Book Review


Interweaving Worlds presents the results of a conference hosted by the Department of Archaeology, Sheffield University, in April 2008, in memory of the late Professor Andrew Sherratt in honour of his contributions to large-scale economic history. The original conference entitled “What would a Bronze Age World System Look Like? World systems approaches to Europe and western Asia, 4th to 1st millennia BC”, explains the evident focus of the volume on world-systems, and page 2 of the volume, lays out the original aim of conference, namely “to review world system approaches”. However, this is considerably more than a world-systems volume.

The book is organized into two broad parts: A) examining Global Systems and Interactions, which contains the bulk of the World Systems papers and, B) The Local and the Global, which takes up roughly the second half of the volume.

Of the twenty three papers (which include an introduction by Susan Sherratt and a short contribution by Andrew Sherratt, left unfinished before his death), five essentially focus on world-systems, four might be regarded as world-systems critiques and five discuss various aspects of inter-regional interactions and trade. The remainder cover a range of topics that reflect the varied interests of Sherratt, although it must be said that this conference volume was deliberately focussed upon world-systems and inter-regional interactions, presumably to give the volume some level of thematic coherence.

Not only does the conference title borrow from an article published by Andrew Sherratt in the Journal of European Archaeology in 1993, it was also borrowed by one of the contributors, David Warburton, for his own chapter. Susan Sherratt is quite upfront in acknowledging the battle grounds surrounding the adoption of world-systems approaches, and in her introduction she cites the 1993 article in which Andrew Sherratt argued that it was possible to combine the insights of detailed regional studies with a broader continental perspective to develop a more sophisticated approach to inter-regional relationships between temperate Europe and the Mediterranean in later prehistory.

Many of the chapters focus upon Near East world-systems, but there is little use of the detailed regional studies that would help define the component “core” areas. Points of definition also arise in Yoffee’s critique which closes the volume as Chapter 23. Here he notes that there is no indigenous use of the term “Mesopotamia” in any Mesopotamian language and that Mesopotamian states were primarily city-states “that were continually in a contest for regional hegemony” (p. 303). He continues by reminding us that the concept of Mesopotamian civilization is an enduring one of high culture, literacy and formalized systems of belief, magic and much else (p. 308) which endured for some two millennia. This implies that the definition of cores and peripheries is dependent upon the nature of the data source employed. At this juncture it is necessary to indulge in some source criticism because the data from which we draw our knowledge of the Near East and parts of the East Mediterranean during the periods in question derives from very different sources, namely: a) written texts, b) archaeological excavations and c) archaeological and environmental surveys. But because these sources are very different in their temporal and spatial resolution they are very difficult to bring together. However, when such reconciliation is attempted, they can provide insightful perspectives on the ancient world (e.g. Sallaberger and Ur 2004). In Interweaving Worlds, these three types of sources are of course employed, but not necessarily explicitly.
One of the most explicit world-systems chapters is by Beaujard (Chapter 3). In many ways this provides a masterly overview of the world-systems of the Near East during the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC, but herein lies the trap of analyzing archaeological data over such large areas. Even relatively large regions are lost sight of because of the scale of the analysis. For example, this article underplays the role of Late Chalcolithic northern Mesopotamia in the development of urbanism and state development, despite the focus of recent work on the slow-growing giants such as Tells Brak (Syria) and Hawa (NW Iraq), which have been argued to rival the southern centres such as Uruk (in southern Iraq).

World-systems also form a significant part of the chapters by Kohl, Monroe and Warburton. Significantly, Kohl critiques his own earlier position as presented in his major paper on the balance of trade in SW Asia, published in 1978. Specifically, he points out how the appearance of new sources of data such as the soft-stone vessels from Jiroft in eastern Iran have shifted interpretations entirely so that rather than the consumers of soft-stone vessels being solely associated with the “elites” of southern Mesopotamia, they were seemingly also used by the local inhabitants from the region of Jiroft. One of the values of papers such as those of Kohl (Chapter 7) as well as Halstead and Isaakidou (Chapter 6) is that they enable earlier models to be questioned by the inclusion of new data within the context of a broader set of papers that contextualize the argument. Kohl reflects that the blanket expansion of the world-systems model deprives the original Wallerstein model of specific explanatory power. Nevertheless, rallying to the defence of his original work, he also maintains that a world-systems approach helps us understand complex historical processes at a grand scale.

Wengrow, in Chapter 11, although recognizing the limitations of world-systems approaches, successfully adopts the grand scale by examining, at a very broad level, patterns of metal hoarding (“sacrificial systems”) versus systems of information gathering (“archival systems”). For his area of interest, which extends from Italy to the Himalayas, he argues that the systems of metal hoarding zones (i.e. sacrificial systems) emerged along key routes of movement and cultural interaction. Like Sherratt’s Secondary Products Revolution, even if this argument is ultimately demonstrated to be incorrect, it will surely stimulate much further research.

Broodbank’s paper (Chapter 4) focuses on the Mediterranean world, and rather than adopting the broad brush approach of world-systems models, examines regional micro-ecologies. By combining both bottom-up and top-down approaches, together with climate change he manages to take a more balanced but necessarily selective, approach to social change.

Food and alcohol were significant in the Sherratt lexicon, and consequently, Chapter 5 by Fuller and Rowland on food technologies is an appropriate addition to the volume. Arguing that culinary systems develop by a long-term additive process in which new foods were added to existing repertoires, they identify areas of the Old World where boiling was dominant as opposed to others where “grinding and roasting” predominated. These resultant rather stable zones of food preparation extend back in time to the origins of agriculture or even earlier. This provides a very stimulating addition to the archaeology of food systems.

Also part of the Sherratt agenda were, of course, secondary products, upon which Sherratt’s own position also shifted through time. In Chapter 6 Halstead and Isaakidou critically examine the “Secondary Products Revolution” some 30 years on to argue that although the conclusions as originally conceived can now be rejected, the initial idea has stimulated much fruitful research. Not surprisingly, recent developments in archaeological science, such as bio-molecular studies, have pushed back the use of secondary products significantly earlier in time thereby undermining the case for a single horizon of innovation.

The second part (B) includes two papers that tackle specific features of trade and exchange, namely silk (by Irene Good, Chapter 17) and murex dye (by Jane Schneider, Chapter 22). Good’s review demonstrates that there was indigenous production of silk in the Mediterranean region as early as the mid-second millennium BC and that the presence of silk cannot be used as evidence of long-distance links between China and the west.
A perennial complaint about world-systems models is that the mechanisms driving them are primarily economic. However, a successful feature of *Interweaving Worlds* is that several articles, including those by Anfinset (Chapter 12) and Kristiansen (Chapter 19) include significant reference to the role of ritual. On the other hand, many academic interests (and obsessions?) of Andrew Sherratt are not included, presumably because by including papers which referenced every one would have resulted in a volume that lacked thematic coherence. Fortunately, most papers escape the festschrift strait-jacket by doing more than simply playing lip-service to his work. For example, Bauer (Chapter 14) successfully continues Sherratt’s work on Europe-Near Eastern links around the Black Sea. Similarly, Faust and Weiss (Chapter 15) tackle questions of Iron Age trade developments in the Levant and east Mediterranean as also discussed by both Susan and Andrew Sherratt. Faust and Weiss question the “standard model”, namely that the growth of wealth in the region resulted from the “pax Assyriaca” which allowed South Arabian trade to flourish. Instead they argue that Phoenician wealth started to be generated before the Assyrians became a significant presence in the region, and continued thereafter. In other words the communities of the east Mediterranean fringe belonged to a system that had life of its own, despite the fact that cities such as Tyre paid tribute to the Assyrian empire.

The above selection of papers provides a taste of the volume, which although providing case studies of world-systems, extends well beyond into the development of food, burial practice and inter-regional trade. Although it is recognized that the world-systems perspective tends to under-represent the role of agency and local dynamics as well simply representing power relationships in terms of a one-way vector from more complex towards less complex states (Stein 2002), similar critiques were already quite evident to Andrew Sherratt. In general, this reviewer is suspicious of the merits of top-down analyses that often fail to avoid local-scale anomalies and scatter maps with arrows that often relate only weakly to the field evidence. However, it has to be said that there is a continuing need for archaeologists to grapple with the large scale processes that structure social and economic developments. As Kristiansen points out in the first sentence of his article linking India and Scandinavian ritual practice: “The Bronze Age world-system is a heuristic device that allows us to think big and trace the forces of history in their full extent” (p. 243). Not only is there a need for archaeologists to think big, it is crucial for us to engage in these types of models, simply because if we don’t others less qualified or informed will step in and make generalisations which will then need to be challenged. The literature on world-systems and related approaches, although not originally developed by archaeologists, has also been taken up with enthusiasm by sociologists, political scientists and others, all of whom apply the concept to archaeological data that is often over generalised. Moreover, major overviews of global change, such as various works of Jared Diamond mine the wealth of archaeological data available to produce broad-ranging and often contested conclusions. It is therefore crucial that archaeologists not only engage in but also lead these debates. From this angle, *Interweaving Worlds* is therefore a welcome addition to the archaeological literature of “big-picture” studies. Nevertheless, as Yoffee points out in his closing chapter it is still necessary to reconcile the study of everyday practices with the large geographical arenas of interaction discussed in this volume. The reconciliation of processes at vastly different scales does therefore represent a major challenge for archaeologists in future.

In such a volume there has been a clear and presumably deliberate choice to omit some of the extraordinarily wide interests of Andrew Sherratt. His evident interest in regional approaches to archaeology (which are relevant to world-systems studies) are not present. In Chapter 2, entitled Global Development, Sherratt argues that prosperity is an outcome of Geography, a point echoed by Jared Diamond as well as by Ian Morris in his recent volume *Why the West Rules* (Morris 2011). In fact there is a remarkable absence of any papers on empirical regional settlement patterns which could help define core areas and peripheries. Although Bauer’s paper does include a map from the regional survey of the Sinop area, there is a general lack of evidence of local or regional scale data that could test world-systems models. Archaeological surveys are now providing a rather different, but complementary, perspective on Middle Eastern and Mediterranean settlement. These data, which have been building up steadily since the classic investigations of Robert McCormick Adams and Thorkild Jacobsen in southern Mesopotamia, indicate a Near East populated by dense settlement “core areas” such as irrigated southern Mesopotamia and rain-fed upper Mesopotamia, together with networks of settlements, and dramatic infillings of the landscape, the latter appearing perhaps because Bronze Age societies expanded pastoral systems in order to furnish developing elites and others with textiles. These data not only provide a perspective on the
civilizations themselves, they are at a scale that is more appropriate to those of world-systems models as well as informing upon the patterns that prevailed at the local level.

It is therefore important to remember that Andrew Sherratt was not simply interested in top-down models, and it is appropriate to reflect on some of the topics that could have been included in the volume. Probably most interesting would have been an article critically examining ancient urbanism. This is a topic that was clearly on Andrew’s mind at the time leading up to his death. Consequently, his challenging, but unfinished contribution as Chapter 2, which poses the question “what is urbanism?” and then answers it as “a machine for adding value”, certainly would be a stimulating topic to follow up. In fact, it is likely that he would have been attracted by the volume *Complexity Perspectives in Innovation and Social Change*, which examined (among other things) the role of innovations in the development of urbanism, both in the long term and in the recent past (Lane et al. 2009).

Overall, the essays in this volume pay a fitting tribute to the work of Andrew Sherratt, both by directly engaging with and in many cases continuing, his often provocative writing.

**References**


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Review submitted: June 2012

*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*