



# I Introduction

---

Susan Pollock  
and Reinhard Bernbeck

It is ever more common these days for archaeologists to acknowledge that their profession is a Western product that emerged, like so many other academic disciplines, in the context of the European Enlightenment. The fact that archaeology is now practiced throughout much of the world, not just by Westerners but by a growing cadre of indigenous professionals, is a result of colonialism and imperialism. Westerners made the study of the material remains of the past a tool in their own political ambitions and at the same time demonstrated its utility to their subjects in their own quests for independence and national identities (Trigger 1984; Kohl and Fawcett 1995).

Although its object of study is the past and the lives of dead people, archaeology is a social practice that is thoroughly embedded in the contemporary world. Archaeologists invariably work among and often directly with people who reside in the areas where their fieldwork is conducted. The structure of the discipline and of academia in general gives some people the rights to excavate, curate, and study archaeological remains, while others are consigned to roles as consumers of the interpretations thereby produced. The ways in which archaeologists interpret their findings owe much to current ideas about knowledge production within the profession, and these tend to privilege certain topics and approaches over others.

The theme of archaeology's embeddedness in the contemporary world runs throughout the contributions to this book. A number of authors treat directly the connections between modern-day politics and the social context of archaeological practice. The choice of topics to include was itself very much a product of the current issues of concern in archaeology of the Middle East and the editors' and authors' readings and evaluations of them. In this way, like all books, the contents of this one are highly selective.

It perhaps needs little mention that any book on the archaeology of the Middle East, especially a single-volume work, cannot possibly pretend to be comprehensive. Our aims as editors have been threefold: to foreground the sociopolitical con-

texts and ideological implications of archaeological work, to explore various themes and approaches to archaeological interpretation that have not received much attention in the archaeology of the region, and to address controversial issues as well as conventional ones in novel ways. We have not sought to produce an absolute coherence in presentation or viewpoints; any such harmony would be an artificial papering over of real differences in the field. We as editors do not agree with all of the authors' arguments, and some authors disagree with the interpretations of others in the book. This is, we believe, a positive state of affairs in an intellectually vibrant field.

What we have *not* attempted to do in this book is to strive for coverage of all periods nor of all parts of the Middle East, nor have we selected a specific range of periods or single region for in-depth treatment. Rather, we have emphasized overarching themes that are also of broad relevance to archaeology as a whole and, in doing so, endeavored to touch on a diversity of times and places in the Middle East. Nonetheless, this book, like so many others, tends to privilege those periods and places where "momentous" changes – according to archaeologists' current interpretations – are thought to have occurred, to the detriment of "in-between" periods in which, by contemporary definitions, not much of consequence happened.<sup>1</sup> The authors do not for the most part present systematic overviews of major sites or sets of data, but rather they treat issues and topics that are predicated upon the existence and analysis of such data. For non-specialists in the field, we recommend using this book in conjunction with an overview text (for example, Roaf 1990; Kuhrt 1995; Sasson et al. 1995) in order to delve further into the evidence on which the interpretations and positions presented here are based.

The Middle East has been, and continues to be, in the forefront of much of the world's political calculations and promises to remain so for the foreseeable future. It is a region that is home to continuing violent conflicts between governments and variously defined social, religious, and ethnic groups, contexts in which archaeology frequently plays (willingly or not) a salient role (Meskell 1998; Silberman 1989; Scham 2001; Bernbeck and Pollock 2004). These ongoing conflicts play a substantial part in shaping the conditions in which knowledge about archaeology of the region is produced and used. More than one chapter grapples with the effects of public perceptions about the Middle East on the study of the ancient history and archaeology of the region (see also Said 1981). It is a cruel irony that this book was in the process of completion during Gulf War II, not long after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, and amidst the continuing violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories. The implications and responsibilities for those of us who work in and study the remains of the past in this region are immense.

On a more strictly academic level, at various times in its history Near Eastern archaeology has stood in the theoretical and methodological forefront of the discipline of archaeology. It would, however, be difficult to argue for such a prominent position for the field these days (cf. Yoffee 1995). Many of the general themes that are sources of vibrant debate in other parts of the world – for example, whether emphasis is placed on study of individuals and small groups or on larger collectivities, or on questions of meaning as opposed to external causalities of change – have

resulted as yet in little sustained debate in archaeology in the Middle East. By broaching some of these issues here and seeking to examine older topics in novel ways, we hope to push the boundaries of the field and encourage work that engages with problems central to the discipline of archaeology as a whole.

As editors, we have found ourselves confronted with several challenges to our initial, idealistic conceptions of what a book with such goals should look like. The political economy of book production in the U.S. today dictates that total length be held within relatively narrow limits, due to cost as well as marketing assumptions about how much particular audiences are prepared to read. These limits placed constraints on the number of contributions and the lengths of each chapter. We would have liked the book to be more diverse in its geographic and temporal coverage and in the topics covered: there is, for example, little or no discussion of Iran or the Gulf states or of “Islamic archaeology.” A second problem that we confronted was the difficulty in finding authors willing to write about certain topics. This was particularly challenging for some of the controversial issues, especially those that touch directly on the intertwining of archaeology and modern political issues, presumably due to individuals’ concerns about limiting future research or even jeopardizing a career.

One of the distinctive aspects of the study of the ancient Near East is imparted by the variety of practitioners who participate in it. These include archaeologists – whether trained anthropologically or in culture historically oriented traditions – but also art historians, ancient historians, and scholars with specialties in the study of ancient languages. The contributors to this volume include scholars from all of these fields. These different specialties and associated educational backgrounds hold the potential to produce a truly vibrant field of study, in which similar issues may be viewed from quite different perspectives and the topics emphasized and questions posed may vary considerably. Both women and men are actively engaged in the field, but despite our efforts, we were unable to achieve a true gender balance among our contributors. However, the place where this volume is least successful in representing the actual balance of the field’s practitioners is geographic: although both European and North American scholars are well represented, only two contributors are Middle Easterners.

## **Geographic Overview**

---

The Middle East has no hard and fast geographic boundaries. It is a modern political designation that extends from Turkey to Iran or Afghanistan and southwards to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states (see figure 1.1). Most scholars use the term Near East to designate this same region in pre-modern times.<sup>2</sup> In this book, we use “Middle East” whenever we speak of modern-day entities and practices (“Western Asia” might be another alternative) but retain “Near East” for references to ancient times (e.g., the ancient Near East).

The Middle East encompasses much geographic and environmental diversity. However, the region as a whole shares some general climatic characteristics,

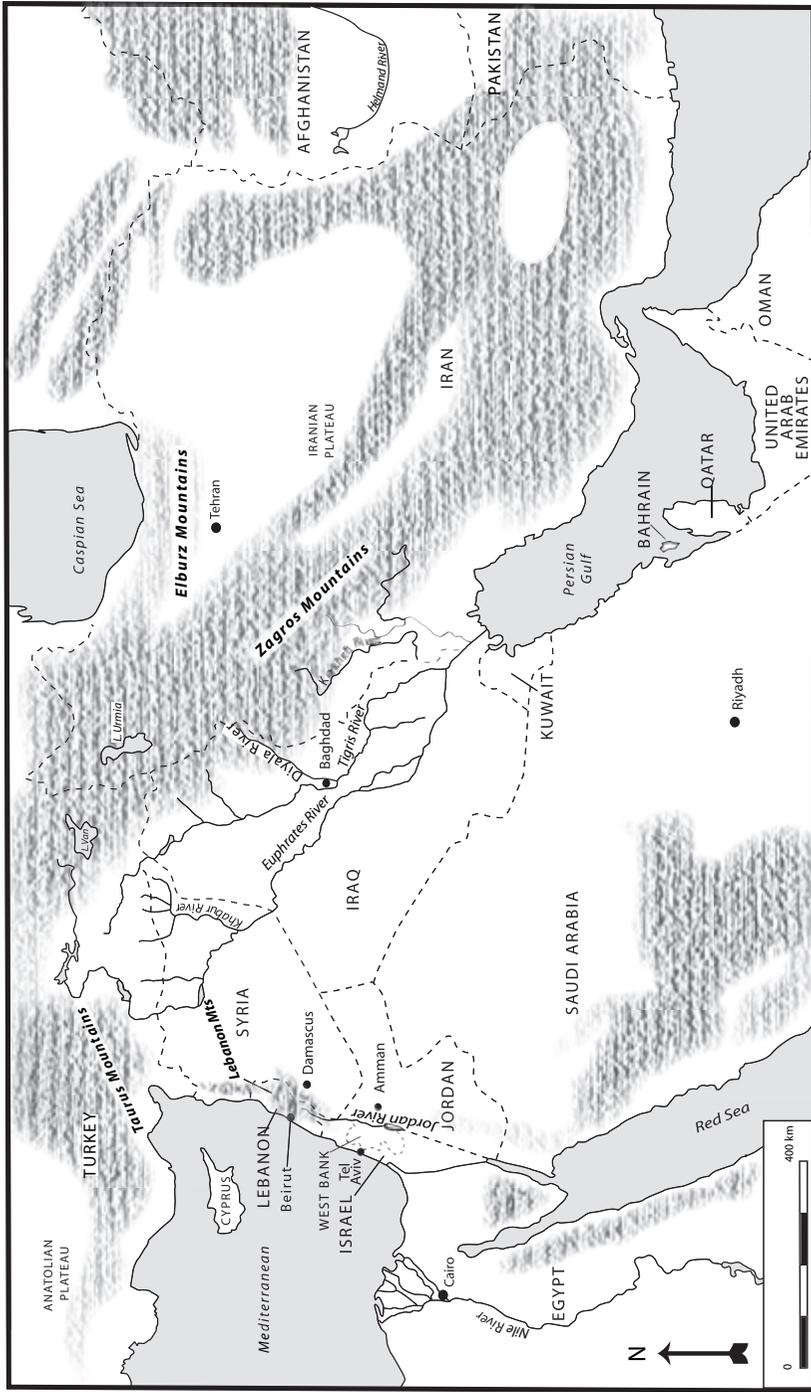


Figure 1.1 Map of the Middle East (authors' original)

especially hot, dry summers and cool to cold, moist winters. Paleoclimatic data indicate that during the early Holocene the rainy season lasted longer than today, along with higher summer and cooler winter temperatures. The transition to somewhat less favorable modern climatic conditions began approximately 6,000 years ago (COHMAP 1988; Hole 1994; Wilkinson 2003:ch. 2).

Geographers and botanists have divided the Middle East into a number of zones, based on features of the natural vegetation and topography.<sup>3</sup> These include the flat, alluvial plains of lowland Iraq, which are classified as sub-desert, with limited, scrub vegetation except in the immediate proximity of rivers; the rolling hills of northern Iraq and Syria and the foothills of the Taurus and Zagros mountains, with steppe vegetation; the high mountains and mountain valleys of the Taurus, Zagros, and Elburz ranges, which support forest vegetation and grassland; the high plateaus of Iran and Anatolia, the former a near desert, the latter characterized by steppe and grassland vegetation; and the coastal plains of the Mediterranean, Caspian Sea, and the Persian Gulf, each with a distinctive vegetational profile (scrub forest along the Mediterranean, sub-tropical vegetation at the Caspian shores, and salt-tolerant plants along the Gulf).

The distributions of wild plants and animals, the land and water resources necessary to support agriculture and animal husbandry, and raw materials including various types of stones, metals, and woods are often argued to be key to understanding historical developments in the region. The Fertile Crescent – an arc extending from modern-day Israel in the southwest up through Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, over to Iraq, and down the line of the Zagros mountains in Iran – is generally acknowledged to be the area where the early domesticates, including cereals (especially wheat and barley), legumes, sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs, were developed from wild populations. Other wild plants, including fruits, nuts, and legumes, as well as animals, such as gazelle, onager, and a variety of deer, were available in and around the Fertile Crescent and were important sources of food and other materials.

The considerable topographic diversity of many parts of the Middle East as well as the early domestication of animals amenable to being herded over considerable distances (principally sheep and goat) have played a key role in settlement strategies from the distant past to the present. Sheep and goat can graze and browse in areas where agriculture is impractical, allowing the use of large stretches of land that would otherwise yield only limited food resources usable by people. Seasonal transhumance, especially movements between lowlands and highlands, has long been practiced in parts of the Middle East, allowing more effective use of available resources, separation of flocks from fields at critical times in the growing season, and as a political strategy to avoid the predations of rapacious governments. Pursuing a range of modes of subsistence and degrees of mobility has enabled Middle Eastern peoples to remain flexible in the face of the vagaries of harsh environments and political systems (Rowton 1973; Adams 1974, 1981; Henry 1989; Wilkinson 2003).

The distributions of other natural resources, especially stones, metal ores, high quality woods, and water, have also influenced the history of the Middle East. The

absence of metals and dearth of stone and wood in the alluvial lowlands of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) are widely cited, especially in contrast to the presence of these materials in the surrounding mountain and plateau regions (Algaze 1989). Although a number of scholars have argued compellingly that the poverty of natural resources in the Mesopotamian lowlands has been exaggerated (Van de Mieroop 2002), there is little question that exchange, alliances, and military adventures have all been spurred by, among other things, the desire for resources that were not locally available. Already in Paleolithic times, items such as marine shell were exchanged over long distances (Hole and Flannery 1968:160), a testimony to the scale of interactions well before the appearance of state and urban societies or even village communities.

Modes of transportation, of people and goods, are key to permitting and constraining interactions among people. The first attestations of domesticated pack animals – donkeys – date to the fourth millennium B.C.E.; the camel was not domesticated until much later. Prior to the fourth millennium, overland transport was dependent on the human back. Riverine transport by boat has been used since at least the late fifth millennium B.C.E. (Safar et al. 1981), a far easier and more effective way to move people and goods than overland, at least in the downstream direction. Maritime movements became important in the third millennium, if not earlier.

### **Brief History of Archaeological Work in the Middle East**

---

Some of the earliest explorations of archaeological remains in the Middle East at the beginning of the 19th century occurred well before archaeology existed as a clearly defined field of study.<sup>4</sup> Two principal and interrelated driving forces underlay the early explorations. One was colonialism, with its attendant efforts to maintain control over knowledge production in colonial holdings and to appropriate resources of all kinds for the benefit of the colonizers. In the case of archaeology, colonialism's impact is evident in the race to fill European museums with unusual and exotic treasures and in expeditions and even "educational travel" that sought to catalog and systematize knowledge of everything from flora to fauna to ancient monuments, the most famous being Napoleon's in Egypt. The second inspiration for archaeological work in the Middle East was the Bible. Numerous individuals traveled to the region – especially the areas that are today Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories – in a quest to identify places known from the Bible and thereby authenticate, if indirectly, biblical stories.

Together, these two sources of motivation – colonial sovereignty and religiously inspired travels – contributed to the construction of the ancient (pre-Islamic) Near Eastern past as being part of Western heritage, the famous "cradle of [our] civilization" (Bahrani 1998; Pollock, Steele, this volume). This endeavor was made all the easier by the fact that there were very few native Middle Eastern archaeologists or other scholars interested in the pre-Islamic past prior to the nationalist move-

ments of the 20th century, thus eliminating any likely counter-claims to the appropriation of the Middle Eastern past by the West.

The early practitioners of archaeology included diplomats, military officers, missionaries, mining engineers, and businessmen. Monumental stone architecture, most notably from northern Mesopotamia (Iraq), and inscribed artifacts were the subject of much of the earliest scholarly attention. Already in the 1770s, Carsten Niebuhr, the one surviving member of an ill-fated expedition to Persia (Iran), had copied cuneiform inscriptions still standing at the Achaemenid capital of Persepolis. These and subsequently discovered examples from Mesopotamia formed the basis upon which a variety of individuals in western Europe began the attempt to decipher the script – cuneiform – and the ancient languages it was used to write (Zimansky, this volume).

The earliest work relied principally on studies of standing monuments, but by the middle of the 1800s, excavations – albeit more like treasure hunts by today's standards – were becoming increasingly common. They were predicated on the growing realization that the mounds dotting the landscape in many areas held archaeological remains. It was not, however, until nearly the end of the 19th century, in Petrie's work at Tell el-Hesi, that what we today consider a basic principle – attention to stratigraphy – began to be incorporated into excavations. A further methodological breakthrough around the turn of the 20th century allowed excavators for the first time to distinguish mudbrick, one of the most common building materials used in the region in the past.

Already by the turn of the 20th century, one of the enduring characteristics of archaeology of the Middle East was well established: the involvement of a mixture of archaeologists, architects, art historians, and philologists. This diversity of different scholarly interests and backgrounds has, on the one hand, resulted in a variety of different approaches to the subject matter, including emphases on different kinds of research questions and use of a variety of kinds of data to answer them. On the other hand, different specialists have all too often remained isolated in their work, either ignorant of what others are doing in related fields or dismissive of those approaches as less useful or reliable than their own (see Zimansky, this volume). These divisions tend to be perpetuated in many educational programs that track students in one direction, with little or no exposure to related fields.

Anthropological approaches to the study of the ancient Near East were relatively late in coming, and they remain to this day in the minority. Although it is rarely possible – or even helpful – to identify the “first” example of a particular approach, Robert Braidwood is often credited with introducing anthropological archaeology in the Middle East in the context of his investigations of early village life and the beginnings of agriculture. Although some elements of anthropological archaeology have become more or less routine in the region – especially systematic regional settlement surveys, pioneered in the 1930s (Jacobsen and Adams 1958; Adams 1962, 1965; see now Wilkinson 2003; Steadman, this volume) – much of the work conducted is rooted in European (as distinct from American) scholarly traditions that emphasize archaeology's connections to history and art history rather than to

anthropology (Bernbeck and Pollock 2004). The contributors to this volume represent both of these “schools” – the Americanist anthropological tradition and the European historical one – helping, we believe, to promote a dialogue between different perspectives and multiple archaeologies in our studies of the ancient Near East.

### **Looking to the Future**

---

We hope that the papers in this book will encourage a rethinking and ultimately some changes in the practice of scholars concerned with the ancient Near East and in this way will also impact the field’s contributions to broader scholarship and to non-academic discourse. Although there are many directions to which these papers point in their critiques and suggestions for constructive reassessment, we identify two principal areas that seem to us key.

The first of these is the realm of fieldwork, generally thought to be the bread and butter of archaeology as well as the practice that ultimately produces the material on which assyriologists, ancient historians, and art historians work. Several of the authors call for a more self-critical fieldwork practice, not so much in terms of the ways in which field methods impact the results of our research but rather in the ways in which archaeologists and their work are interwoven with people who live in the areas where we work. Second, the range of different approaches to interpreting the material record of the ancient Near East taken by the authors in this volume presents a challenge to readers and one with which we hope readers will engage. As one peruses these diverse approaches to the study of the past, it is perhaps not of primary importance whether or not one agrees with each author’s arguments. Instead of striving to promote the “best” – often equated with the newest – approach, the central point is to appreciate the multiplicity of ways in which understandings of the past can be achieved through a range of different perspectives that are all too often marginalized in our teaching and scholarship.

### **NOTES**

---

- 1 Zeder (1994) has made a compelling case concerning the common neglect of village-based societies in Mesopotamia “after the [Neolithic] revolution.” One could also point to the dearth of research on the Kassite period (ca. 1600–1150 B.C.E.) , a time during which there is relatively little evidence of war or expansionary politics in southern Mesopotamia, to suggest that “peacetime” is not seen as a stimulating research topic.
- 2 The terms Near East, Middle East, and Far East are legacies of European involvement with these parts of the world and especially of British colonialism. Each referred originally to a different geographic area. The Near and Middle East designations quickly became conflated in popular parlance, and “Near East” has fallen out of common usage, except among scholars of the ancient world.

- 3 It should be pointed out that in many, if not most, areas of the Middle East “natural” vegetation is something that can only be reconstructed hypothetically – thousands of years of human occupation and alteration of the vegetation have created a thoroughly anthropogenic environment.
- 4 Specification of an exact beginning of archaeological exploration is arbitrary, as it depends entirely on one’s definition of such enterprises. However, prior to the early 19th century there are only isolated examples that might be considered archaeological, and hence we use the generally accepted reference to the early 1800s. It is worth mentioning, however, that there were occasional explorations of antiquities in ancient times, the best-known example being the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus, who commissioned excavations at Ur from which he retrieved ancient clay tablets.

## REFERENCES

---

- Adams, Robert McCormick, 1962 Agriculture and Urban Life in Early Southwestern Iran. *Science* 136:109–122.
- Adams, Robert McCormick, 1965 *Land Behind Baghdad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Adams, Robert McCormick, 1974 The Mesopotamian Social Landscape: A View from the Frontier. *In* *Reconstructing Complex Societies: An Archaeological Colloquium*. C. B. Moore, ed. pp. 1–12. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, Supplement 20.
- Adams, Robert McCormick, 1981 *Heartland of Cities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Algaze, Guillermo, 1989 The Uruk Expansion: Cross-cultural Exchange in Early Mesopotamian Civilization. *Current Anthropology* 30:571–608.
- Bahrani, Zainab, 1998 Conjuring Mesopotamia: Imaginative Geography and a World Past. *In* *Archaeology under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East*. Lynn Meskell, ed. pp. 159–174. London: Routledge.
- Bernbeck, Reinhard, and Susan Pollock, 2004 The Political Economy of Archaeological Practice and the Production of Heritage in the Middle East. *In* *The Blackwell Companion to Social Archaeology*. Lynn Meskell and Robert Preucel, eds pp. 335–352. Oxford: Blackwell.
- COHMAP Members, 1988 Climatic Changes of the Last 18,000 Years: Observations and Model Simulations. *Science* 241:1043–1052.
- Henry, Donald, 1989 *From Foraging to Agriculture: The Levant at the End of the Ice Age*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hole, Frank, 1994 Environmental Instabilities and Urban Origins. *In* *Chiefdoms and Early States in the Near East: The Organizational Dynamics of Complexity*. Gil Stein and Mitchell Rothman, eds. pp. 121–151. Madison: Prehistory Press.
- Hole, Frank, and Kent Flannery, 1968 *The Prehistory of Southwestern Iran: A Preliminary Report*. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 33:147–206.
- Jacobsen, Thorkild, and Robert McCormick Adams, 1958 Salt and Silt in Ancient Mesopotamian Agriculture. *Science* 128:1251–1258.
- Kohl, Philip, and Clare Fawcett, eds., 1995 *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Kuhrt, Amélie, 1995 *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 B.C.* 2 vols. London: Routledge.
- Meskel, Lynn, ed., 1998 *Archaeology under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East*. London: Routledge.
- Roaf, Michael, 1990 *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*. New York: Facts on File.
- Rowton, Michael, 1973 *Autonomy and Nomadism in Western Asia*. *Orientalia* 42:247–258.
- Safar, Fuad, Mohammad Ali Mustafa, and Seton Lloyd, 1981 *Eridu*. Baghdad: State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage.
- Said, Edward, 1981 *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon.
- Sasson, Jack, John Baines, Gary Beckman, and Karen Rubinson, eds., 1995 *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. New York: Charles Scribner's and Son.
- Scham, Sandra, 2001 *The Archaeology of the Disenfranchised*. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 8:183–213.
- Silberman, Neal Asher, 1989 *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Trigger, Bruce, 1984 *Alternative Archaeologies: Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist*. *Man* n.s. 19:355–370.
- Van de Mierop, Marc, 2002 *In Search of Prestige: Foreign Contacts and the Rise of an Elite in Early Dynastic Babylonia*. In *Leaving No Stones Unturned: Essays on the Ancient Near East and Egypt in Honor of Donald P. Hansen*. Erica Ehrenberg, ed. pp. 125–137. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Wilkinson, Tony J., 2003 *Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Yoffee, Norman, 1995 *Political Economy in Early Mesopotamian States*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24:281–311.
- Zeder, Melinda, 1994 *After the Revolution: Post-Neolithic Subsistence in Northern Mesopotamia*. *American Anthropologist* 96:97–126.