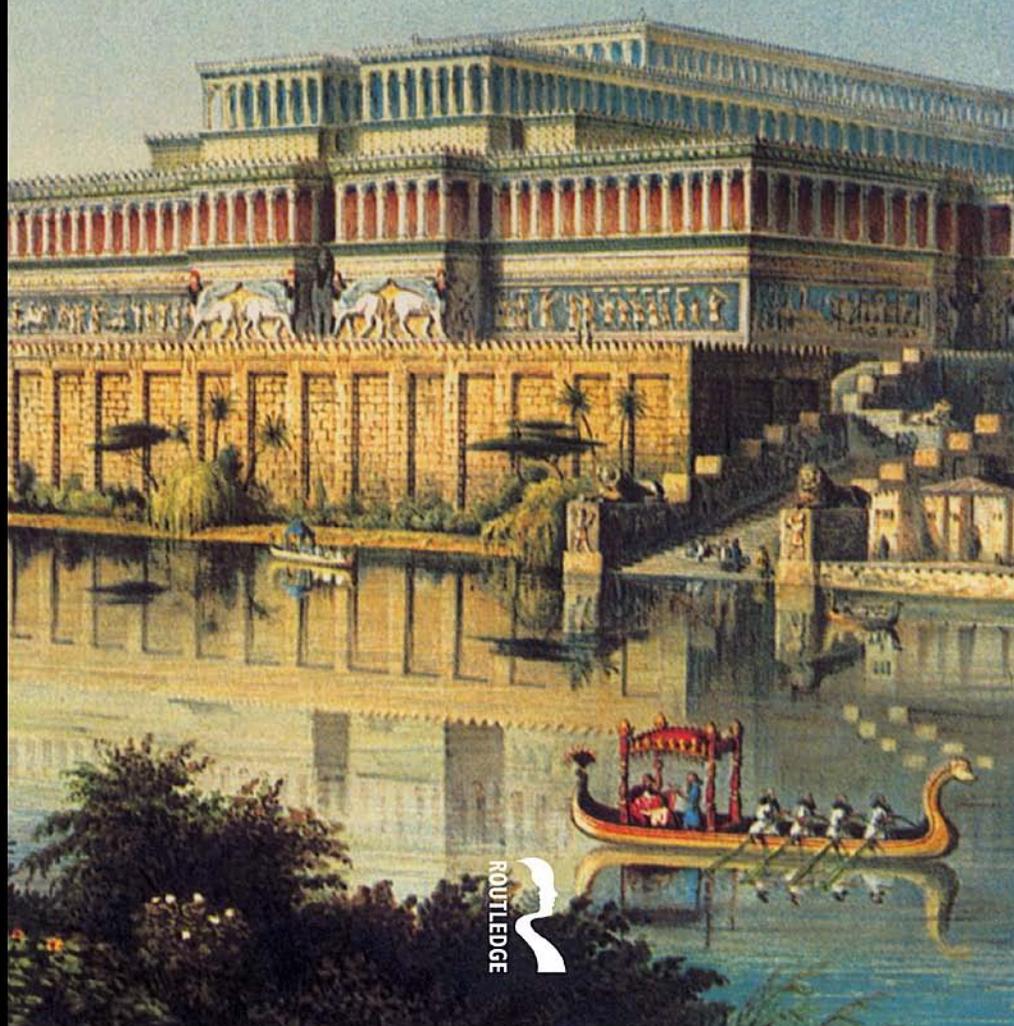


THE NEAR EAST

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE 'CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION'

CHARLES KEITH MAISELS



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'CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION'

Charles Keith Maisels



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To my wife Jennifer for being there

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NOTE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

In this edition I have confined myself to cleaning-up the text with a few corrections, deletions and additions (such as the definition of the state on page 195), and have also replaced Figure 5.1 with a similar but more comprehensive flow chart. The major change is the addition of a Glossary of physical terms.

A map of Mesopotamia and the Levant with some key sites appears at the back of the book.

Theoretical perspectives and apparatus are developed in Maisels (1990, 1993, 1995) and a fuller bibliography will be found in Maisels (1998).

GLOSSARY

Aggradation: The ‘building up’ of the land surface (in Holocene times especially the lower reaches of river channels) by the *depositional* action of rivers, winds or seas (see next two entries plus loess). Its opposite is *denudation*.

Alluvium: Sedimentary deposits of eroded rock fragments laid by the action of rivers. Larger particles, notably gravels, are deposited upstream, while finer materials (usually called *silts*) are deposited downstream, sometimes right into waterbodies, where *alluvial fans* are formed. If offshore conditions are right, *deltas* are formed. Comprising unconsolidated (though usually deep and mineral-rich) material, alluvial soils are a type of *immature, skeletal* or *azonal* soil, manifesting poorly developed *horizons*, which are levels of different structure and organic activity.

Anastomosing: A condition of rivers, in which, due to excessive *deposition* (see above) there is little gradient (slope) in the rivercourse, encouraging the main stream to break up into a network of branches or braids, the number and location of which shift over quite short periods of time. *Levees*, which are broad raised banks, can also result.

Biome: An ecosystem covering a significant proportion of the earth’s surface, land or water. Tundra, Boreal (i.e. northern coniferous) forests, tropical rainforests and savannas are examples of biomes. A dominant life-form structures each—mosses and lichens in the case of tundra—hence Biomes have also been called ‘formation types’. However, the dominant life-forms (on land) are themselves a consequence of latitude, precipitation and altitude.

Caprid: Goat. *Caprini* is the *tribe* including both sheep and goat. *Capra aegagrus* is the Bezoar goat, the wild progenitor of the domestic goat, while *Capra ibex* is a type of goat (the ibex) specializing in high altitude and desert conditions.

Climax: Two senses: (1) the most massive species of plant that a territory can sustain, e.g. oak; (2) the final stable plant community, e.g. oak-ash forest, reached after a process of *succession* from simpler/lower/less massive/less woody plant types. Thus primary succession from tundra to broadleaf and coniferous forests occurred in Britain after the Last Ice Age, and secondary succession, which takes place after climax has been removed, is spontaneously towards renewed forest cover. Moisture, temperature, seasonality, light and soils are determinants of what species represent climax for particular locations.

Dendritic: Tree-like branching, for instance of watercourses in the ‘fan’ type of drainage basin (q.v.).

Dendrochronology: tree-ring dating.

Drainage basin: The area from which a river, its tributaries and their feeder streams drain the rainfall left after evapotranspiration (q.v.). Drainage basins are separated by watersheds.

Distal: Situated farthest *away from* the point of attachment or connection, the converse of *proximal*, nearest.

Ecotone: The transitional zone between two biomes.

Epiphysis: Peculiar to mammalian vertebra and limb bones, this is the separately ossified end of a growing bone (the *diaphysis*). Separated by cartilage, the two only become unified at maturity.

Evapotranspiration: The rate of water loss from surfaces of (a) the ground and (b) leaves and stems; a function of temperature and wind speeds. The water balance (positive or negative) of an area is the rate of evapotranspiration set against rainfall plus any exogenous supply (see below).

Exogenous: Coming from without. Thus the Nile in Egypt is fed from drainage basins which lie in areas of adequate rainfall outside Egypt. A substantially positive water balance (see above) is required for rivers to originate, otherwise only wadis form (q.v.).

Fractal: Describes similar forms repeated at different scales, most often in natural phenomena. Thus trees, mountains, clouds and coastlines manifest fractal symmetry: leaves have similar forms to branches and branches have similar forms to whole trees (by affine transformation). Small stones in close-up resemble large rocks and the form of individual rocks resembles mountains. Coastlines have similar 'ragged edge' interactions between land and water at every scale from, say, a 1:4,000,000 map, down to that of rockpools. The Mandelbrot Set is a well-known demonstration of fractal process.

Hydric/hygrophyte: Plants which require large amounts of moisture and which therefore only thrive in/by water or in humid regions (c.f. mesic and xeric below).

Isohyet: A line joining points that receive the same amount of rainfall. Analogous to isobars, which are lines of equal atmospheric pressure, and points of equal height (contours). All are *isopleths*, lines joining points of equal value.

Loess soils: Sometimes called 'brickearth' soils from their sandy-yellow colour, hence the 'Yellow River' (Huang He) from the sediment it carries. Consisting mainly of fine quartz particles in deep layers, the loess soils of north China are rich in lime and form a good *loam* for agriculture. Loess soils are analogous to alluvial soils, but are primarily wind-deposited (aeolian), compacted and thus more cohesive, being able to sustain vertical banks when rivers cut down (as they always do in loess). Loess soils, being free-draining, do not waterlog. Russia's fertile 'black earth' (Chernozem) soil is loess with a high humus content. Such soils also occur in a long swathe from Saskatchewan through North Dakota to Texas.

Mesic/mesophyte: Temperate climate plants requiring moderate amounts of moisture.

Metacarpal bones: Corresponding to the palm-region in man, those are the rod-like bones of the fore-foot in tetrapod vertebrates, usually one corresponding to each digit (finger or toe). *Metatarsals* are the same bones in the hind foot (sole).

Nucleation: A settlement type which has its buildings clustered tightly together leaving little space between (only squares, greens or plazas, not fields and farms).

Obsidian: (Rhyolite) 'Volcanic' glass in extrusive igneous (i.e. *magmatic*) rocks. Like glass, obsidian takes a very sharp edge.

Ovicaprids: Sheep (*Ovis*) and goat together, used particularly where differentiation from skeletal remains is difficult. However, wild sheep (e.g. *Ovis orientalis*, or Mouflon, the progenitor of domestic sheep) and goat have different environmental preferences and tolerances, goat being tougher and more versatile.

Palynology: Pollen analysis. Since many pollens were originally airborne and all are different, identification and counting of different types in sedimentary and peaty deposits can reveal changing vegetation types over time; e.g. from woodlands to grasslands where man has cleared for farming and grazing.

Phytoliths: Silica deposits in soil from plant cells, notably grasses. The morphology of the deposits is related to transpiration and so can indicate water availability.

Prairies: Longer mid-latitude grasslands found in both North and South America (prairies and pampas). Natural grasslands are a function of ‘interiority’ (distance from coasts) and wind direction. Much of the Argentine pampas is only *situational climax* (a function of species availability) as trees will thrive when introduced. (See the discussion of grass as climax in Maisels 1995:51–9.)

Savanna: Low-latitude grassland, often containing trees such as baobab (*Adansonia digitata*), acacia and euphorbia. The Llanos and Campos of South America are savannas and it covers much of Australia. However the regime is often referred to as ‘Sudan-type’ as it extends right across sub-Saharan Africa from the White Nile to the Atlantic. See steppe.

Steppe: Short grassland, most extensive in mid-latitudes. A belt extends all the way from the Ukraine to northern China.

System: A system is a pattern of interaction between nodes or elements. Nodes can be anything from simple switches to complex sets of subsystems, such as living cells. A system that seeks out its own energy is alive. Energy is the capacity to do work, and work is the capacity to produce changes of condition, that is, of state or position.

Wadi: An intermittent watercourse without baseflow and thus only running after rains or storms (carrying runoff). Not to be confused with a Palaeochannel, which is a course abandoned by a river for geological or energetic reasons (cf. anastomosing above). A wadi is more like a large erosion gully than a river.

Xeric/xerophilic/xerophyte: Trees like tamarisk, baobab and acacia (‘gum’, ‘wattle’ or ‘thorn’ trees) and other plants such as cactus (succulents) which can thrive in arid conditions. In addition to a simple lack of soil moisture, excessive transpiration caused by heat *or* wind (or both) produce xeric conditions. Thus pines and marram grass (on dunes) are xerophytes. Responses to periods of intense or prolonged drought can have significant consequences for radiocarbon dating.

1

INTRODUCTION

Everyone wants to know how the present situation—and thus their current condition—came about. Everyone needs to understand their own existence as individuals in society. And since people sense that histories consist in chains of cause and effect, they usually want to know how things began, in a sense what the first ‘cause’ was. Of course, the very first cause was the Big Bang at the origins of the universe and any subsequent cause always has causes preceding it, resulting in a chain of causes and effects which form a trajectory in time.

But this is not a book about the Nature of Time, the Universe and Everything. As a work in prehistory and early history it describes three ‘firsts’: the earliest approach to a settled life after the 40,000 years during which modern humankind had pursued a hunting-and-gathering way of life in small groups. This experimental regime was the Natufian culture of the Levant which flourished as modern climatic conditions were becoming established there some 12,000 years ago. The second ‘first’ was the formation of the world’s earliest village farming cultures—the Hassuna, Samarra and Halaf cultures of Mesopotamia—which led on in only a few millennia to the first sustainable cluster of cities in the world: the third ‘first’.

Villages existed elsewhere prior to Hassuna ones but not recognizable village *cultures*. Likewise, towns such as Jericho in the Jordan Valley (Levant) and Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia (Turkey) existed before the cities of southern Mesopotamia, such as Uruk, Eridu, Ur and Nippur. However, the earliest large settlements were not cities as they lacked urban structure—density and diversity of activity manifested in the built environment—and consequently there were no urban societies until their advent in Sumer (southern Iraq) during the fourth millennium BC. Sumerian urbanism in turn produced a whole cascade of ‘firsts’—those conventionally associated with civilization—literacy, numeracy, monumental building, organized religion, organized warfare and the state.

In Sumer, for the very first time, we have sources of information that supplement archaeology, indeed that are strictly speaking ‘historical’, for historiography (the writing of history) is an enterprise dependent upon the existence of texts. Those are cuneiform documents (overwhelmingly economic), written with a stylus on clay, and, in earliest pictographic form, dating from around the end of the fourth millennium. When writing first appears it represents the Sumerian language—one with no known affiliations—but later in the third millennium Akkadian and Eblaite are represented by the same means, thereby becoming the earliest Semitic languages to be recorded (Plate I, A and B).

The study of cuneiform tablets in Sumerian and Akkadian is the province of Sumerologists, philological specialists, and one eminent scholar who has been active in this field for over half a century is S.N. Kramer. In his book *History Begins at Sumer* (1956, 1981), he lists no fewer



Plate I(A) A Fara-type tablet (c. 2600), recording numbers of workmen.

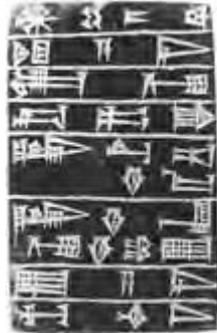


Plate I(B) A later but clearer example of the script: a tablet of King Shulgi (2094–2097) of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2122–2001), from the temple of Dimtabba at Ur.

than '39 Firsts in Man's Recorded History' which he has recognized from Sumerian texts. Those range from the first schools through the first 'Noah' (Ziusudra) and the first Farmers' Almanac to Man's First Cosmogony and Cosmology. He might also have added the earliest formal organizations known, namely the *oikos* household and the temple, which were (it is argued below) crucial to Mesopotamian social evolution.

More strictly literary is certainly the earliest narrative tale known—the 'quests' of Gilgamesh—the earliest literary debates, plus the first recorded proverbs and lamentations. All this and yet more. However, the point is not to list (even though many

Sumerian texts are lists of professions, plants, places, animals, mores, etc.) but to understand how all this came about.

There are two aspects to this. The first is to see how all those elements of civilization fit together in a functioning society, embodied in the city-states of Sumer and Akkad (the area of the alluvium adjoining Sumer to the north). The other is to see how that society evolved from earlier ones. In the case of Sumer we know that its immediate precursor is the Ubaidian culture, so named from a site in the extreme south of alluvial Mesopotamia, south even of the River Euphrates which, with the Tigris, was responsible for depositing most of that silt.

Indeed, it is the still controversial argument of this book that the Ubaidian culture, which so successfully colonized the alluvium, owed that success, based upon irrigation, to its pioneering Samarran forebears. It is further argued that the specific form of economic production and social reproduction developed in that endeavour—the *oikos* household—was the key not only to secure and highly productive irrigation farming in a semi-desert, but that this household form (large and stratified) gave the emerging city-states their social and political character. In turn, the products of this character (for the ancient world dynamic and democratic) were seminal to subsequent developments in the Near East and ultimately the world.

Later (e.g. Iron Age) developments and interconnections have been traced in my previous book *The Emergence of Civilization* (Maisels 1990) where a fuller bibliography and more extensive notes will be found. Here I concentrate on a more straightforward developmental account showing how the data for this emerged piecemeal from the labours of many archaeologists working under many different circumstances, all of them difficult. However, archaeologists do not find facts, they find artefacts—things like flints, seeds, pots, bones, cylinder seals, hearths, refuse pits and mud-brick walls—which all have to be *interpreted*. The artefacts are certainly data, but they do not speak for themselves, so archaeologists must speak for them. Accordingly, I have also tried to indicate how different pre-occupations—Biblical, Classical, Antiquarian—caused different questions to be posed, different data sought and different answers given.

In the process, and not in isolation from other sciences, modern archaeology has emerged as the basis for a prehistory which, like the rest of History now, is no longer just ‘one damned thing after another’, any more than modern Geography is merely ‘one damned thing next to another’. On the contrary, both are essential to the space-time grid upon which any rational view of the world must be based, and it is to the promotion of such a framework that I hope my work contributes.

Biological evolution has provided us with memory and curiosity. As biological individuals we have no option but to exercise those faculties to construct perspectives; we are quite unable to float in a timeless present, for we are aware that the present ever recedes, that there are generations before us and hopefully after us and that the present state of affairs is transient, as our lives are. Therefore we have to keep track and trace connections.

Accordingly, all known societies have accounts of how things came to be. Without the disciplines of History and Geography, Archaeology and Anthropology, our accounts will remain mythical and social evolution a matter of blind stumbling, as chaotic in the future as in the past.

If we are to escape the tyranny of the past we have to demythologize History. This means comprehending it as a complex of processes—chains of causes and effects—driven by biological and cultural forces. By knowledge we might actually get to grips with the motive forces and so control them, rather than they us.

2

AN ARTEFACTUAL BASIS FOR THE PAST

Toward the end of the twentieth century it is hard for us to conceive the extent to which European social-historical-cultural thinking was formed on the twin axes of the Bible and Classicism.¹ Both streams were of course transmitted from antiquity, though differentially, providing an invaluable, quasi-ethnographic, contrast to extant conditions while supplying an historical, quasi-evolutionary perspective. Christianity, in the form of Eastern and Western churches, and with them patristic writing of late antiquity, survived the collapse of empire so well that within a relatively few centuries the Western church was able to Christianize Dark Age Western Europe, where the church alone remained literate.

Classicism, the cultural legacy of the (pre-Christian) Graeco-Roman world, had a more partial and spasmodic recovery to independent existence. Not only was the greater part of written material in Latin lost with Roman collapse (finally in AD 476) but so too was widespread literacy, which perhaps had reached around 20 per cent (Harris 1989). The widespread recovery of the classical legacy is conventionally dated after 1453, when Byzantium fell to the Ottoman Turks, and many scholars bearing manuscripts and with, of course, a perfect knowledge of Greek, fled west. There they encountered in Italy, and also in northern Europe, city-state regimes where Classicism was already fostering Humanism, a secularized form of Christianity. This process of the revival of learning inspired by classical sources and stimulated by widening geographical horizons and technological competence, was later termed 'the Renaissance'.

If the emerging Humanism reinforced by intellectuals from the New Rome (Constantinople=Byzantium) strengthened awareness of the Graeco-Roman world (the Byzantine Empire was always Christian and Greek-speaking), the Bible kept alive awareness of and interest in the history and geography of the Near East. So much so, indeed, that at the launch of the Palestine Exploration Society in London, on 22 June 1865, formed, as its founding statement relates 'for the purpose of investigating the archaeology, geography, geology and natural history of the Holy Land', no less a personage than the Archbishop of York, the inaugural meeting's chairman, could declare that 'This country of Palestine belongs to *you* and *me*, it is essentially ours.... It is the land towards which we turn as the fountain of all our hopes; it is the land to which we may look with as true a patriotism as we do this dear old England, which we love so much' (cited Lipman 1988:51).

Formed by the remarkable George Grove (also the moving spirit of the standard *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the short title of which is just 'Grove's') with a mix of church and scientific luminaries, the Palestine Exploration Fund was the first permanently organized body devoted to long-term research in archaeology. Like Grove's