The materialization of power and the identification of political models in the archaeological context

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades there has been an explosion of studies dealing with the nature of power and its expression on the archaeological record. We have witnessed the development of a myriad of topics of study in the different expressions of power, from gender studies to colonialism or performance as a mean of social domination However, there are fewer studies devoted to the relationship of power, the models of state and, in concrete, the feasibility of interpreting different political models in the archaeological context and record.

This work is intended to be a general review of the topic. In order to achieve this, I will develop a discourse from the more general, the definition of the terms involved in the analysis, to the more specific: which is the material expression, if any, of the different political models in which a society can be organized, moving away from the traditional interpretations that most of these phenomena have had in the discipline.

Keywords:
Power, Artefact, Political model, Archaeological Interpretation.

RESUM

En les dues últimes dècades hi ha hagut una explosió d'estudis que tracten de la naturalesa del poder i la seva expressió en el registre arqueològic. Hem presenciat el desenvolupament d'una infinitat de temes d'estudi en les diferents expressions de poder, des de 'estudis de gènere al colonialisme o performance com a significat de la dominació socia.l No obstant això, hi ha alguns estudis dedicats a la relació de poder, els models d'estat i, en concret, la viabilitat d'interpretar diferents models polítics en el context arqueològic i el seu registre.

Aquest treball pretén ser una revisió general del tema. Per aconseguir-ho exposaré un discurs des del més general, la definició dels termes implicats en l'anàlisi, específicament: quina és l'expressió material, si escau, dels diferents models polítics en els quals una societat es pot organitzar, allunyant de les interpretacions tradicionals que han tingut la majoria d'aquests fenòmens en la disciplina.

Paraules Clau:
Poder, Artefacte, Model polític, Interpretació Arqueològica

The Definition of Power in the Social Sciences

The definition of power in social sciences is an example of "debate of extremes" in which the definition of a single concept constantly fluctuates between the two extreme ends of the spectrum of meanings. Thus, power has been considered either the property of individuals or a characteristic of the collectivity. For example, Schortman, Urban and Ausec defined power as "the ability to direct and benefit from the actions of others (1996: 62). This idea of achieving goals by influencing the others was already formulated by Thomas Hobbes, who defined it as present means, to obtain some future apparent good (1651 [1998]).

The means to obtain these positive results were also shaped in a binary classification. Thus, in one extreme we have the influence (Handy 1993) while on the other we find coercion. The latter has been a traditional attribute of power, mainly in the form of institutionalized violence of the state. We do not have to reach the extremes of Mao Zedong when he declared that "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" (2003: 224), to at least agree with Weber, who defined power as "the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others" (1968: 926). Power can be understood as a commodity, as authority circulating the social system in a manner equivalent to money (Parsons 1963), or as a general media of communication (Luhmann 1979). Finally, power can be defined as a clash of interest (Miller and Tilley 1984a) if, following Lukes, we consider that "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests" (1974: 27).

Although this list of definitions could be much more extent, it compiles most of the characteristics that have been assigned to power though time, and that deserve some further consideration. Thus, we must first pay attention to the division between those who have power and enforce their interests and those who accept or are forced to accept these interests. This dichotomy between rulers and ruled is actually the basement for class struggle and dialectic of society in Marxism (Bottomore 1983) that, at the same time, depends on class consciousness. The reason for including these reflections on the analysis of the nature of power is that the enforcement of this power does not have to be necessary violent, and instead of coercion the ruling class can resort to ideology, and create the illusion, the alienation in those ruled by them that the actual state of things and the interest promoted against their benefits are actual the natural state of things (Maisels 2010).

Another important characteristic of the nature of power is that it is self-contained. No matter what the interest of the rulers is; the first one is always the perpetuation of power itself. This was already recognized by Niccolò Machiavelli, who addressed for the first time the existence of evil in the political power (1532[1976]). This negative connotation of power was not dispelled until the last quarter of the 20th c. with the works of Michel Foucault on the nature of power.

Foucault has been central in the definition of power in the social sciences (Miller and Tilley 1984a; Jamieson 2000). In The History of Sexuality, he wrote: "The analysis [of power] should not attempt to consider power from its internal point of view and...should refrain from posing the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: 'Who then has power and what has he in mind? What is the aim of someone who possesses power?' Instead, it is a case of studying power at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices." (1981: 97). As Miller and Tilley pointed out, Foucault broke the idea of power "as a monolithic and unitary mechanism, or sets of mechanisms, that can 'do' nothing but say no." (1984a: 5; Foucault 1981: 85), inherited from previous traditions (Althusser 1971) and will develop a model in which power is conceived as a possession with two sides or faces, one the positive productive effect on social life and the other the negative, repressive one. Finally, power cannot be interpreted as unidirectional. As Greiner and Schein (1988) pointed out, power can act downward, for example, when a company's superior influences subordinates, and upward when the subordinates influence the decisions of the leader.

Power covers the full spectrum of human society. Thus, we cannot easily isolate politics from other spheres in our exploration of political models in the archaeological record. We can detect the use and abuse of power in a myriad of spheres, from religious taboos to gender-based organization of the household, social cast or political institutions. These spheres are isolated entities: they are all interconnected and work to fulfil the interest of the ruling elites. Thus, political power, which ultimate expression is the state, is able to legislate on other spheres, as well as other spheres of power can condition the legislation of the state. The imposition of Christian beliefs at the end of Roman Empire (edicts of Thessalonica and Justinian I, 380 CE and 529 CE respectively) (Williams and Friell 1994; Humfress 2005) is an example of a secular and political institution favouring, and empowering, one religion over the rest, while, in present day Spain, the new and restrictive legislation of the right-wing government in

Spain, is clearly influenced by the official doctrine of the Catholic church in the country (Barambio 2012; Cancio 2012).

Power and Politics in Archaeology

The study of power in past societies, as any other approach considering elements as ideology of symbols, was erased from the archaeological inquiry with the establishment of archaeology as a pure anthropological discipline (Binford 1962). It was the incapability of processualism of formulating these questions what caused their incapability to address them in the archaeological context. It also caused the isolation of other sub-fields of the discipline (such as Classical Archaeology, Egyptology or Assyriology) that were more used to deal with the material remains of political systems (Alcock and Osborne 2007; Dyson 2006; Whitley 2001). This is a dichotomy that will persist in the United States as long as the departments of Classics would keep the Classical Archaeologists separated from the Departments of Anthropology.

However, we cannot say that political systems were study in Prehistory or Classical Archaeology before the advent of postprocessualism. What we have is an interest in inequality, in the differentiation of classes based on the archaeological record, on the definition of elite based on grave goods or monumental architecture. The life of the commoners, mainly in the so-called civilized cultures, was only considered of interest in very exceptional cases (Dyers 1875; Robinson, D.M 1946; Robinson, D.M. and J.W. Graham 1938; Whitley 2001). This is elegantly illustrated, for example, by a publication of the British Museum dated to 1928, *A Guide to the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities in the British Museum*. It includes a section called "Political Antiquities" a series of objects related to the civic and political life of Ancient Greece, such as a treaty of alliance between the Eleans and Heraeans, a colonial decree from Naupactos and a series of Athenian ostraka (Walters 1928: 118-119). This divergence of evidence, mainly in the presence of writing, caused a separation between prehistory and classical archaeology that lasts until the present day, including in the way that political institutions are addressed. James Whitley summarized in a strongly biased way this lack of understanding when he wrote:

"Many prehistorians dislike Classical Archaeology. It is not simply that they exhibit a perfectly understandable preference for their own area of prehistory; nor that they have a well-developed aesthetic preference for the rough-hewn, the rude and the primitive; nor even that they may be some lingering resentment of the prestige that Classical Archaeology once enjo-

yed. Many prehistorians, at least many who work in Britain simply do not see the point of Classical Archaeology" (Whitley 2001: 12).

This excursus is necessary to illustrate how this division in the discipline is reflected in the way political institutions are interpreted in the archaeological context. After the collapse of the binfordian dogmatism in the 70s the archaeological inquiry started to have new interests in the study of past societies. One of the first and most influential works of this new line of research was Richard Bradley's *The Social Foundations of Prehistoric Britain* (1984). In the last chapter the author was able to foresee the two possible reactions of the scientific community with regard to the validity of his work:

"*By this stage I would anticipate two different reactions from readers: either a basic agreement that social questions can be investigated by archaeological methods, or the conviction that this book, rather than Steven's poem, should be called 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction'.*" (emphasis in the original, Bradley 1984: 157).

The material record in which the study was based was not very different, qualitatively, from the prestige goods and graves used by Gordon Childe fifty four years before (1930) and that actually helped them to start wondering about something more than collections of objects. The difference lays in the question that was being asked. New perspectives had been opened by postprocessualism and an increasing interest in more "continental" issues (Kuper 1999), and symbols and ideologies started to be studied in the archaeological record. One of the first syntheses of the topic was the volume edited by Miller and Tilley (1984a). This works contains a series of contributions that range from gender issues (Hodder 1984) to legitimation of power in the Neolithic (Tilley 1984), but there is no trace of the analysis of political models in the archaeological record. Their definition of power, in which two senses of the noun may be distinguished, power to and power over, followed Foucault (1981), and refers to the integral and recursive element in all aspects of social life as opposed to the specific forms of social control. This will leave political power in an ill-defined position, sharing analytical space with ideology, symbols and social control. No political models were considered.

The result of this works and others to come, both from processual and postprocessual perspectives, encouraged the analysis of ideology and its role in the development of complex societies. Among them, DeMarrais (et alii 1996) were one of the first who started to address Ideology as a source of social

power. They defined it social power as "the capacity to control and manage the labor and activities of a group to gain access to the benefits of social action (1996: 15) and they identify four sources of power: economic, political, military, and ideological. Here we can see political directly addressed as one of the means of acquiring social power. This assumption is not tied to any particular time and place: political power can be found from the most egalitarian hunter-gatherers to the most complex societies.

This last point contrast with the work of Maisels (2010), who has produced the most complete synthesis on the study of Politics and Power in the archaeological record. When analysing the emergence of the first states, he writes:

"*At its most basic level, political power denotes the ability of an agent to advance partisan interests in the face of opposition. As such it is universal accompaniment of human society, exercised in all aspects of human discourse.*" (Maisels 2010: 3).

This universality of politics seems to contrast with his statement that chiefdoms are not states, and thus do not have well defined politics, since they are based in traditional modes of authority and still have a large consensual element in its function (Maisels 2010). Since he defines the state as "[…] con-

trol over people and territory exercised from a centre through specialized apparatuses of power." (Maisels 2010: 2), it seems to state that a deep class dialectic for the state to appear, as his statement about the necessity of rupture with the consensual authority by a "supreme leader" seems to demonstrate (2010: 8).

Although the last two models diverge in their conception and extension of power, both agree in an essential aspect for archaeology. Power, as any other social action, can be materialized and thus become part of the archaeological context. This idea was already introduced by Miller and Tilley (1984b) when they assessed that a better understanding of long-term change as the context for the study of relationships between social and material culture. Although this can be considered an obvious statement in archaeological praxis, it has rarely been defined in most of the works dealing to power. Another exception is Elizabeth DeMarrais, Luis Jaime Castillo, and Timothy Earle (1996) who consider that the process which sustain and give primacy to one ideology over the other was "grounded in the process by which these ideologies are given concrete, physical form. This process is the materialization of ideology. We argue that ideology is materialized in the form of ceremonies, symbolic objects, monuments, and writing systems to become an effective

source of power." (1996: 16).

This reification of power is also analysed by Walker and Schiffer, who studied how "the acquisition of an artifact instantiates social power by imposing interactions on groups taking part in that artifacts life-history activities." (2006: 67).

Following Nielsen (1995), who demonstrated the relationship between power and architecture in order to reproduce social relations, the authors defined social power as the mean individual of social entities can exercise their will or exert power over others (Walker and Schiffer 2006) definition that correlates to the second meaning of power in Miller and Tilley (1984a). Although there is not an explicit reference to political power, by the establishment of "cadenas", Walker and Schiffer (2006) treat objects and human beings as socially equivalent. If this agency is conferred to the object, due to study of its life history and artefact life (Schiffer 1976, 1995) and artefact, for the authors, is understood "in material terms, to include any humanly made or modified object, device, structure, place or system […]." (Walker and Schiffer 2006: 68) we should be able to trace some of the material expressions that the interaction of the human beings with the artefact of political power produce.

The Archaeological Context of Political Power

It was pointed out in the last section that it is possible to address power in the archaeological record, but is it also possible to study political models? If we consider that the political system of a society is another artefact (system) that interacts with human beings, and, thus, susceptible of leaving traces in the archaeological contexts. In the following line I make a general classification of three different kinds of archaeological remains (architecture, "political tools" and textual evidence) that can serve as a basement for the analysis of political institutions and models in the archaeological context.

A) Architecture:

The architectonic remains of any nature have been considered for a long time the result of highly organized activities within the community that necessary implied some sort of organization and, in consequence, hierarchy (e.g. Clark 1937 [1960]). However, in the last decades, different works on Historical Archaeology and colonialism have used architecture to explain the relationships of the different strata in the society, a model that would be replicated in the design of the buildings (Jamieson 2000; Lucas 2004). Finally, the constitution of spectators as political subjects has been elegantly explored in the edited volume by Inomata and Coben (2006), although these theatres of

power are not exactly equivalent to the political arena.

The first point we have to consider is the nature of the political organization. An egalitarian system such as Athenian democracy implies the participation of a large number of citizens, as well as the development of a series of offices, which were provided by a series of buildings to house them. This is how remains of the Pnyx, the gathering point of the Assembly, the Bouleuterion for the Boule Council or even the prison have been preserved. The communal exercise of power also needed of courts in order to house the jurors, that in Classical period could reach the number of 1001 (Camp 2001, 2010; Hölscher 2007; Osborne 2002; Vanderpool 1975; Whitley 2001). This does not imply a separation of powers in Athenian democracy, since all auctoritas was concentrated in the demos, but it highly contrast with the concentration of power in other cultures. We do not detect this profusion of buildings in the absolute monarchies of Egypt or the Near East, from Summer and Akkad to the Persians. Due to the concentration of powers in the figure of the monarch, there was no need for such a profusion of political public buildings, and the palace would act as the centre of all this activity (Bard 2008). These palaces also involved other activities apart from the political ones, such as rituals (Bard 2008: 220-229), and are de-

corated with scenes in which specific agents, like the monarch, high officers of members of their family, are depicted like in the reliefs of the palace of Persepolis (Schmidt 1953). Such as distinction would be inconceivable in the egalitarian political buildings.

Finally, it can be argued that all these examples are borrowed from highly complex cultures that provided us with a highly differentiated material record. However, this is not the case. Byrd elegantly pointed out how the houses at Basta, in Jordan, narrowed their entrances in the PPNB, and oriented them away from public spaces. He considered this a sign of individualization and, in order to compensate such loses in the community cohesion, more formal and political ceremonial institutions were required. Those were housed in large, centrally situated non domestic buildings characterized by a distinctive architectural style and, interestingly the absence of trash dumping (Byrd 1994).

B) Political Objects:
This is the most opened category of the three exposed in this work, and includes an almost infinite variety of items, usually studied in the research of symbols, such as sceptres, crowns and other regalia that allowed to identify the figures of authority. However, I want to pay more attention to other kinds of objects, not usually addressed in these analyses. The first set comes

again from Athens. In the excavations of the Agora and the Pnyx several items ascribed to the praxis of democracy have been found. Those include white and black pebbles used to vote in the assembly as well as ostraka, pieces of broken pots with the names of prominent citizens that the demos wanted to expel from the city for ten years (Osborne 2002, Whitley 2001). More than the artefact fetishism of finding ostraka with the name of prominent historical characters, the meticulous analysis of the script has demonstrated that many of them where inscribed by the same hand, demonstrating the existence of political groups of interest in the political life of the city (Camp 2010).

Although the list of object could be extended, I want to pay attention to a fairly common object in the archaeological context of many cultures; the coins. They have been, with the sculpture and the painted pottery, object of fetishist devotion by scholars who expended decades classifying them in locations, mints and even series of coining (Dyson 2006) that have acquired the precision of dendrochronology. Largely, and wrongly, diminished now because of its antiquarian approach, the study of numismatics is not only relevant as a mean of dating the site or the economy of past communities, but also as an expression of their symbols and policy. Firstly, coining is carried out by independent states, not by subjects, so

this can be a marker of political autonomy in the archaeological record. Secondly, coins are marked with different images in order not only to distinguish them from one city to another (usually related to the quality of the gold or the silver of the coin) but also as a mean of transmission of symbols. Thus, Greek poleis, with more or less opened political systems, struck coins that usually represent the tutelary divinity of the city and its symbolic attributions. This divinity is collective, a protection of the community who also rules the city, and can obviously decide on the images displayed in the coins. This highly contrast with the numismae coming from absolute monarchies in which the divinity is represented along with the absolute ruler, that in many cases is accompanied by his name. This phenomenon can e easily observed in the coins from poleis like Athens, Corinth or Aegina when compared to the examples from Persia or the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Diadocoi (Kleiner 1975; Kroll And Walker 1993). The same process can be observed in the transition from the Republic to the Principate to Rome, being the addition of his own face to the coins one of the most polemic decisions of Julius Caesar (Thompson 1954) precisely because it was identified as a symbol of monarchy and absolute power.

C) Textual and Epigraphical Evidence: The textual evidence has been one of

the prominent battlefields between pre-historians and those archaeologists working with complex societies almost since archaeology was defined as discipline. Prehistorians tend to argue that texts provide us with the code to decipher the social and symbolic aspects of a culture. Although extremely necessary, this debate is out of the scope of this paper. However, I would like to point out to two ideas that must be considered in the analysis of political models in the archaeological record.

First, texts are artefacts, conditioned by the same c- and n-transforms than any other item in the material record. The desert environment of Egypt or Palestine can preserve delicate documents like the Dead Sea scrolls, while other environments allow only the survival of harder supports like stone or bronze, which, on the other hand, could be reused as building materials or melted down when they lost their primary significance.

Secondly, and related to this, no archaeological context is perfect and includes all the evidence necessary for the archaeologist to reconstruct past behaviours. The German School at Athens can have a lot of epigraphic and textual resources that can help them in their research project at the Athenian Public Burial Ground; however, due to the pre-eminence of cremation in the burials, they lack the anthropological

evidence, analysis and results that physical anthropologists could provide them. Texts, when available, play an analogous role in the archaeological interpretation to the ethnographic record for the study of prehistoric societies.

Writing systems are itself an evidence for the emergence of political systems. In his interpretation of states as an organized mean of taxation, Maisels (2010) points out how the development of writing systems allowed a better control of resources and hierarchical positions. As he illustrated in the development of the state in China, the knowledge of the system itself is another way of regulating the power, since a restrictive access to the writing was another mean of control.

DeMarrais et alii (1996) have produced one of the most outstanding works on the importance of the writing systems. They pointed out that "Written documents, such as inscribed stelae or monuments, legal documents, contracts, and stories, are physical manifestations of belief systems and, like other means of materialized ideology, may tell a story, legitimate a claim, or transmit a message." (DeMarrais et alii 1996: 19). They can mislead, exaggerate or falsify the reality, but this manipulation of symbols is analogous to many other artefacts in the archaeological record. For the purpose of this study, textual evidence can be of great help to unders-

tand the political organization of the city. Aristotle Athenaion Politeia or the Gortyna law code can be exceptional cases, but the record of laws in stone or bronze is not exclusive of ancient Greece. The importance of these texts is not only based on the legal information provided; their display, their support, their theatrical display and their language can provide us with information about the political system that created them. Thus, Athenian laws and decrees, as a matter of public affair, where displayed in the public space of the Agora, and always indicate that there are the result of the will of the demos (Camp 2001; Whitley 2001). In contrast, the earliest legal code known, the Hammurabi Code, although engraved in stone and publicly displayed, is not a symbol of the community, but of the will of one ruler that, under the divine sanction of the gods Anu and Bel, legally unifies its country under a single legal rule (Harper 1904).

Conclusion

Political power can be defined as the ability given to one or several agents in order to organize the community that has the goal of the maintenance of the structure but also implies the permanence of those who control it in their position of authority by means of naturalization of the class dialectic or the use of coercion. This definition implies, first, that power is given to the agents, individual or communal, human or ar-

tefacts (political entities), is not an intrinsic characteristic of them. Power cannot be mistaken with will or agency, since agency is intrinsic to the human being but extrinsic to artefacts; these can have agency, but this is always given, and thus external, to them. It also avoids the use of terms like rulers or elites since power implies, as we have seen, a dialectic, a bidirectionality between those who control power and those subdued to them, that by means or social pressure or open rebellion, for example, can influence or take away the power of the so-called ruling elites.

For the purposive of this study, it is necessary to point out that this model implies the interaction and the renegotiation (of roles, status, symbols...) of agents that, like any other behaviour, is always mediated by artefacts (Schiffer 2010). Thus, this specific political behaviour will need a specific set of artefacts in the systemic context that, after their life-use, will become part of the archaeological context and, in consequence, are susceptible of being analysed by the archaeologists. I am not arguing that a careful analysis of the archaeological record will allow us to rewrite every law and decree enforced by a specific community of the, for example Early Bronze Age. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the human being is a gregarious species, a zoon politikon that tends to live in community, a life that must be regu-

lated, that needs both rules and authority to enforce them, and that through the analysis of some aspects of the archaeological context, as the examples already mentioned, we are able to reconstruct how communities were organized not based on a unilinear evolution perspective, but in the set of values that they decided, through coercion or naturalization, to use in their communities.

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