

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT INTERACTIONS

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Parkinson, William A. and Michael L. Galaty, eds. 2010. *Archaic State Interaction: The Eastern Mediterranean in the Bronze Age*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press. 318 + xii Pages, ISBN 978-1934691205 Paper (\$34.95)

Archaic State Interaction casts valuable new light on how extra-societal contacts may be implicated in processes of increasing social complexity. As the title makes clear, the contributors ground their discussions of interaction theory in the specific sequence of events dating to 3100-1000 BCE in that portion of the Mediterranean basin stretching from Italy to the Levantine Coast. Their goals, as stated clearly by Parkinson and Galaty in the introduction, are to consider how local social and economic changes, on the one hand, were related to: variations in the intensity of interactions occurring at differing spatial and temporal scales; changes in how, and by whom, such contacts were conducted; and, shifts in the routes these transactions followed. The result is less a consensus than a healthy, productive debate on these issues. The main points of contention concern: rates of socio-political change; how to translate patterns among static material remains into dynamic political and economic processes; whose interests drove and shaped the course of cross-border contacts; and what interpretive frameworks are best suited to modeling the latter interactions. With respect to the last point, a consistent theme running throughout the papers deals with the utility of world-systems theory (WST) in describing and understanding the developmental significance of inter-polity contacts.

There is much in this collection that will interest scholars who specialize in Eastern Mediterranean prehistory. The contributions by Galaty et al., Cherry, and Thomas, in particular, provide what this non-expert took to be very helpful summaries of, in turn, the archaeological evidence for inter-societal relations across the eastern Mediterranean, in pre-palatial Crete (prior to 2050 BCE), and between the eastern Adriatic and the rest of the eastern Mediterranean. Given my own background, and what I take to be the interests of my audience, I will focus here instead on the broader conceptual issues with which the authors grapple, especially their discussions of the advantages and drawbacks offered by a world-systems perspective on ancient power relations.

Parkinson and Galaty outline this debate very helpfully in the first chapter. Here they raise an important point concerning scales of analysis, specifically, which anthropological models are better suited to modeling processes of political change occurring within and among realms over time scales ranging from a few generations to centuries. This discussion has the salutary effect of: reminding us that different approaches have distinct strengths and weaknesses; inter-societal interaction is a complex set of interrelated processes that are enacted by varied people in different ways in diverse places; these actions can give rise to a host of, often unanticipated, consequences over different spans of time; and that understanding all of this variety is best achieved by taking advantage of the varied approaches available to us rather than insisting that one perspective fits all situations. A basic premise here seems to be that studies of inter-societal

dealings should seek cross-cultural regularities while remaining true to the vagaries of historical details. Accomplishing this goal, Parkinson and Galaty contend, requires tacking between detailed accounts of local happenings and the broader contexts of inter-societal interactions in which those events are enmeshed. Such shifting of analytical foci, according to the authors, requires drawing selectively on conceptual schemes that are best suited to grappling with large scale, long-term processes (WST), competitive interactions that transpire on a regional scale over the medium term among neighboring polities (Peer Polity Interaction, PPI; Renfrew and Cherry 1986), and the manner in which foreign goods and ideas are manipulated by actors seeking local advantage over the course of a generation or so (Prestige Goods Theory, PGT; Ekholm 1972; Friedman and Rowlands 1977). These issues are then considered throughout the volume.

Kardulias and Sherratt devote their chapters to nuanced considerations of WST's applicability to modeling socio-political and economic change. Kardulias, in particular, lays out the case for distinguishing between WST, as originally proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980), and World Systems Analysis (WSA; see also Chase-Dunn and Grimes 1995; Hall 1989, 2005). The latter approach draws inspiration from Wallerstein's original formulation while redefining some of his basic concepts to bring them in line with the reality of inter-societal transactions that are not driven by capitalist imperatives. Hence, Kardulias allows for: the existence of inter-polity interaction networks that are not characterized by the exploitation of peripheries by core states (core-periphery differentiation); the emergence of cultural, technological, and political innovations in areas of core-periphery contact (hybrid zones); and, the active manipulation of long-distance transactions by those traditionally seen as passive recipients of core demands (negotiated peripherality). Sherratt also strongly argues for a more flexible approach to the study of ancient world-systems, one that acknowledges a continuum of core/periphery dealings in which exploitation played a variable role. Kardulias and Sherratt, in sum, make a strong case that WSA provides important insights into systemic relations that pertain among societies as they become embroiled in ties of mutual dependency, even if no one participant dominates the others. This, they argue, is a fertile domain for investigating how local political formations are conditioned by their positions in a multi-polity structure and the ways in which shifting political and economic relations within this framework can impact developments throughout the system.

Cline, though appreciative of the points raised by Kardulias and Sherratt, questions what WST and WSA terminology and precepts contribute to our understanding of relations among interaction intensity and historical events in the eastern Mediterranean of the Bronze Age. This question has been asked in other contexts; not so much that WST and WSA are wrong as that their use obscures our understandings of past power contests by shoehorning ancient developments into models of capitalist expansion and interactions (cf. Stein 1999, 2002). Cline also argues that any further development of interaction theory should be founded on stronger evidentiary bases than currently exist, a point seconded by Cherry in his contribution.

Cherry and Schon also question the utility of WSA/WST, preferring to focus on how foreign contacts and goods were employed in local power struggles that led to the emergence, respectively, of the Minoan and Mycenaean states. Both authors draw inspiration from PPI and PGT, arguing that political centralization and hierarchy building on Crete and the Greek mainland were based on elite control over the local use and distribution of key imports as well as, in the Mycenaean case, the production of high value items made from foreign raw materials. The political significance of these imports and local manufactures lay in their use as: markers of high

status; payments to secondary elites who administered ever-larger populations for paramount lords; and, symbols of inter-polity solidarity among rulers of distinct realms that facilitated exchanges of all sorts. Cherry and Schon, in sum, make the case that the structure and form of inter-polity networks are the outcomes of myriad decisions made by elites in diverse societies concerning how best to serve their own interests by dealing with others. Rather than local actions being shaped by a society's position within an inter-regional network, it is those initiatives that configure the web.

Wengrow's contribution poses another challenge to WST, this time focusing on the meaning of the objects that changed hands across social borders and on the possibility that non-elites partook in these transactions. Cherry and Sherratt also call for greater attention to the cultural significance of imports in understanding inter-societal dealings and their political implications. It is all too easy in studying prehistoric situations to reduce material remains to indices of wealth and power and miss their polyvalent significance to those who made and used them. World-systems theorists have often been criticized for failing to see the conceptual in the material, for losing the cultural significance of inter-polity ties in the shadow of their economic and political importance. Wengrow provides a fine example of how to proceed cautiously to address this problem, by paying close attention to the contexts in which specific objects were used in their societies of origin as well as in those that imported them. In this case, Wengrow argues that the scarabs and stone vessels that constituted the first known Egyptian imports into Crete figured in practices that ensured the safety and health of non-elite women in life and after death. While admittedly a hypothesis, this interpretation raises important questions about: the gendered nature of inter-societal ties; the possibility that significant trans-border links were established by segments of ancient populations outside the charmed circle of paramount power; and that ritual may have provided a context for initiating and maintaining these connections.

Thomas in her chapter raises important questions about the applicability of WST to understanding developments on what Sherratt calls the margins of these interaction networks; i.e., places whose populations were only in intermittent contact with other members of the web and, hence, whose local functioning was not dependent on inputs from beyond their borders. Her detailed review of the material record from the eastern Adriatic and western Balkans reveals very little evidence of sustained contact with the eastern Mediterranean and its Bronze Age Minoan and Mycenaean cores. I am not sure that Thomas would argue that her research vitiates the utility of WST/WSA in understanding the past. Rather, she urges us to be careful in defining the system's limits and to not be over-zealous in imputing great developmental significance to isolated foreign pottery sherds or the occasional local architectural anomaly that seems inspired by distant models. Peter Wells reached similar conclusions with regards northern European contacts with Classical Greece and Rome (1980, 1984), and Thomas's cautions are well-taken here.

One of this volume's great strengths is that its contributors reach beyond local matters to consider topics that are relevant to social scientists working in diverse areas and time periods. Debates about WST/WSA are not limited to the eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age and involve issues that are central to understanding human behavior generally. One basic point that this compendium raises very successfully concerns how we can effectively model power contests that are impacted by recursive relations among processes occurring at micro- and macro-spatial and temporal scales. Part of WSA's appeal is that it provides a set of concepts and relationships that encourage grounding the local in the global. Admittedly, Wallerstein's original formulation is

stronger on economic than cultural processes and tends to favor inter-societal dealings over local developments in explaining change. The work of scholars like Sherratt and Kardulias in converting WST to WSA has done much to address these concerns. Others, notably Schon, Cherry, and, to some extent, Cline in this collection, favor a more bottom-up approach, giving explanatory pride of place to such endogenous processes as intra-societal contests for power in which foreign goods and symbols were deployed. The difference here seems to be one of emphasis; those espousing WSA start from the top down, setting parochial events within translocal structures whereas others see those structures as the cumulative products of parochial initiatives. I believe that Parkinson and Galaty correctly view these as complementary perspectives to solving the same problem; i.e., how power relations that pertain at any scale are shaped by processes occurring over multiple territorial extents and temporal durations. I am not convinced, however, that the answer lies in juxtaposing different established models, such as WSA, PPI, and PGT, drawing on each depending on the analytical level at which we choose to work. Such a step avoids the question of what ties developments on these multiple scales together; how is the manipulation of prestige goods within a certain realm inextricably bound up with exchange relations occurring across political boundaries and to inter-state competitions waged within particular regions? I suggest that the answer lies in reimagining the world, ancient and modern, less as a plane divided among distinct, nested territorial entities than as a bundle of overlapping networks that often operate with a fine disregard for boundaries (cf. Brooks 2002).

This reimagining might start from the premise that people rarely accomplish significant goals alone. This is especially the case when it comes to securing and defending power, the ability of people to achieve their own ends by their own efforts and to secure the help of others in reaching those objectives (Giddens 1984:38, 258-261; Wolf 1990). Success in the political arena requires marshalling resources that are used to support the claims to preeminence of particular factions in consistent and reliable ways. Mobilizing these assets is predicated on forging durable alliances, both with those living at home and at variable distances, from whom the necessary goods and ideas are obtained. Material items, as means to accomplishing essential tasks and bearers of meaning, are among the resources under contention; they are certainly the primary assets deployed in political struggles that survive in the archaeological record (Gell 1998). It is by studying the patterned distribution of these remains, in association with the contexts in which they were used, that archaeologists can infer what resources were deployed within which networks to achieve what aims. Contests for power are, therefore, waged through networks composed of people and the objects essential to achieving political objectives.

Success in political struggles often requires membership in multiple webs extending over different territorial extents. For example, those seeking power within a realm must forge connections with their followers by establishing a credible affiliation that transcends loyalties defined by such factors as residence, gender, age, ethnicity, and/or class. At the same time, rulers seek to elevate themselves above their subordinates, their ascendance frequently funded through local monopolies over the use and distribution of imports secured through interactions with distant allies engaged in much the same projects (Schortman and Urban in press; Schortman et al. 2001). Those of lower rank may maneuver, with variable success, to challenge these hierarchical structures by establishing nets of their own through which resources essential to promoting physical survival and a meaningful life are obtained. Wengrow's study of early Egyptian imports to Crete provides one example of how some level of local autonomy can be achieved by non-elites, in this case through the manipulation of potent religious symbols.

The resulting political arena is, therefore, a dynamic array of intersecting networks that variably unite and divide people of all ranks in their quests to defend their power to accomplish their own goals and to assert power over the labor and loyalty of others. Preeminence within this network of networks can occur at many levels simultaneously depending, in part, on how far the ability of the contestants to monopolize tangible and conceptual assets extends. The broader the reach of would-be sovereigns, however, the wider the array of competitors they are likely to encounter, each marshalling different assets within their own networks. Hence, the instability of many so-called core states in antiquity may be due in large part to difficulties paramount lords faced in countering the efforts of diverse actors to secure some level of autonomy and thus undermine elite monopolies.

Political structures, in this view, are almost always multi-scalar and prone to transmutation as the flow of resources through them changes with shifts in who is allied against whom over what territorial extents. The networks that comprise these formations are, therefore, simultaneously features of those political structures and the means for modifying them. World-Systems Theory/WSA, PPI, PGT, and many other such models capture parts of this bundle of networks. I contend that synthesizing insights derived from these valuable models requires acknowledging that the relations they highlight are different aspects of interrelated political struggles waged by many of the same agents who occupy different positions within a political structure that is as extensive as the territorial spread of the resources on which the contestants draw. By focusing on political networks, I suggest that we cannot only reconcile the perspectives offered by these seemingly contradictory models but proceed with our studies in ways that do not presuppose: causally significant distinctions between cores and peripheries and between foreign and autochthonous processes; the primacy of elite actors as drivers of change; and, the unity of societies and their ability to function as social actors. Research guided by this network approach retains the multi-scalar emphasis promoted by WST/WSA, PPI, and PGT. It goes further, however, by drawing connections among the analytical levels on which these theories work, focusing on how people actively used networks to cross multiple spatial boundaries in search of political advantage. Rather than imposing territorial divisions, such as societies and cores, on our material from the start, a network perspective encourages us to determine how ancient actors created political structures through the manipulation of diverse materials in cooperation with some and opposition to others (Gell 1998; Latour 2005). In this way we can advance the cause so well articulated by the contributors to *Ancient State Interactions*, to capture the dynamism and fluidity of most political dealings in all times and places.

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