bigger than 2000 persons (Feinman, Kowalewski, Finsten, Blanton & Nicholas 1985, p. 344). The largest site of this period, San Jose Mogote already had monumental platforms and stone carvings (Marcus 1976, pp. 83, 88; Spencer 1982, pp. 14–19).

Before proto-Literate, and in a way even before Sargonian times, Mesopotamian temples were rather similar in their size and planning and associated with habitation complexes. It is often difficult to differentiate possible communal buildings from the ordinary houses (Tell es-Sawwan and Tepe-Gawra are good examples of such problems: Roaf 1984, p. 82). Differences in spatial organization between common dwellings and shrines are, probably, the greatest in early settlements such as Çayönü-Tepesi (Schirmer 1988; Schirmer 1990) and possibly Beidha (Byrd & Banning 1988, p. 69), while from the sixth millennium BC in the Near East this dichotomy becomes uncertain. At the same time, the dwellings of some southwestern Asian sites have a 'quasi-temple' appearance. In Çatal-Hüyük many architectural units, taken separately, could be easily interpreted as religious structures, but the extensive number of 'shrines' and the gradual transition from buildings with rich wall sculpture, painting and human interments to simple houses without interior decoration now make archaeologists consider the complexes as multifunctional, used both for habitation and for ritual purposes (Hodder 1987). A very similar picture is revealed recently by the Kara Kum expedition of the Institute of History of Material Culture (Russian Academy of Science) at Ilgynly-depe, a 14 ha chalcolithic site in southern Turkmenistan. Excavations in different parts of the site demonstrate that in the late fourth millennium BC, most of the settlement was built up with the houses of basically uniform plan but of different size and rather rich though unequally elaborate interior decoration. Every one of such houses excavated alone would be almost certainly interpreted as a 'shrine' and they actually even are labelled 'sanctuaries' in preliminary publications (Berezkin 1989; Berezkin 1990; Masson 1992; Masson, Berezkin & Solovyeva 1994) and no real temple was discovered.

To conclude this topic, we can formulate a rather pervasive rule. The sites with equal demographic parameters and similar structural position in the regional settlement patterns in pre-

Columbian America and in the Ancient Near and Middle East tend to have opposite ratios of labour investments in corporate architecture and monumental art, on the one hand, and in individual dwelling construction and decoration, on the other. We should also emphasize that the absence of big temple platforms in pre-state Mesopotamia and Iran can not be just the result of poor preservation of the mud brick work. Ancient American monumental structures are identifiable in any state of preservation for they seriously change the site topography with their impressive size.

Social and material differentiation

Some leaders of pre-Columbian chiefdoms were capable of concentrating great wealth in their hands. The members of high elite groups of Early and Middle Mochica polities on the Peruvian coast north of Chicama valley (0–AD 500: Alva 1988; Donnan 1990; Nagin 1990; Donnan & Jaime 1992; Schuster 1992; Alva & Donnan 1993), of late Early Horizon polities in the headwaters of the Jequetepeque river in the Peruvian highlands (the temple of Kuntur Wasi, *c.* 500 BC: Kato 1993; Onuki 1995, pp. 15–19), of Cocle polity in central Panama (AD 500–1200: Lothrop 1937–1942; Dade 1972) were buried with the grave goods that are among the richest ever found in the New World during controlled excavations. These treasures are approximately comparable with the finds from the Royal Cemetery of Ur. I have no doubt concerning the chiefdom, rather than state, organizational level of Ancient Panama and of the Peruvian Early Horizon. The rich Mochica graves, at least the earliest ones ('Old Lord of Sipan' and looted Loma Negra tombs in Upper Piura) also seem to belong to the period before probable political unification of the northern coast by Moche kings and in any case they were not the tombs of these kings (Shimada 1994, pp. 81–6). Even if archaeologists did not e.g. excavate the above mentioned spectacular complexes, valuable objects of art made of metal, semi-precious stones and rare marine shells that are currently circulating in antiquity markets constitute a proof in itself of the existence of ancient elites that supported production of prestige goods. The cultural affiliations of such objects of art in the New World demonstrates that they were produced both in states and in chiefdoms.

The situation in southwestern Asia is different. There are no massive objects made of valuable and exotic materials neither in pre-Early Dynastic Greater Mesopotamia nor in pre-Late third millennium BC eastern Iran, Afganistan and the adjacent parts of former Soviet Central Asia. Mesopotamian materials, of course, are not very representative: known burial complexes of the fifth to fourth millennia BC in this region are so scarce that some exotic way of disposal of the dead rather than burial is not excluded. However, the extensively excavated third millennia BC burials of Altyn-depe and Shahr-i Sokhta did not contain large concentrations of funerary goods.

It seems, that skilled craftsmen rather than nobles, were buried in the richest graves of Shahr-i Sokhta (Piperno & Tosi 1975; Tosi & Piperno 1975; Piperno 1976, pp. 9–12; Piperno 1979; Piperno 1986, p. 258). The absence of a tendency towards accumulation of treasures in the societies of the Early Bronze Age in the Middle East to south-central Asia is especially remarkable if we compare these data with the latest materials from the Middle to Early Late Bronze Age from the same territory, i.e. with the Bactrian-Margianian Archaeological Complex (Sarianidi 1990). Although the best Bactrian objects result from clandestine excavations and the inventories of the funerary goods in separate tombs remain unrecorded, the treasures that accompanied Bactrian elites in their graves (Pottier 1984; Amiet 1986) were obviously many times more spectacular than golden, carnelian and lapis lazuli beads found in the relatively rich graves of Altyn-depe and Shahr-i Sokhta.

We have good reason to believe from their demographic, technological and social characteristics that many pre- and proto-Literate societies of Greater Mesopotamia as well as late chalcolithic and early bronze age societies of eastern Iran and southern Turkmenistan were no more primitive than the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century AD chiefdoms of e.g. Tahiti, Virginia or Panama. In addition to a dynamically growing town of Shahr-i Sokhta at 3000 BC in Sistan, the small village community of Tall-I Bakun A in Fars at about 4000 BC demonstrates a remarkable degree of complexity and stratification (Alizadeh 1988). At the same time, the reconstruction of political organization of Halaf, Samarra, Hassuna (Voigt 1990, p. 12) as chiefdoms, not to say the bold suggestions concerning state level organization of Altyn-depe and Shahr-i Sokhta (Tosi 1986), need to be more profoundly argued. Settlement patterns with two or three levels of site hierarchy, specialized production at the local and regional levels, differential wealth and status of burial complexes, the remains of small scale communal works (most, if not all of which are village or town walls from Tell es-Sawwan to the Early Bronze Age Altyn-depe) all suggest the existence of complex and stratified, but not necessary centralized societies.

Is it possible to imagine a social unit of 10,000 and even of 2000–3000 persons, which would function permanently without a coordinating centre? Some attempts in this direction have already been made. 'The development of social complexity during the Middle and Late PPNB refers to the increasingly intricate interrelationships among the inhabitants of growing populations', suggests G. O. Rollefson (1989b, p. 172), adding, however, with caution that 'the precise form that social complexity obtained at this time may never be recoverable'. Without obvious historical examples, any theoretically created model is doomed to remain either too vague or highly speculative, and the only clear and well formulated model of a complex society that the anthropologists have provided us with is the Oceanic or Amerindian chiefdom.

Ethnographic analogy: the case of Apa Tanis

The cultural and political situation of the Near and Middle East has been very different from that of the Neolithic for such a long time that the ethnographic materials, or historical documents from this region are of very limited help. In the Americas, some Pueblo societies, AD 900–1200, of the greater southwest, as Chaco canyon, would perhaps be of interest for our research, but they are poorly understood (Lekson 1986, p. 270; Lightfoot 1987; Fish & Fish 1989; Lekson 1990, pp. 44–88; Wills & Leonard 1994). My own knowledge was insufficient to take into account all potentially valuable ethnographic materials for interpretation of southwestern Asian archaeological data. I was fortunate, however, to consult with professor R. Carneiro in the American Museum of Natural History in New York who kindly advised me to look through publications on Apa Tanis, an eastern Himalayan ethnic group of Tibetan linguistic affiliation.

The Apa Tanis were described by K. Fürer-Haimendorf in the 1940's before they were taken under Indian government control (Fürer-Haimendorf 1962). As far as it is known, these people were never subjugated before by any foreign power and were not familiar with any religion of non-local origin. About 11,000 of Apa Tanis live in the valley that is 10 km long and 3 km wide, lying at 5000 feet above the sea-level. There were 2520 Apa Tani families in 1961, about five persons per household, living in seven villages. Every village represented a separate social unit, but at the same time all Apa Tanis formed one integrated community.

The Apa Tanis valley is extraordinary fertile thanks to the sediments of the ancient lake that once occupied most of its floor (Fig. 1). When K. Fürer-Haimendorf was conducting his research, Apa Tunis were cultivating wet rice and some millet, raised cattle, pigs, and hens. The role of meat in people's diet was modest but domestic animals, first of all bulls, were extremely important as units of value. Land, in particular, could be acquired only in exchange for bulls. Apa Tanis bought cattle from their Mira and Dafla neighbours who lived in the nearby mountains, or who pastured their own herds in the forests on the borders of their territory. This last activity was considered marginal in comparison with rice agriculture, so most of the herdsmen were again the Daflas who received some calves in payment for their work. In general, the position of Miris and Daflas in respect to Apa Tanis strongly reminds one of the position of semi-nomadic pastoralists on the periphery of oases in Greater Mesopotamia. The population density among Miris and Daflas was much lower than among the inhabitants of the valley bottom, and their social organization was simpler. Along with animal husbandry, the mountaineers practised some swidden agriculture.

Besides crops and domestic animals, Apa Tanis possessions consisted of houses, granaries, bamboo groves, and of some imported prestige goods such as Tibetan swords, bells and bronze plates. In case of inner conflict and fighting inside the valley, all this property, especially the crucially important granaries, could be quickly destroyed. The Apa Tanis' economy could be ruined and their territory certainly invaded by Miris and Daflas. It is easy to imagine that in a

similar situation somewhere in pre-Columbian America, the integrity and safety of the society would be guaranteed by a dynasty of chiefs who would suppress quarrels, organize defence and, by the way, mobilize the commoners for the construction of an earthen mound for the community temple. The case of Apa Tanis, however, was entirely different and the decision making in their society totally decentralized. This decentralization corresponds to the almost complete lack of any economic power beyond and above separate households. No land, buildings or other immoveables were possessed collectively by all inhabitants of the valley. Property of the separate villages was restricted to some lands on the forested margins of the valley. The only collective owners who had played some role in the economy were patrilineal clans, each of which encompassed the inhabitants of a particular village. Even the clans, however, only possessed mountain forests and pastures, cemeteries and the platform shrines (*lapang*) on the small village plazas. The *lapangs* needed little labour investments for their construction or maintenance. Individual property was much more important than any collective rights, and everyone could buy a plot of land both in his own village and in any other.

The right to buy and to sell land at one's own will would lead inevitably to concentration of wealth in the hands of the few richest families. However, there were institutions in Apa Tani society which prevented such a process going to extremes, and prevented the rich land owners from monopolizing economic and political power and becoming a class of landlords. The most important of these institutions was *Lisudu* (potlatch). The more prosperous an Apa Tani was the easier his dignity could be wounded. There was no way to restore personal honour but to sacrifice property, mainly bulls, that would demand the greatest manifestations of generosity from the side of the opponent if he did not want to lose face. Other members of the society usually held such competitions under control to prevent too big a destruction of property after which further economic recovery could become impossible. The big *Lisudu* was an important event not only socially but also economically, because the meat of the slaughtered animals was distributed first among the village dwellers and afterwards throughout the valley.

There were two principal mechanisms which helped to smooth over conflicts inside Apa Tani society. First, on the occasion of mass ceremonies and religious feasts people of different clan and village affiliation exchanged ritual gifts, and a complex pan-valley system of interpersonal relations and obligations was formed. Second, the informal councils of respected men functioned in every village, with a separate participation of adult heads of the households, senior persons, and the young. Before any decision (e.g. punishment of a criminal) was made, the matter was discussed with representatives from all sides so long as was needed to find an acceptable solution. In the most extreme cases the disputes were resolved by means of ritual fightings (*gambu sodu*). The persons directly involved in the conflict did not take part in *gambu sodu,* but paid compensation for the wounded and killed. The procedure was a sort of a sacrifice and after the

very first casualties peace was always restored. If no group interests were affected, the opponents were let to clarify their relations as they liked. Such 'mini-wars' inside one and the same village could continue for months if they were not a menace to other people's life and property.

All Apa Tanis clans pertained either to the *mite* ('patrician') or *mura* ('slave', or better said 'plebeian') categories. The latter were ritually dependent on the former but enjoyed the same economic rights. Differences in wealth were between families, rather than corporations, and this was an important obstacle against the monopolization of power in a stratified society. Another institute that helped to preserve personal ties across all kinds of social borders was *patang* (labour-gangs). Boys and girls who became the members of one and the same *patang* continued to support one another during all their life. Apa Tanis had some slaves, usually Miris and Daflas. These were as a rule liberated after some time, becoming (together with the adopted foreigners) the members of *mura* clans or entering the *mite* clans of their former masters with individual *mura* status. Apa Tani clans were exogamous, but if a man and a woman of one and the same clan had resolute intentions to live together and were ready to sacrifice a bull, they were permitted to marry. Despite prevailing patrilineaty, the property in some cases could be transmitted by the maternal line as well. When a particular clan became too numerous, it was divided in two. In short, the kinship system was dynamic and flexible. No symmetrical divisions of moiety type were observed.

The economic and social organization of Apa Tanis demonstrates parallels to the situation in ancient southwestern Asia in several respects: (1) a general economic orientation towards irrigated agriculture as a primary activity and animal husbandry in the second place; (2) a local level settlement pattern of nucleated villages with no monumental architecture but with many small shrines; (3) a degree of economic differentiation (differences in wealth are significant but not overwhelming; because of *lisudu,* no real treasures are accumulated in anybody's hands; (4) a degree of craft specialization (in the 1940–50's Apa Tanis had several families of hereditary iron smiths; the women of four *mura* clans of one of the villages had exclusive rights over the pottery production; (5) forms of external relations which included both war skirmishes and some economic symbiosis between densely populated agricultural core and sparsely populated extensive periphery and the acquisition of rare prestige goods via long-distance trade exchange.

Reconstructing complex societies of the Near and Middle East

These characteristics make Apa Tanis an appropriate model for reconstruction of complex, but not centralized, prehistoric societies of the Near and Middle East. Politically, Apa Tanis certainly did not form a chiefdom, but neither were they just an aggregation of independent village communities. For lack of a better term, let us call such a system 'an autonomous town', since intercommunication across all Apa Tani valley was as easy and quick as in any nucleated

settlement of 10,000 inhabitants. The possibility of everyday personal contact between the members of the acephalous political unit was probably crucial for preserving its integrity both in the twentieth-century Himalaya and in prehistoric Near and Middle East. Other conditions on which such a decentralized system was able to function were (a) an autonomous position of individual in respect to any kin or territorial ties (b) an individual private property of land and cattle (c) the absence of significant corporate property and, (c) consequently, the lack of social groups which would and could use the latter for their own interests. Just as in chiefdoms, there was considerable redistribution in the Apa Tani society, but this exchange of services and goods was neither asymmetrical nor centralized.

Individual property of land certainly inhibited small scale local migration. In this respect, it is worth remembering that agricultural settlements in the Near and Middle East had clear outer limits, dense planning, and a rather stable perimeter from the Neolithic onwards. They grew mostly from within, new buildings being erected between the older ones (Schmidt 1964; Dentzer, Villeneuve & Bianquis 1985). An example of this type of planning and pattern of growth is provided by the 0.5–0.7 ha early sixth millennium BC settlement of Jeitun. This is the earliest known agricultural hamlet in southern Turkmenistan (Masson 1971; Berezkin 1992, p. 28). Later, the southwestern Asian towns and cities usually had walls which sharply divided the urban areas from the rural ones. The lack of the easily available ground for new habitation because of the private property on land in the core zones of the agricultural oases could be one of the main causes of the growth of 'living mounds', or tells. Such mounds became characteristic landmarks from Bulgaria to Pakistan but are unknown or rare in other regions.

In the New World (particularly in the central Andes where late pre-ceramic and early ceramic architecture is better known than in Mesoamerica) both the first permanent buildings and later villages, towns and cities differed in their nature and structure from their counterparts in the Near and Middle East. The earliest permanent buildings of pre-ceramic Peru (the fourth to third millennia BC) such as Piruru (Bonnier & Rosenberg 1988) and probably Asana (Aldenderfer 1990; Aldenderfer 1991) are interpreted by excavators as community sanctuaries. Even earlier, in the sixth to fifth millennia BC, an example of a community centre with the remains of two artificial earthen mounds and tiny settlements scattered across the surrounding valley was recorded in the Upper Zaña drainage in northern Peru (Dillehay, Netherly & Rossen 1989). During the late third to early second millennia BC, Peruvian shrines were already built with great elaboration and in some cases, e.g. La Galgada with substantial labour investments (Burger, Salazar-Burger 1980; Grieder & Bueno 1985). However, even during this period, there were no significant permanent villages in Peru apart from near the coast where settled life was based mainly on the exploitation of marine resources and where public constructions are out of proportion to the size of habitation settlements (Feldman 1985; Feldman 1987). This predominance of corporate non-utilitarian

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architecture over the habitational one in the early period probably indicates both great seasonal and/or year to year mobility and the existence of some (kin-) group much larger than a family as a principle subject of economic relations. Later pre-Columbian cities and towns often had very vague outer limits and the urban territory was interlaced and merged with agricultural lands. In Inca Cuzco every kin-based social partition possessed ideally not just a plot of land with precise dimensions but a sector of the world beginning from the main temple of the city and reaching to the horizon (Sherbondy 1979; Zuidema 1986). Though many archaeological sites in the Americas have the same tell-like appearance as the ancient settlements of Mesopotamia and Iran, their internal composition is different: rather than slowly accumulated habitation refuse most of the pre-Columbian artificial mounds consist of earth, mud bricks, or stones brought from elsewhere during one or several short construction episodes to form the platform. The remains of the dwelling houses are dispersed at some distance around and usually not easy to recognize.

Conclusion

Archaeological evidence suggests that many neolithic, chalcolithic and bronze age societies in the Near and Middle East, despite being complex and stratified, were not politically centralized. Even though those societies occupy an evolutionary place between the autonomous village and the state, they do not seem, however, to possess important traits typical of chiefdoms.

The Apa Tanis of the eastern Himalayas are suggested as an appropriate model of an integrated but acephalous social unit of the same size (more than 10,000 people) that is typical for complex chiefdoms elsewhere. Individual private land ownership and the corresponding weakness, both of corporate ownership rights and of kin-based institutions in general, seem to be key factors that permit such a system to function.

Could the earliest state administrations develop directly from the self-governing acephalous systems or must they be inevitably preceded by intermediate chiefdom-like centralized power structures? In Mesopotamia, the still poorly known Late Ubaid to Early Uruk materials must be crucial for the investigation of such a problem. The Indus valley data strongly supports the first suggestion. The mature Harappan culture with its four-fold settlement hierarchy (typical for a state) and extraordinary urban achievements (Jacobson 1987) demonstrates no evidence of treasure accumulation in the hands of restricted social groups (Jacobson 1987, pp. 150–1; Miller 1985, pp. 56–7). The investment of labour in public construction, considerable in itself (Jansen 1979; Jansen 1989), is probably unprecedented in the Old World before Roman times when construction of private houses must be considered (Sarcina 1979a; Sarcina 1979b; Jansen 1984; Miller 1985; Jansen 1989; Kenoyer 1991). All this makes Harappa look more like a very enlarged and complicated Apa Tanis than like the third millennium BC Mesopotamian city-states. Perhaps

the proto-Literate Sumerian cities were, as J. Jacobson (1987, p. 64) has already suggested, not so different from the Mature Harappan ones.

The evolutionary transformation of political units had probably only one really universal trait: progressive growth of the greatest possible size of integrated systems. The degree of their centralization seems to be one of the most variable characteristics both in prehistory and nowadays. In southwestern Asia acephalous 'autonomous towns' probably occupied the same place between 'autonomous village' and 'state' that belonged to the 'chiefdom' in pre-Columbian America.

Acknowledgements

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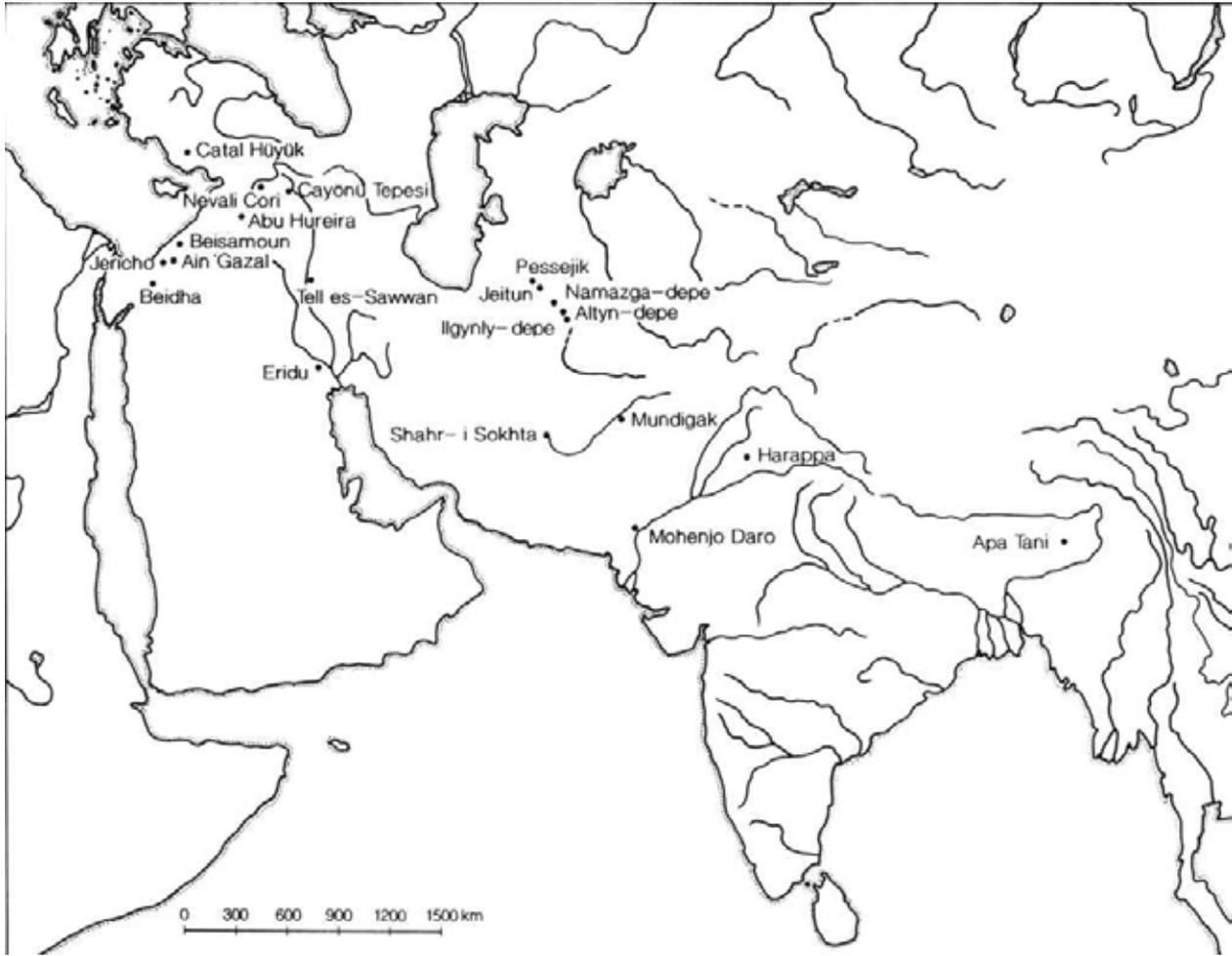## Captions for illustrations

Fig. 1. Places mentioned in the text.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Location of place names mentioned in the text