Comparative Archaeologies

The American Southwest (AD 900–1600) and the Iberian Peninsula (3000–1500 BC)

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Chapter 2

Bridging Histories: The Archaeology of Chaco and Los Millares

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History is critical for the comparison of Iberia and the Southwest on at least two distinct levels: the history of research in the present, and the history of events in the distant past. Archaeologists study the latter: we want to understand and interpret events in the distant past, for example, Chaco Canyon at AD 1000 or Los Millares at 3000 BC. But archaeological understandings and interpretations of these events reflect the history of our disciplines. The axes of comparison we discuss in our chapters reflect these two levels of history.

Chaco Canyon is a key site for Southwestern archaeology: it is famous and, more significantly, important. Indeed, Chaco is one of the most famous sites in the Pueblo area, second only, perhaps, to Mesa Verde. Images of Pueblo Bonito, Chaco’s signature ruin, appear in magazines, popular books, on television documentaries around the world. More significantly, archaeological consensus makes Chaco one of the most important sites in American prehistory: it has been described as the *bête noir* and *deus ex machina* of Southwestern archaeology. It has been argued that Chaco played a unique and decisive role in the history of the ancient Southwest. Archaeological claims made for (or against) Chaco would not be made for any other sites of its time and place. A lot is riding on Chacoan archeology.

Similarly, the cemetery and fortified settlement of Los Millares has been one of the key sites in the archaeology of Iberian Late Prehistory. Although known and excavated since the late nineteenth century, it only recently became a part of the Andalusian heritage network. The site is now an object of cultural tourism. Visitors can also experience prehistoric life at Los Millares at a small interpretation center with life-size reconstructions of the Copper Age walls and domestic buildings. They can understand the importance of the site when reading the nicely illustrated guide that informs them that what they are about to see was, in fact, the capital city of the earliest state in the western Mediterranean basin. Be that as it may, the site has been one of the most international of Iberian prehistoric monuments, along with Altamira’s Paleolithic paintings and, more recently,
Atapuerca’s contemporary importance for the study of human evolution. Although many other Copper Age sites are now known to exist in southern Iberia, some of them seven times bigger, Los Millares was and is a challenging cornerstone for the interpretation of the Copper Age in southeast Iberia, traditionally known as the Millaran culture.

Each of these remarkable sites must be understood in the historical contexts of research. American and European archaeology are sister disciplines, but they have individual biographies. As subsets of those larger intellectual programs, Southwestern and Iberian archaeologies have, of course, local histories. In both regions, the swing of academic and scientific opinion revolves around particular institutions (museums, universities, national programs) or individuals, as well as larger theoretical or intellectual trends. Iberia and the Southwest provide two intriguing historical case studies of the practice of archaeology. Southwestern archaeology began as expeditions from museums on the US East coast, into what was then (late nineteenth century) a wild frontier; local museums rose in Santa Fe and Tucson which took over intellectual leadership in the early twentieth century; and academic departments (closely linked to national and international theoretical developments) rose to prominence in the later twentieth century. The arbitrary political boundary between the United States of America and Mexico hampered understandings of the ancient Southwest—a region which extended well into northern Mexico until the later twentieth century, when collaborative cross-border projects expanded. Today, cultural resource management projects undertaken by government agencies and independent (that is, non-academic) researchers provide the bulk and the best new archaeological information in the Southwest.

The institutional history of Los Millares closely relates to the biography of certain individuals. The Belgian engineer Louis Siret discovered Los Millares in the late nineteenth century. He personally financed the works, and in 1892 sent his overseer Pedro Flores to control the excavations at the extraordinary chamber tomb cemetery and prehistoric village. Most of this information was systematized by Georg and Vera Leisner in 1943, who had direct access to the work of the late Louis Siret and who created the chronological and typological sequence that would stand for decades. But it was only during the 1950s when two key Spanish archaeologists, Antonio Arribas and Martín Almagro, reviewed the Siret collection and manuscripts, developing the first modern excavation program at the site. Their archaeological campaigns included the first exact mapping of the whole Millares complex (village, cemetery and forts), a detailed documentation of the chamber tombs, and unearthed part of the exterior defense line for the first time. The results were published in 1963 and are the only up-to-date monograph of the site. This work was continued by the team of the University of Granada, originally led by Antonio Arribas and Fernando Molina (later by the latter) during the 1970s and 1980s, at the same time that the first Anglo-American archaeologists, Antonio Gilman and Robert Chapman, came to work in Southeast Spain. Both Chapman and Gilman tested their hypotheses using the available but limited archaeological data. Their interpretations had a triggering effect on the debate over the scale and complexity of the Iberian Copper Age, a debate that continues to this day.

There are intriguing parallels between Copper Age Iberia and the Southwest, many of which reflect larger geographic and historical contexts. Neither was the setting of
primary civilizations, but each was within reach of older, larger, and distant civilizations. Both were peninsulas: physically, for Iberia and culturally, for the Southwest. The ancient Southwest has long been recognized as somehow connected to (and to some degree derivative of) Mesoamerica; and, historically, Nuevo Mexico was a nearly insular outpost of colonial development, removed from but administered from Mexico City and the larger colonial world system of Spain. Similarly, events and developments in Copper Age Iberia have been linked to earlier civilizations to the east, and more demonstrably to Phoenician colonization and the Mediterranean world, long after the period of interest here. A key issue in the history of research, in both areas, has been: to what extent and in what ways have Iberia and the Southwest been affected by older, larger, and distant civilizations?

That question has been variably important, and variously answered, through the long histories of each region. In the Southwest, initial suggestions that Chaco Canyon and similar ruins were the homeland of the Aztecs were refuted by the earliest archaeologists. Since 1950, various archaeologists have proposed models of Toltec or other Mesoamerican colonization and direct political involvement in Chaco; these proposals have met with a wide range of responses, and currently are discounted. In a similar manner, Los Millares was originally believed to be a colony of eastern Mediterranean “high cultures” interested in the mineral wealth of Iberia. As with Chaco, it was processual archaeologists that dismantled the ex oriente lux model during the 1970s, although the current consensus over the lack of direct influences does not deny the existence of some formal Mediterranean similarities. Some reluctant crypto-diffusionist archaeologists may still have a chance to see a revival of the oriental influence hypothesis, now fueled—who knows—by the possibility of a Helmsian traveler.

These questions are, of course, related to local historical issues—either as causes or as causes-denied. We focus here on one local theme: political complexity. A key issue for Chaco and for Los Millares is the inception of political complexity in their respective regions. Claims have been made at both sites for the origins of political complexity; and those claims have been critically evaluated, accepted by some and rejected by others. Those claims can only be understood in the historical contexts of current research and ancient events. We briefly summarize, here, the arguments to be made at greater length in the individual sections that follow.

Chaco Canyon is clearly more “complex” that other ancient Pueblo sites. But how much more complex? At various points in the history of Southwestern archaeology, Chaco has been called a short-lived aberration of the familiar egalitarian Pueblo pattern, or a chieftain, or some unique political formation not susceptible to textbook terminology—a rituality, perhaps, or a state. Lekson will argue, below, that the latter was most likely: Chaco was a state. But that the Chaco state can only be understood in its historical context, as a far-flung periphery of the larger, older states and civilizations of Mesoamerica. Lekson will argue that Chaco was not an outpost or colony of Mesoamerican states, but rather a locally developed secondary state, developed in reaction to and reflection of Mesoamerica. And Chaco’s experiment in complexity was not a success: attempts at state-like complexity at Chaco failed, and were ultimately rejected by Pueblo peoples.
Likewise, Los Millares has moved in two decades from the simplicity of the “egalitarian” to the complexity of “the State” with no more data than were available in the early 1980s. This is partially a trend: state-talk is “in” nowadays among Iberian prehistorians. Several Copper Age sites in Iberia, not just Los Millares, are currently competing for the dubious privilege of been the first pristine (not secondary) state of Western Europe, while others in the same line of thought are happily ready to accept their prehistoric ancestors as peripheral. Díaz-del-Río will use the currently known archaeological data to argue against the interpretation of Los Millares as a state, or even as a “culture” on the verge of statehood. He reviews the data, moving from the regional scale to evaluating internal food consumption patterns, differences in household size, or ways in which labor was deployed in wall construction. The available dataset suggests that the fueling logic of kinship, and the undermining effects of factionalism, may have been key in the internal history of such a complex and monumental site.

In the chapters that follow, we explore the importance of history on two levels: the history of archaeological research and thinking, and the history of what actually happened in those distant times we study. We believe that the archaeologies of the two cases — Chaco and Los Millares — provide interesting and provocative comparisons of how archaeology is done in different regions of the world, and how individual sites can contribute to a larger understanding of human history.