
Rosetta

Lewis, M. (2019); 'Davide Domenici and Nicolò Marchetti (eds.), 2018. Urbanised Landscapes in Early Syro-Mesopotamia and Prehispanic Mesoamerica: Papers of a Cross-Cultural Seminar held in Honor of Robert McCormick Adams. Weisbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. Pp 224. €35.00. (Free open access download available). ISBN 978-3-447-11086-0.'

Rosetta **23**: 28-32

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue23/Lewis.pdf>

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Reviewed by Michael Lewis.

Abstract

This volume is based on a conference held at the University of Bologna in 2015 celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Adams' publication "The Evolution of Urban Society: Early Mesopotamia and Prehispanic Mexico". It brings together papers from several authors, with work highlighting the lasting effect of Robert McCormick Adams' career in archaeology.

Review

Numerous case studies are presented in the volume, with a geographic range from Mesoamerica (Domenici), Mesopotamia (Butterlin, Benati and Marchetti) and Central Asia (Mantellini) highlighting the scope of work undertaken by Adams. These are followed by a biographical account of Adams in the twenty-first century (Yoffee).

Following the preface outlining the volume, Feinman in chapter one argues that a universal approach to explain the origin of urbanism is not suitable given the diverse paths to achieving 'urban status' and the manifestation of this urbanism. Chapter one therefore attempts to reassess the theoretical methodology we use to draw diachronic and temporal cross-cultural comparisons regarding the origins of urbanism. Feinman supports a methodology to explain cross-cultural variation. He moves to reframe the dialogue regarding the origins of urbanism by highlighting several characteristics of early urban centres in a manner similar to Childe's Urban Revolution (1950).

In chapter two, Domenici seeks to reinterpret the mural paintings of Teotihuacan, which he argues was a writing system and, through comparison with the Postclassic Nahua glyphs, was used to propagate a specific political message.

It is argued that Teotihuacan was the centre of a hugely complex polity ruled by multiple socio-political units and governed by different intermediate elites. This, Domenici suggests, is far more realistic when imagining the bureaucratic organisation of such a huge urban centre.

Butterlin in chapter three synthesises (in French, but with an English abstract) the history of archaeological research regarding the nature and key arguments of the Uruk Phenomenon, as well as a re-synchronisation of the chronologies of many key sites of the Uruk sphere. In attempting to reframe the discussion of the Uruk Phenomenon, Butterlin contends that this expansion was a result of globalisation, and a universal style existing across the Uruk sphere.

The homogeneity of an Uruk cultural package is then noted (ceramics, architectural elements and administrative technologies), which dominates sites of the latter fourth millennium BCE, though with acknowledgement of the problems in equating a cultural package to a specific cultural group. This is noteworthy given that archaeologists in the region still rely heavily upon culture-historical methodologies.

Butterlin then uses Jebel Aruda, Habuba Kabira and the Uruk cultural package noted therein to argue for a colonial situation based on the production of wine and wool by these specialised households of the Middle Euphrates and initiated by the “roi marchands d’Uruk”.

Benati continues looking at the Late Chalcolithic (henceforth LC) in chapter four. He takes a detailed approach, noting the origin and construct of large-scale political networks with focus on northern Mesopotamia by the agents of the LC3-5. Importantly, it is recognised that many of the themes he observes have origins in the preceding LC or Late Ubaid (see Marro 2012). Benati then outlines the developmental trends in the archaeology of the region, with emphasis on trade and exchange, commensal strategies and their relation to political networks and the origins of societal complexity.

Despite Benati’s conclusion that our understanding of political and social organisation is somewhat lacking for the LC of Greater Mesopotamia, I wholly support his concluding argument that publication of primary data and scientific analysis of artefacts will enable a more holistic understanding of the key issues he has raised.

In chapter five, Marchetti provides a personal commentary relating to issues of archaeological survey based on his own surveys at Ebla in Northern Syria, and also in southern Mesopotamia, both of which follow in the footsteps of Adams.

Marchetti critically evaluates various methodologies of modern survey which do not pursue a holistic approach, whether due to seasonal variation, topography, budget, time or politics whilst praising those of Adams in southern Mesopotamia and highlighting the pioneering legacy of his surveys.

Marchetti's paper highlights the influence of Adam's survey work, which can be seen in the declassified CORONA Imagery dominating contemporary Near Eastern Survey (e.g Ur 2010). Adams was instrumental in the declassification of this (Pournelle 2007). Whilst Adams, of course, was not the first to use aerial imagery, his approach was hugely important in utilising the CORONA imagery to integrate the surveyed archaeological sites into the contextual ecological landscape, (Ibid. 32) and study the urban centres alongside their rural hinterland.

In chapter six, Mantellini looks at the development of irrigation systems and settlements of the Samarkand Oasis of Central Asia based on archaeological survey. Mantellini highlights that water management was a key requisite of settlement in the region. Despite the contrasting survey methods utilised in Near Eastern and Central Asian archaeology, the two regions are highlighted as environmentally similar.

The settlement and occupation of the Samarkand Oasis is then discussed, alongside the rise and fall of settlement numbers based on survey data. The author notes numerous issues related to survey, some of which were raised previously by Marchetti, but Mantellini adds that detailed ceramic chronologies for Central Asia are still, for the most part, lacking. Clearly, this represents a key aspect of the regional archaeology which deserves to be readdressed.

The final chapter of the volume sees Yoffee present a continuation of his earlier biography of Adams (Yoffee 1997), covering his work from 2000-2012. Yoffee's contribution deserves to be read alongside this earlier biography for a full appreciation of Adams and his lasting effect upon the archaeological discipline.

Overall, the absence of chapters within this volume which deal with comparative archaeologies of complex societies goes a long way to denote the standing of this

methodology within the current archaeological discipline. This is, however, acknowledged by the editors early in the volume. The resurgence of a comparative archaeological approach of the early 2000's (e.g. Trigger 2003) has recently wavered. Rather than the direct comparison of large-scale complex societies, a more common method now involves utilising comparative archaeology on a smaller scale, such as individual assemblages or archaeology of small-scale settlements, and adopting a bottom-up approach. Feinman comes closest to using such an approach, though notes that whilst similar trends occur diachronically across the world, there are so many specific nuances of each path that a direct comparison is no longer deemed valid.

As a whole, this volume is well presented, with colour tables, plans, maps and archaeological plates, many of which are in colour. The work includes a wide variety of papers clearly highlighting the legacy of Robert McCormick Adams. However, I would advise the interested scholar to consult the earlier volume dedicated to Adams (Stone 2007) alongside this one, for a full appreciation of the contribution made by him to archaeology.

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