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Technology and Production in Archaeology

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The presence of full-time craft specialists in complex, urban, socially-stratified societies is a well-documented phenomena. Skilled craftspeople who dedicated significant levels of energy, time and resources to the creation of products such as tools, weapons, and ornaments were an essential component of these types of societies, and had a substantial impact on the material record. But to uniformly and inextricably associate these two elements of ancient society ignores significant evidence for the existence of variation and complexity within this system. Due to this extensive material evidence of diversity, the questions often raised by archaeologists about this socio-technological relationship are frequently centered around issues of causation and correlation. What varieties of craft specialists can be identified, and with what types of social and political structures are they associated? Does full-time craft specialization require the stability and resources provided by a highly developed and hierarchically stratified urban environment? Are specialized craftspeople and their manufactured goods utilized or managed by ambitious individuals or groups in order to create or reinforce elite social and political power?

V. Gordon Childe proposed an answer to this question, at least in the case of Mesopotamia, by proposing that full craft specialization was dependent on the creation and management of a surplus under the direction of powerful social elites, thus implying that the development of complex and stratified political structure led directly to full-time craft specialization. In this model, craftspeople were also wholly controlled by the elite as producers of prestigious luxury goods. A number of scholars have investigated the theoretical and practical implications and questions raised by this proposal; Gil Stein does this most directly in his article “Producers, Patrons, and Prestige: Craft Specialists and Emergent Elites in Mesopotamia from 5500-3100 B.C.” He reviews evidence of craft production in both the Ubaid and Uruk periods and finds that, in opposition to Childe’s model, the first specialists that developed in the region were independent, indicating that organized elite supervision and patronage was not a precipitating factor for Mesopotamian craft specialization. In essence, it appears that, at least in this region, the specialized production of widely needed, utilitarian goods was an activity outside of the express control of social elites. Stein does find later evidence for elite-attached craft specialists, but emphasizes that they were likely the producers of the high status, prestige items that were a key element of elite social strategy.

Articles by Peter Peregrine and Brian Hayden (“Some Political Aspects of Craft Specialization” and “The Emergence of Prestige Technologies and Pottery,” respectively) elaborate further on the role played by prestige goods in the production and reinforcement of elite power structures. These authors define prestige goods as items valued not for their functionality or efficiency, but rather the amount of labor, skill and wealth invested in their creation. It was these characteristics that gave them efficacy as elite social tools, as opposed to the more practical uses of utilitarian items. Through their control of the specialized production of value-laden luxury products (often made from resources that were rare or difficult to attain), elites could demonstrate their social cachet, economic success, and even religious power to the society at large. In addition to production control, elites could also establish and reinforce the

socio-political networks that supported them by distributing these prestige goods through extensive gifting and feasting activities. It was not craft production in and of itself that was closely linked with the strategies of the newly developed elite class, but rather a highly specialized and strictly controlled sub-set of production centered around the creation of the goods that reflected and reinforced elite social agendas.

Although there is a strong correlation between complex, urban societies and centralized, full-time craft specialization, this association is not ubiquitous in the ancient world. Evidence for a wide variety of types and levels of craft specialization can be found in ancient societies, as is demonstrated in Peter Wells’ article “Structures of Craft Production, Society, and Political Control: Late Prehistoric and Early Roman Temperate Europe.” Wells examines the evidence for the methods of production of both pottery and bronze ornaments in the Bronze and Iron ages, and into the Roman period, revealing a number of interesting patterns. Even with the rise of *oppida* urban centers, the vast majority of production took place at the localized, community level on a relatively small scale. Although the Roman period led to the centralization and expansion of certain areas of craft production, small-scale independent craft-making was still the main system of manufacture. Wells argues that this reflects the decentralized, dispersed nature of European political organization during this time, and demonstrates that successful technological production and specialization does not require extensive social control or intensive concentration of labor in a single location.

The articles referenced above highlight the strong connections between complex, socially stratified societies (generally controlled by elites) and systems of specialized craft production. It is clear that highly developed, urban settlements provided an environment in which the system of intensive production of a wide variety of tools and other wares expanded and flourished. The artifacts manufactured by craftspeople served not only utilitarian purposes, but also political, ritual and social purposes as well. These connections do not imply, however, that craft specialization was uniformly caused by a rise in social complexity and urbanism. Numerous lines of evidence indicate the extreme variation both within and between past societies in terms of the development and functioning of systems of specialized craft technologies. Particularly interesting is the case of early Europe outlined by Wells, in which independent, small-scale production persisted despite shifts in the cultural and political situation over time. I believe that in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how different systems of technological manufacturing were integrated into and influenced by complex social frameworks (and vice versa), we must not only be open to a broader and more nuanced definition of “specialized craft production,” but also exercise caution when attempting to draw connections between social complexity and levels of technological specialization in ancient societies.