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T. PATRICK CULBERT

An appreciation

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Abstract

Pat Culbert's scholarship and teaching are marked by both an insistence on rigorous attention to data and a gentleness and humaneness in which scholarly inquiry should flourish. I discuss in this paper one aspect of his research—the size and degree of political integration of Maya polities—by means of a comparison with Mesopotamian examples.

As a mere Mesopotamianist, I want to comment briefly on one aspect of Pat Culbert's interests in Maya archaeology and history: the size and nature of interaction among Maya polities. Although such a cross-cultural perspective is by no means alien to Pat's scholarly methods, I have no illusion that my contribution is more than an aside to the central debates among Mayanists. I am on much firmer ground in using this opportunity to say something about Pat's working style and the inspiration he has given to so many students and colleagues. I begin by introducing my co-author of the first part of this chapter, Bobbi Culbert, standing alongside our hero in their wedding costumes (Figure 1). In close-up, we further observe something that few of us have seen in Pat—at least, those of us who have known him only for the past thirty years: his chin (Figure 2), also seen in early years (Figures 3 and 4).

Pat's stamina for grueling survey in the *bajos* of the Peten was initiated in his early years in Minneapolis. After majoring in chemistry at the University of Minnesota, he served his country (Figure 5) before entering graduate school at the University of Chicago. There he wrote his thesis under the supervision of Bob Adams, then in his Mesoamerica phase, which, fortunately for us Near Easterners, soon lapsed.

Others will have scenes of Pat in the field, but his interests are not limited to Mesoamerican archaeology. When I first met Pat in 1972, he was active in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society in Tucson, playing subaltern roles in *Yeoman of the Guard* (Figure 6) and the *Mikado* (Figures 7 and 8).

Pat has perhaps turned a little grayer over the past thirty years (Figure 9), but I cannot really detect any major physical changes. This last contemplative pose taken in Medanales, New Mexico (Figure 10), after surveying house lots for a friend, is a rarity, as anyone who has tried to keep up with his forced marches round about the Old Galisteo Road can easily attest.

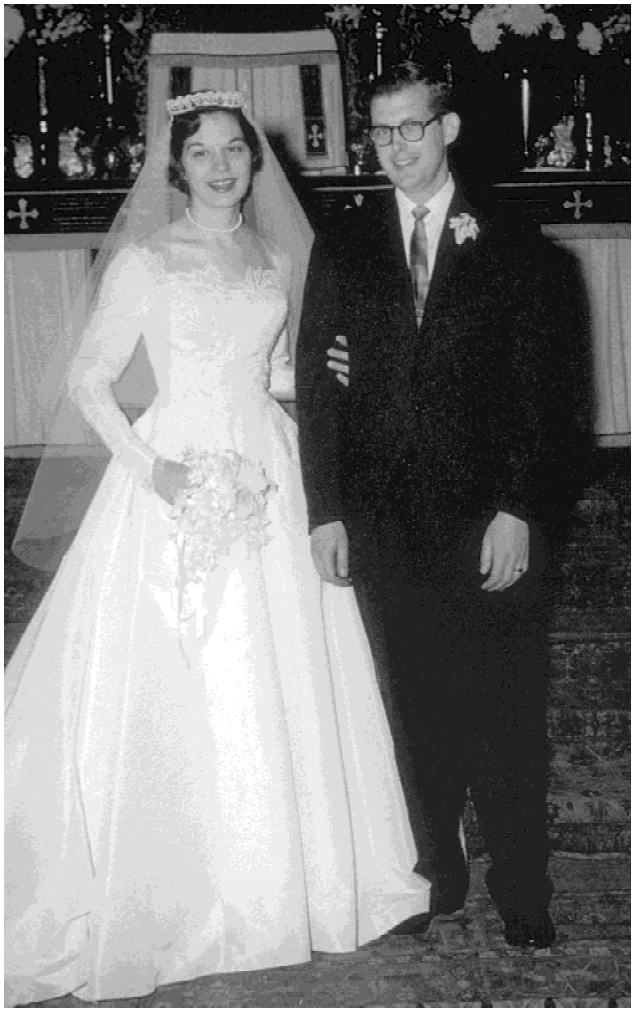


Figure 1. Pat and Bobbi Culbert, 1958.

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Figure 2. Pat, 1958.



Figure 3. Pat, age 2.

In the second semester of my first year at the University of Arizona—1973, to be exact—Pat and I co-taught the advanced seminar "Early Civilizations," which we offered every year or every other year for about fifteen years, until increased numbers of Maya and Mesopotamian students dictated that we each offer regional seminars instead of Early Civs. During those fifteen years,

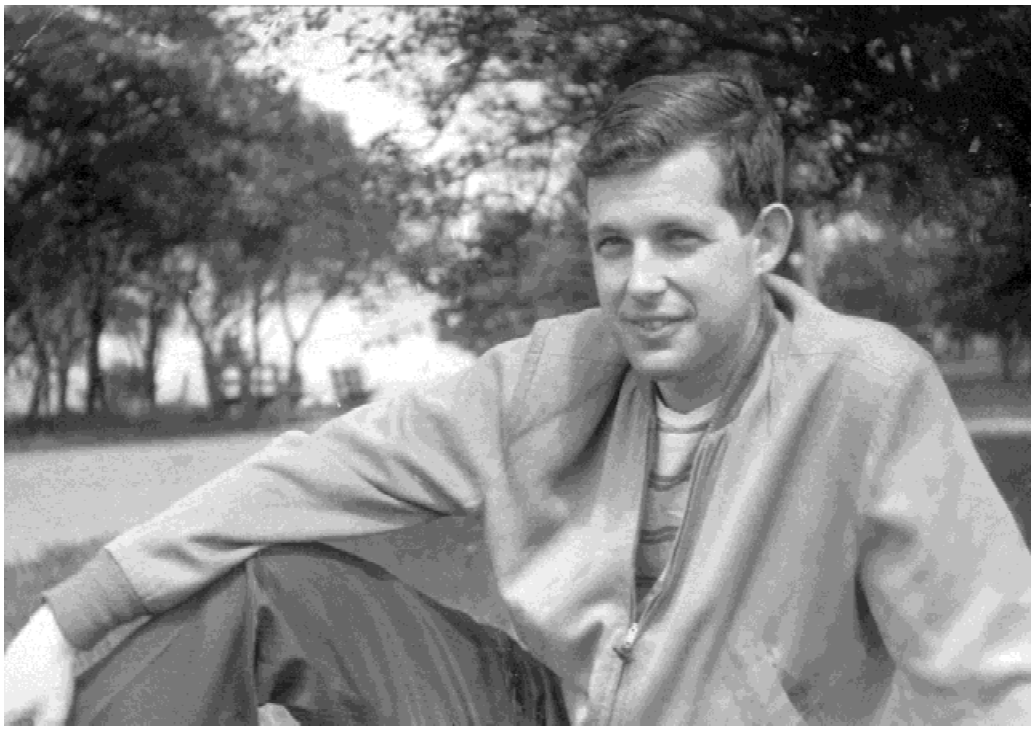


Figure 4. Pat, early 1950s.

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Figure 5. Pat, mid-1950s.



Figure 6. Pat, mid-1970s.



Figure 7. Pat, mid-1970s.



Figure 8. Pat, mid-1970s.

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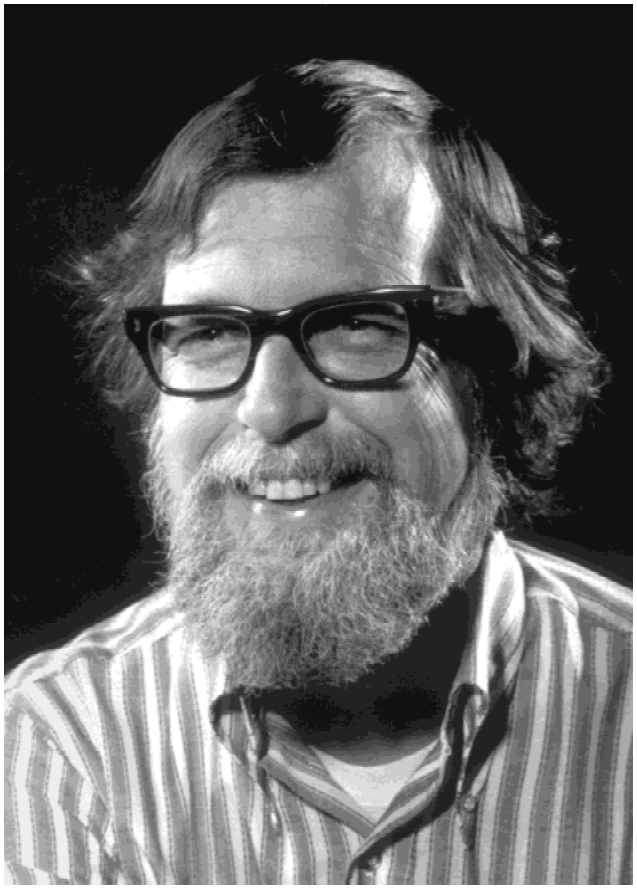


Figure 9. Pat, 1970s.

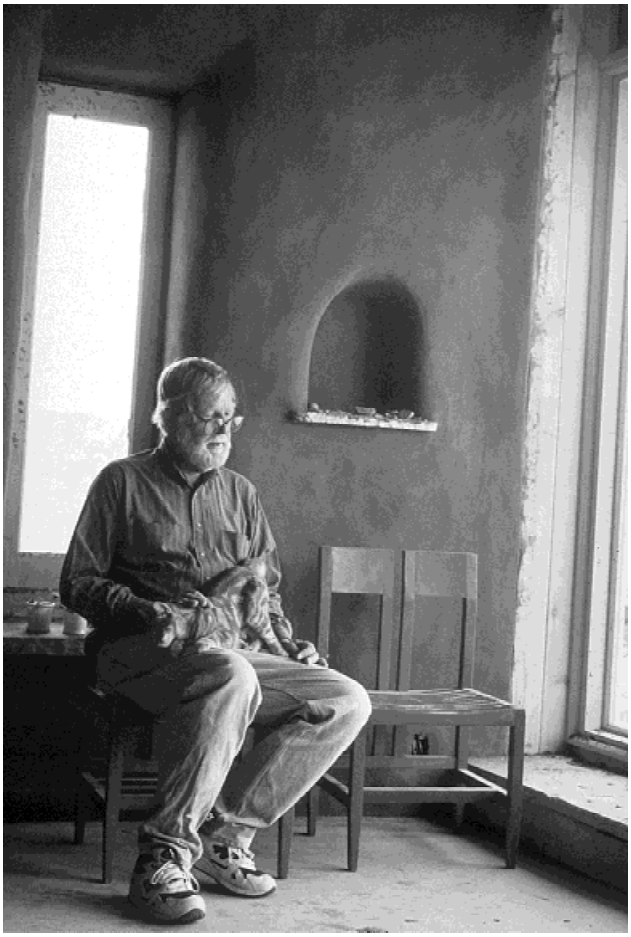


Figure 10. Pat, 1998.

varying the theme from such topics as trade, war, settlement patterns, empires, and the like, we covered an enormous amount of literature, time, and geography. Typically, we began the seminar with readings and examples from our own areas of expertise, but we soon ranged far afield, guided by students' interests and pertinent examples from anywhere on the globe. The seminar was really Pat's (and Bill Longacre's) brainchild, the product of his characteristically anthropological curiosity in all manner of ancient states. Although Pat insisted that arguments be logically constructed and rigorous, he was also patient with the most heterodox of ideas, allowing students to explore unfamiliar data and struggle with problems of generalization. Opinions that seemed, well, odd—or, at least, different from his own—were never subjected to scorn, only to amused and constructive criticism. I learned a lot about world archaeology and the comparative method from Pat and from our students, and I also learned—or I tried to learn—that gentleness and humaneness could, and should, advance scholarly pursuits.

Early on, we developed some standard lines, born from genuine interest in each other's field. In the early 1970s, Pat wished aloud that the Maya had texts that resembled the sorts of things I was talking about from Mesopotamia, and I equally earnestly desired the kinds of skilled excavations and anthropologically oriented archaeology that he analyzed in the Maya area. Of course, Maya script has been deciphered, and Pat has carefully followed the progress of historicizing Maya politics and society (best seen in the School of American Research seminar he organized and whose proceedings he edited [Culbert 1991a]). It is in this spirit of cross-cultural investigation and employing both historical and archaeological data that I will devote a few final, cursory comments.

I want to address specifically a problem that Pat has written a lot about—namely, the nature of Maya polities, their size, and their degree of political integration. Pat has consistently held to the "big state" model of Maya polities (1991b, 1991c), and he has been much impressed by a famous but unpublished paper by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (1994) on macro-political organization, which has now been superceded by an important and elegant essay by Grube (2000) on Maya "city-states" and by Martin and Grube's (2000) jointly written book on the many Maya "kingdoms." Martin and Grube provocatively reject certain cross-cultural models (forcefully in the 1994 paper), arguing that good emic models exist for the Maya that can be reconstructed from inscriptions, and that a comparison with Aztec political systems is most instructive. They especially resist the models of city-states proposed by early investigators—notably, J. E. S. Thompson, who interpreted Maya cities on the analogy of Greek city-states (although Grube defends the term "city-state" in his 2000 paper). In Culbertian spirit for being maximally cross-cultural, I will look at Mesopotamian city-states, because city-states are not limited to the Greek case, and I agree that the polis is not a good analogy for

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either Maya or Mesopotamian polities. (New books on city-states debate the issues. See, e.g., Hansen 2000; Nichols and Charlton 1997). Because it serves little purpose to debate which term—"city-state," "micro-state," or "kingdom"—best characterizes Maya polities, I try to reposition the meaning of big-state and little-state investigations in both Mesopotamian and Maya situations.

Martin and Grube (1994:) point to several lines of evidence that do not fit a "weak states" model of Maya polities and that indicate that "a small number of Maya states held sway over others and formed the focal points of pan-regional groupings or 'political spheres.' " They cite four lines of evidence: (1) Emblem glyphs do not necessarily mean that the "named" city was independent, because cities could be incorporated into the territory of other cities; (2) glyphs translated as "by the doing of" or "under the auspices of" in accession statements show, for example, that the king of Caracol was subordinate to Tikal, that Cancuen was under Calakmul, Qirigua under Copan, El Peru under Calakmul, and Yaxchilan under Piedras Negras; (3) the personal possessive pronoun found in connection with "ahaw"—thus, "his ahaw"—implies that Dos Pilas was subordinate to Calakmul, Arroyo de Piedra was subordinate to Dos Pilas, Naranjo was subordinate to Calakmul; and (4) military descriptions of "axe war" or "star war" document Tikal's defeat by Calakmul, which brought on the "hiatus"; Calakmul's defeat of Caracol; and Caracol's defeat of Naranjo, although the fallen ruler was removed to Calakmul.

Although Naranjo revived and became independent of Caracol and even fought against its great neighbor, Tikal; Tikal defeated Calakmul once; and Calakmul's defeat was followed by major building episodes and the erection of stelas at Calakmul, Martin and Grube (1994) conclude that there was a "relatively stable macro-political structure in the central Peten," with Calakmul controlling El Peru, Dos Pilas, Cancuen (230 km away), Naranjo, and Caracol. At the same time, they conclude, Tikal controlled El Zapote, Uaxactun, Yaxchilan, Río Azul, and sometimes Caracol.

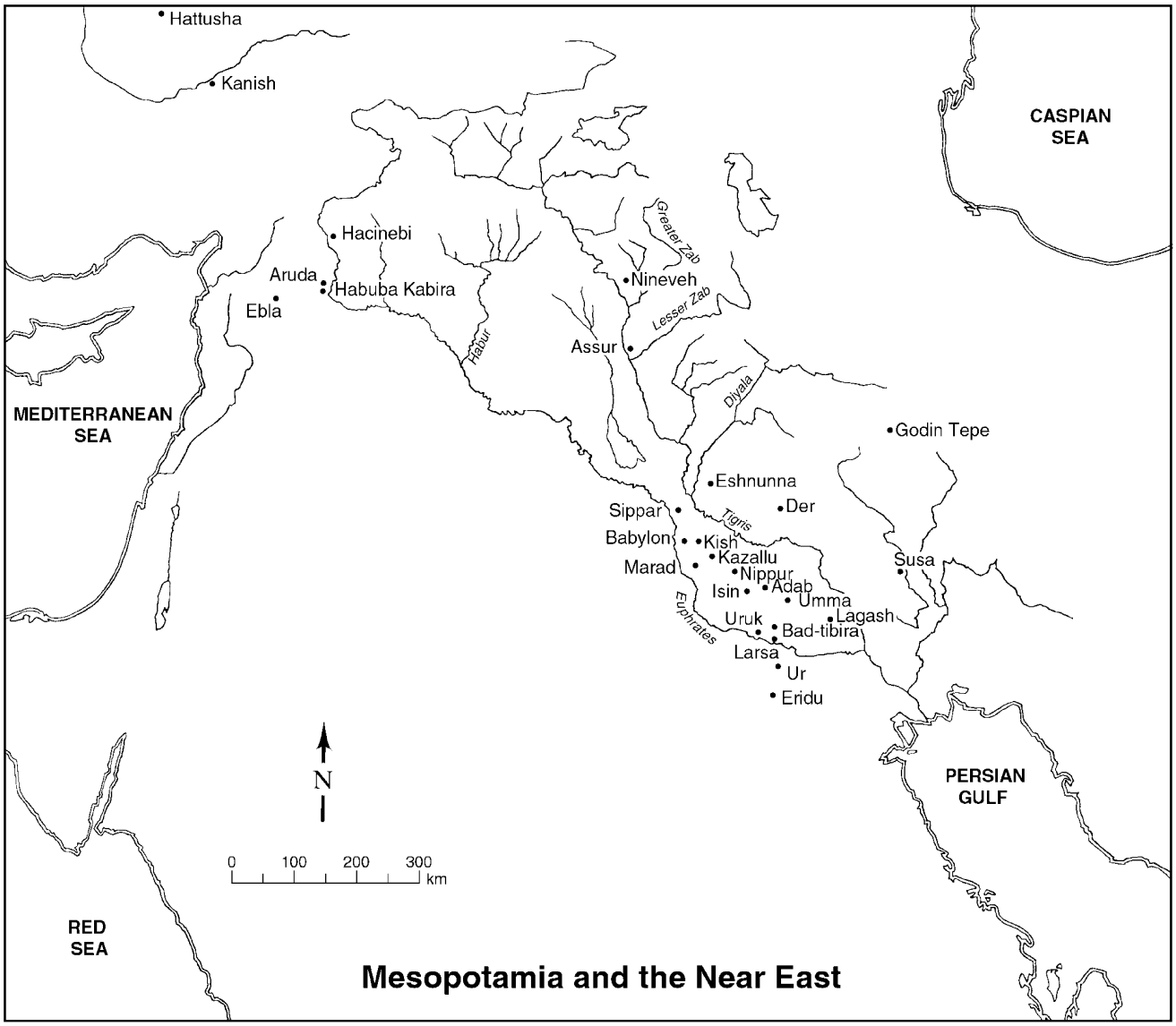


Figure 11. Mesopotamia and the Near East.

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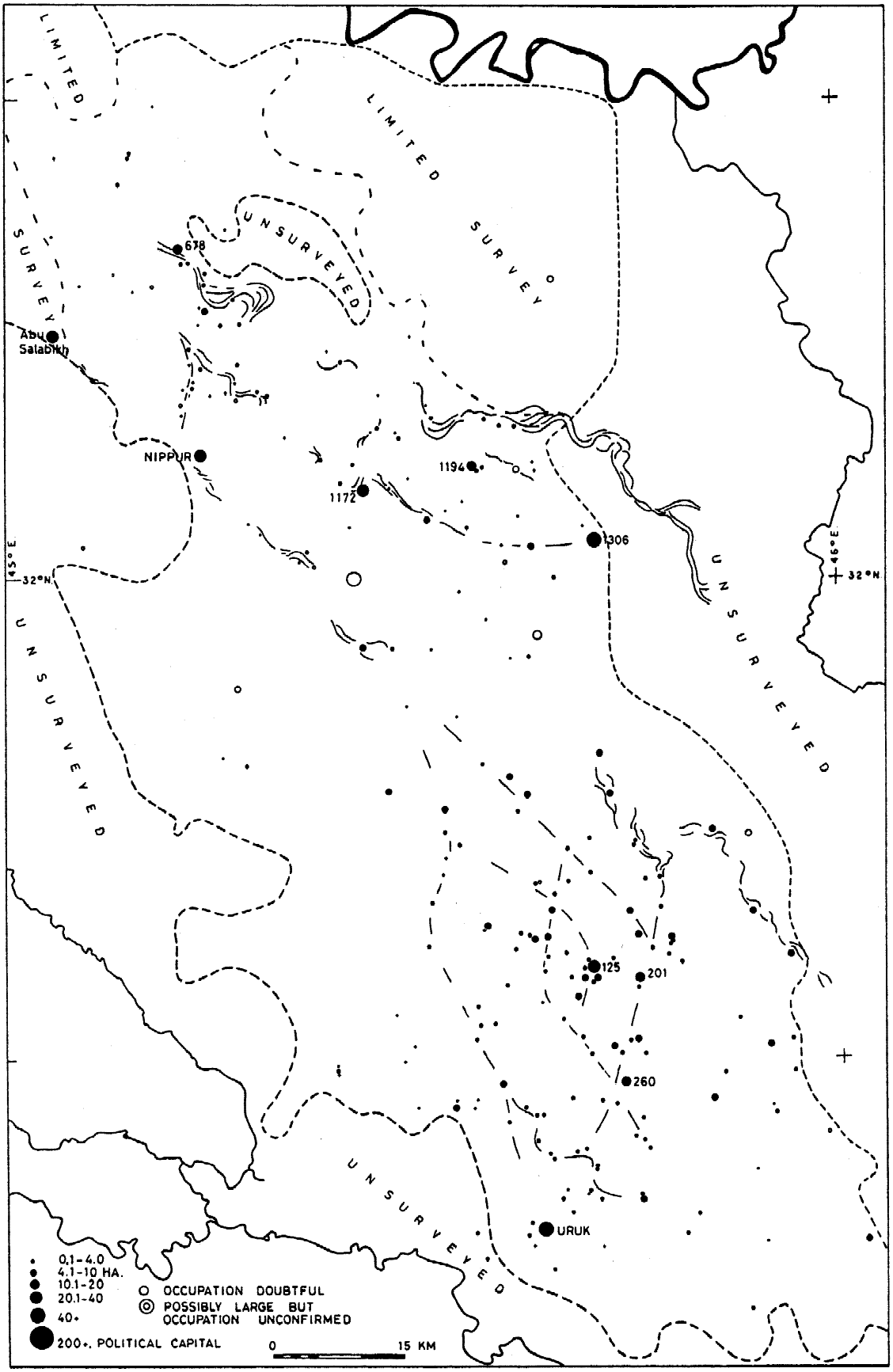


Figure 12. Late Uruk settlement pattern (after Adams 1981).

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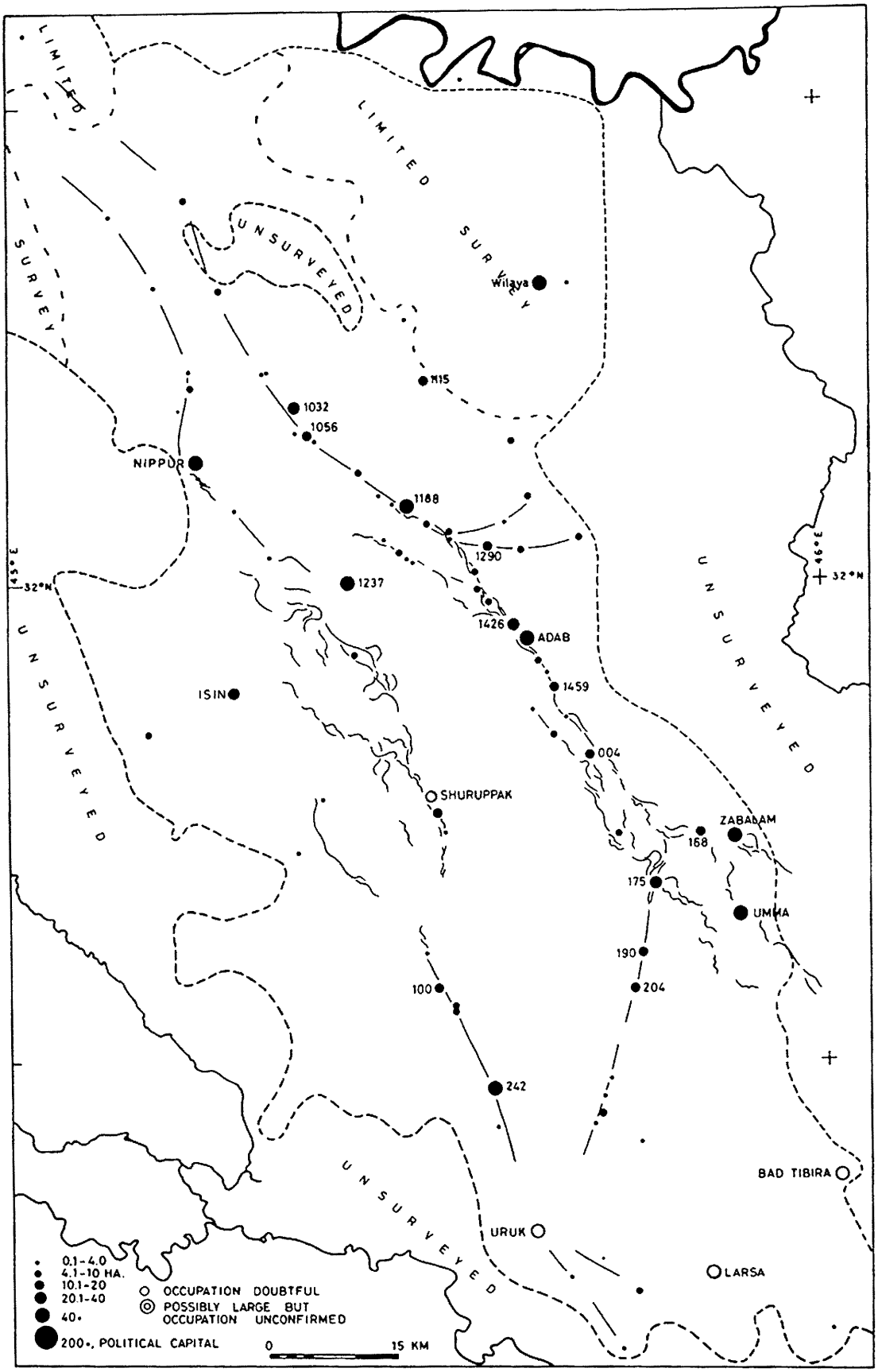


Figure 13. Late Early Dynastic settlement pattern (after Adams 1981).

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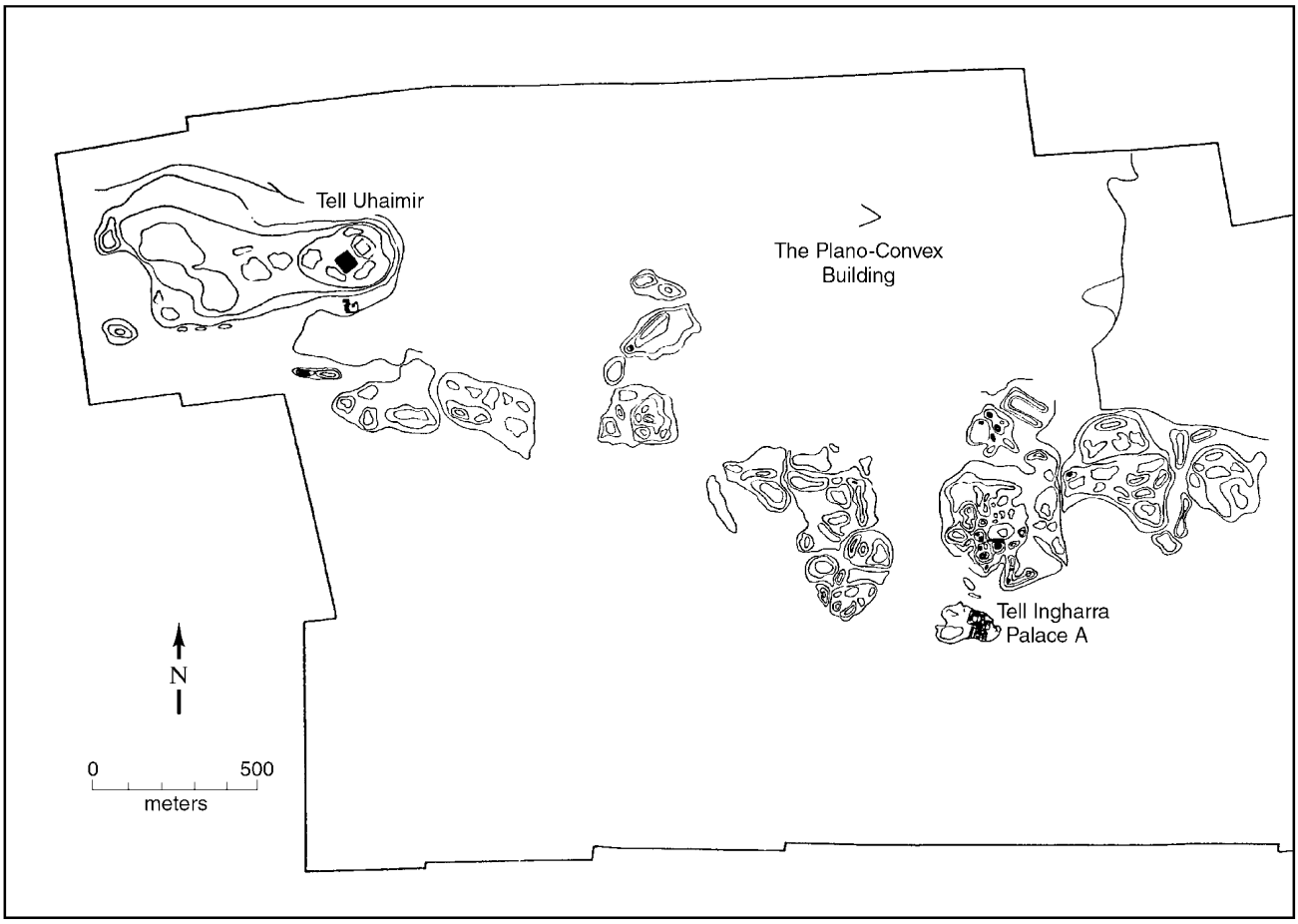


Figure 14. Tells at Kish (after Moorey 1978).

Some of these data look familiar to a Mesopotamianist, but the analysis of these similarities does not necessarily lead to the conclusion of political stability. The claims of kings to control other kings is one of the most common motifs in Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. In one recent analysis of Sargon of Akkade's claims to have conquered distant places (Michalowski 1993), it is held that these claims mirrored a new title invented for Sargon, "king of the four quarters." That is, Sargon's scribes wrote down distant places that he controlled to verify the geographical necessities implicit in the title. The claims were literary inventions, not dispassionate political history. In the Amarna correspondence, in the middle of the second millennium, a Babylonian king complains to the king of Egypt that he should not receive his "subordinate," the king of Assyria—although it is clear from other evidence that the king of Assyria was in no way a subject of the Babylonian king (Kuhrt 1995:348–355). In date formulas from the early Old Babylonian period, a king of Kish, who is otherwise utterly unknown, claims grandiose victories. A king of Babylon says that he destroyed the city of Kish. He says this in five consecutive years—Year 12: I destroyed Kish; Year 13: I destroyed Kish; Year 14: I destroyed Kish; etc. Another king of Kish, in a slightly earlier period, was vassal of the king of Babylon, then vassal to a king of another city, then independent, then again vassal of Babylon (Donbaz and Yoffee 1986; Goddeeris 2001). This political turmoil is not usually described as a "stable political system."

It might be useful here to show what a Mesopotamian city-state looked like and to suggest something about the interaction among the Mesopotamian city-states. Lower Mesopotamia is the land of the famous cities of Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Umma, Larsa, Isin, Nippur, and Kish, among others (Figure 11).

In the late Uruk period (ca. 3400–3100 B.C.; Rothman 2001), small sites clustered around larger ones, which had become nodes of settlement, as Robert Adams has depicted the urbanization process in Mesopotamia (Adams 1981; Pollock 2001; Figure 12).

By the late Early Dynastic period (ca. 2500–2400 B.C.), the big sites had become even bigger, and the countryside was relatively depopulated, as lower Mesopotamia had become a region of urban enclaves (Figure 13).

The same process occurred in central Mesopotamia around Kish, which was surveyed by McGuire Gibson (Gibson 1972; Moorey 1978). Kish, like other city-states, is made up of multiple mounds; the two major ones, Ingharra and Uhaimir, originally were independent villages that merged into a city-state (Figure 14). Other sites nearby were controlled by Kish.

The city-state that we know most about from third-millennium texts is Lagash (Beld 2002; de Maaijer 1998; Figure 15). Lagash consisted of two main towns, Lagash (Tell al Hiba) and Girsu (Telloh), the later capital of the city-state whose overall name was Lagash.

Telloh covers about 80 ha and Lagash about 400 ha. Second-order towns were Gu-aba, Sirara (or Nina), and Ki-nunir. From

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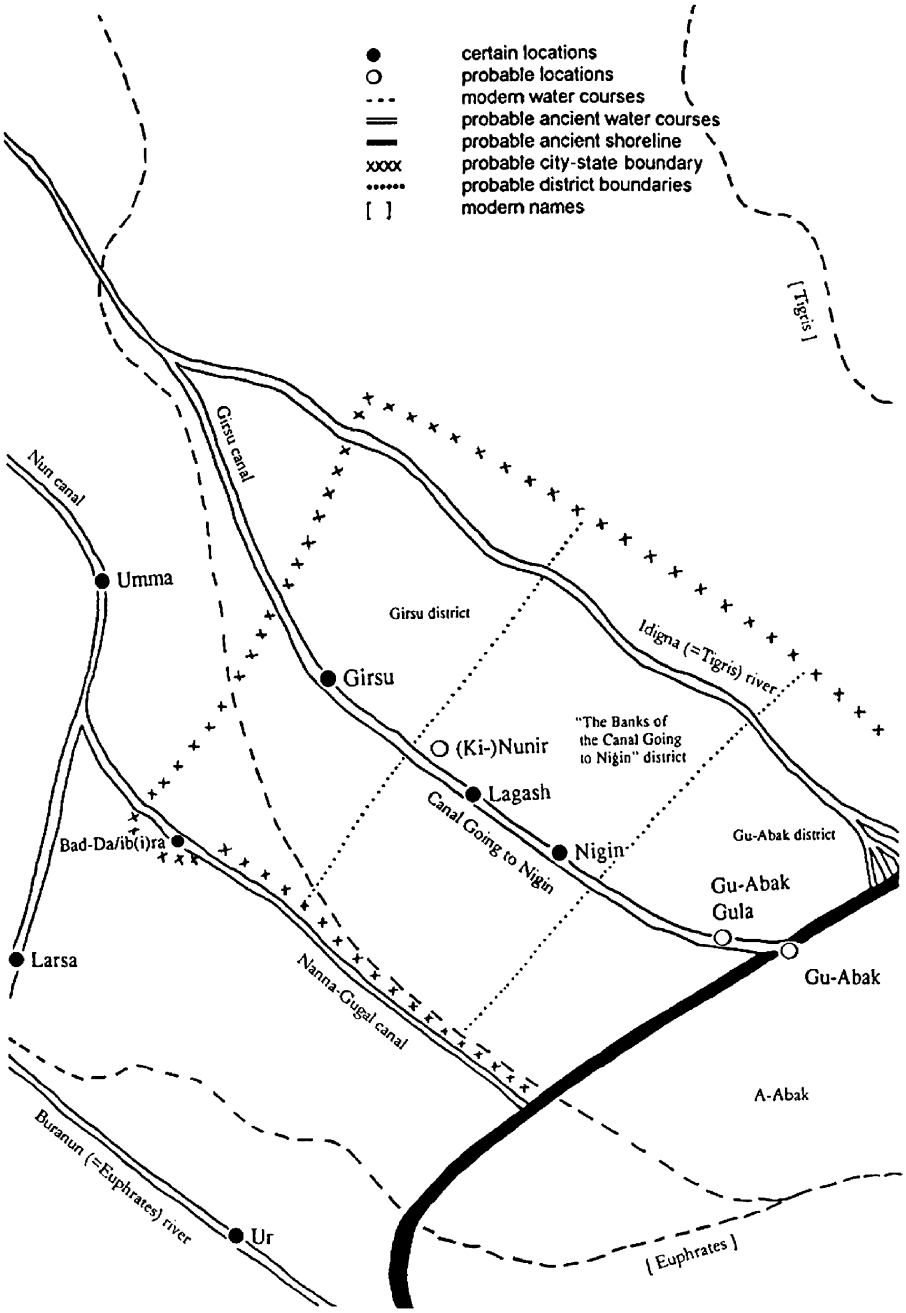


Figure 15. The city-state of Lagash in the Ur III period (after de Maaijer 1998).

north to south, the territory of the city-state was about 80 km, and from east-west about 40 km—that is, more than 3,000 km^2 of territory. There are at least four third-order villages and many named farmsteads and relay stations. The land was divided into districts for the purposes of administration. As is well known, in the middle of the third millennium Lagash was almost continuously at war with the neighboring city-state of Umma, just to the west of Lagash. The multicelled city-state of Lagash was named after its first capital; had a principal, patron deity, Ningirsu ("the lord of Girsu"); and was never described in any text other than as a "city." The Mesopotamian city-states thus look a lot—at least superficially—like Renaissance city-states in Italy (Figure 16). These city-states, or "statelets" (in George Cowgill's term), each consist of several cities, towns, and villages with one city as capital.

We can return now to our question about the size of Maya polities in comparative perspective. First, Mesopotamian city-states were by no means small. There were also many such city-states, and they were in conflict with other city-states—especially with their nearest neighbors—for independence and dominion (perhaps thus resembling the extended competition between Tikal and Calakmul). Instability was the order of things. Sometimes smaller polities defeated larger ones (reminding Mayanists of the episode

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Figure 16. Italian city-states in the Renaissance (after Griffeth and Thomas 1981).

in which Quirigua defeated Copan). These city-states were bound together in a common cultural system, sharing traditions that can be followed both in the textual record and in material culture.

Second, although the governance of Mesopotamian city-states—a matter more complicated than I can describe here—was depicted in royal inscriptions as the responsibility of the king, the evidence from private and administrative documents admits of councils: grandees who were practically autonomous owners of land and who effectively ruled patches of territory. Elites contested for power *within* city-states and occasionally played what looks like ethnic politics, appealing to solidarity of kinsmen in and out of the city-state in their attempt to topple the ruling house. Rulers confiscated property of officials who were trying to convert land they administered into their own property (this in the Ur III period, about 2000 B.C., perhaps the most centralized state in early Mesopotamian history [Maekawa 1996]). I am not sure that terms such as "big" or "small" state or "strong" or "weak" state really can capture the fluidity of political and social relations in Mesopotamia, and I question whether these terms can be easily applied to the Maya, either—at least, without a lot of unpacking.

In conclusion, these few reflections serve, I hope, to underscore Pat Culbert's long insistence on cross-cultural analysis and the utility of New World–Old World comparisons. At Arizona, it was rare that a Maya student would not have had some exposure

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to Mesopotamian states, and Mesopotamian students regularly took Pat's courses and even seminars on the Maya. In my perspective on Mesopotamia, as I have noted—at least, in the early periods—polities are normally called "city-states," and evanescent conquests by one or another of them normally collapse into the city-states that were the relatively stable unit from which confederacies, territorial states, and even empires were constructed. In recent years, many Mesopotamianists (that is, my friends and myself) have turned their attention to the complex social and economic relations within the city-states, which were prime arenas of competition for political and social status, in spite of the many characterizations of intercity warfare in the formal historical inscriptions of Mesopotamian kings. It would require an act of little faith in the comparative method not to think that Maya studies must also turn to these investigations—and, in fact, they already have. I have no illusion that I have convinced Pat Culbert that he and some others have overstated the claims for "big" Maya states. Indeed, I am almost pleased that I have not, for I look forward to continued, zestful conversations with Pat on the topic.

RESUMEN

El trabajo académico y la labor educative de Pat Culbert se caracterizan por su insistencia en la atencion rigorosa a los datos, así como por su calidez y humanidad, en las que toda actividad académica debería preperar. En este trabajo me refiriré a uno de los aspectos de su investigación, el alcance y el grado de integración política de las instituciones mayas, en comparación con ejemplos de la Mesopotamia.

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