**Modern political views and the emergence of early complex societies in the Bronze Age Mediterranean**

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**Introduction**

The Tea Party, the Arab Spring and the 'Occupy' movements may seem to have little in common. They respond to very different circumstances, and they are fuelled by very different ideologies. Furthermore, they do not represent homogeneous movements and each of them amalgamates very different groups with very different interests. Stripped of their most obvious traits, however, they share a common dissatisfaction with the nature of power in the present world, and each has opened a debate on the nature and legitimacy of current power structures.

Interestingly, many of the questions raised by these movements are shared by the archaeological study of the early complex societies and first states in the Mediterranean Bronze Age: why did decision-making become the prerogative of a few over many? Was it a necessary step, or the result of the calculated promotion of this few over the rest? The fact that two such different debates involve comparable questions highlights the fact that modern political views about power and the study of the past are intrinsically connected (Tilley 1990; McGuire 2008), much more than archaeologists in the Mediterranean have normally been willing to admit. Indeed, only recently has the political charge of our studies of early complex societies in the Mediterranean begun to be explored (Lull & Micó 2011), bringing into focus many ideological assumptions that have slipped into our research unnoticed.

The mere question, 'are unequal power structures necessary or not?', throws us deep into the many political connotations of the archaeology of early complex societies. Recently Lull and Micó have reminded us of a point that was made 30 years ago by Gilman: while most of Anglo-American archaeological academia interpret the appearance of complex socio-political systems as a necessary and positive change, such change can be alternatively interpreted as having provided very restricted benefits for the majority of the population (Gilman 1981, 1990, 2001; Lull & Micó 2011). The pertinence of opening such debate is supported by

modern ethnographic work that is still trying to understand who exactly benefits from the creation and maintenance of unequal power structures (Wiessner 2002, 2009; Hayden & Villeneuve 2010). There are therefore, two paradigms for the understanding of novel complex societies in the Bronze Age that have significant ideological and political repercussions. Each paradigm is deeply embedded in the historiography of two classical case studies on state formation in the Mediterranean: the Aegean and south-east Iberia.

**Good for the Aegean, bad for Iberia**

In the last 40 years of study in the Aegean, the assumption that change was necessary, accumulative, positive and, more importantly, beneficial for most of the population (Hamilakis 2002) has been the corner stone for most studies in the region. Renfrew's study of the third-millennium Aegean published in 1972 (Renfrew 1972) presented society as a well-oiled system in which its various components are seen to interact in a reciprocal, beneficial way. Changes are positive and are built within the systemic structure, and therefore are not traumatic. Different social and economic roles work in unison, in a process of feedback that continues to evolve towards increasing complexity. Growth was the natural outcome of such a system.

In the 1970s and 1980s this positive view was maintained in the study of the Aegean. Managerial models presented chiefs as necessary to organise society (Branigan 1987) and to help tackle inherent problems such as growing demographic pressure. The development of successful risk buffering strategies to cope with the uncertainties of the Mediterranean climate has also been argued as a positive motor for social, economic and political changes (Halstead 1988, 1995). Peer-polity interaction marked the introduction of the idea that competition is a force for development that brought major innovations to the Aegean (Cherry 1986). Nowadays, most current models on the appearance of complex societies on Crete are based on the idea that competing mechanisms fuelled change (Sbonias 1999; Schoep 2006; Legarra Herrero 2011), or they stress the transformative impact of fluid technological, economic and ideological interactions through world-system (Galaty *et al.* 2010) and network approaches (Knappett 2011). Many of those approaches portray elites as the main agents of change, actively introducing technical and ideological innovations through their own personal agendas of improvement (Schoep & Knappett 2004; Poursat 2011). For example, the conspicuous consumption of exotic items and materials is seen as a key mechanism in which local elites promoted a new political economy and helped to develop a new socio-political organisation into the island (Colburn 2008; Manning 2008).

After 40 years of research, most approaches view Aegean societies as constructive, positive, stable systems in which people interacted and where there was little room for losers, underprivileged classes or dissent (Hamilakis 2002). The Aegean is a world where interaction, competition and consumption created new forms of state beneficial to most, if not all the population—a model that recalls modern capitalist thought.

The archaeological study of early complexity in third and second-millennia BC south Spain has been based on a very different approach that relies heavily on Marxist ideology and where models explain early forms of inequality in a much darker way. It was Gilman who first created an explicit model (Gilman 1981) in which certain individuals were portrayed as Mafia types that managed to bully the rest of the population in order to gain a privileged position in Bronze Age south-east Iberia. Lull's seminal work on Argaric societies (Lull 1983), founded on a clear Marxist paradigm, also put a negative construction on the restricted benefits that new socio-political and economic developments brought for a large part of the population. These two works have set the tone for the study of state formation in south Spain during the third and second millennia BC. Authors such as Arteaga, Nocete and Lull (Arteaga Matute 2000; Lull *et al*. 2010; Nocete *et al.* 2010) have defended the idea that a hierarchical society was established through the efforts of a reduced group of people to control the production, distribution and consumption of both basic staples and elaborated prestige items in Argaric societies (Cámara Serrano & Molina González 2006; García Sanjuán & Díaz-del-Río 2006). They suggest a society rigidly organised in classes in which not only the raw materials but also the means of production and the workforce were under the control of a small elite. Much of this control was realised through physical coercion that ensured taxation, and dominance over labour.

Beyond the archaeological merits of this view, the model presents changes from a negative perspective. The creation of unequal power structures was done regardless of the greater good of the population, and the benefits of such a system were mainly enjoyed by a minority (Gilman 2001). The language used by these authors is heavy with words such as control, exploitation and domination, with the emphasis lying on how even basic subsistence was controlled and managed by a few over the majority. The Mafia types suggested by Gilman have become kings with a clear despotic control of the territory that they rule through military intimidation (Nocete 1994; Arteaga Matute 2000).


**Creating a positive debate between the past and the present**

The presence of two such different takes on the past should not be seen as the evidence of something wrong with archaeology; quite the contrary, it shows that archaeology is alive and well and that it breathes the same air as the modern world. Ignoring such political references would be dangerous because it would allow a number of assumptions in our studies to remain unchallenged. We need to put more effort into creating truly multivocal fora that bring together the various schools of thought and the work of specialists in different Mediterranean regions, so that such issues are identified and debated (Chapman 2008). Informed, logical and clear debates would preclude the worst of the radicalisations and manipulations of archaeological models and help to create a healthy atmosphere of discussion.

Such debates also provide a crucial asset for archaeology to link with modern public interest. In a world that is currently questioning the foundations of power and how it is structured, archaeological debates over the interpretation of early complex societies are clearly relevant, and their political meanings acquire wider significance. This is not only because the past may provide a useful laboratory for the study of human nature, but also because Bronze Age Mediterranean societies are viewed by many modern populations in Europe and America as part of their history. Academics may say that this link between the past and the present has very little or no grounds, but the link is still held in the public consciousness of many European societies (Hamilakis 2007b); from a practical point of view, what archaeologist say about the past is still important for modern populations.

So discussing the political meanings of the study of the past is not only healthy for the academic debate, helping to identify ideological undercurrents in our studies, but also promotes the role of archaeology as a significant discipline for the present. Rather than archaeologists becoming the keepers of the past (Mrozowski 2012; Watkins 2012) and the curators of an academic museum, they should promote a rich and politically aware discussion of state formation in the past. Such a platform presents the archaeologist with the chance to become an active force in the modern world, capable of engaging public interest and making people realise that the Mediterranean Bronze Age is deeply relevant to modern life.

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