Chapter 5

Archaeologies of empire

Empires in archaeology

Another first often accredited to the arena of ancient Mesopotamia is that of empires, perhaps acceptably defined as 'any large sovereign political entity whose components are not sovereign, irrespective of this entity's internal structure or official designation' (Taagepera 1978a: 113), or 'a supernational system of political control' (Larsen 1979: 92). Ironically, in historical ancient Mesopotamia there appears to have been no special word for 'empire', only for countries, lands or peoples. Definitions of empire vary greatly, and it is possible to regard some of the complex core/periphery interactions considered in the previous chapter as taking place within a context already containing elements of imperialism, as we have seen. Conventionally the term 'first Mesopotamian empire' (Larsen 1979: 75), or even 'world's first empire', is reserved for that of the Akkadian period of the later third millennium in Mesopotamia, when textual evidence appears to attest an imperial expansion and administration across substantial swathes of Lower and Upper Mesopotamia and beyond. The presence of textual evidence, however, has arguably encouraged an over-hasty definition and detection of imperial modes of power in what is still essentially an ahistoric archaeological environment. In relation to the alleged Tula empire of central Mexico, Smith and Montiel comment that there has been a tendency 'to give too much weight to the native historical record in central Mexico, in spite of its obviously propagandistic nature' (Smith and Montiel 2001: 269), and a similar sentiment might be cast in the direction of some Mesopotamian textual scholars as regards study of the Akkadian period. The notion of ahistoric or prehistoric empires in ancient Southwest Asia has not seriously been entertained, in contrast to studies in the New World on political phenomena such as the aliterate Inka and Wari empires of Peru (D'Altroy 2001b; Schreiber 2001). In truth, the specifically archaeological study of empires in the Mesopotamian context is in its infancy. The apparent wealth of texts surviving from empires of the Mesopotamian past has perhaps encouraged a view that atextual archaeological investigation has little to contribute. In this chapter we hope to show how false that view might be.

How have archaeologists gone about defining and studying empires on the ground? What might be the archaeological correlates of empires, as distinct from those of complex societies engaging in regional interactions? What special approaches or scales of approach might be required, given that we are here considering probably the single largest anthropological entity that an archaeologist might study? Empires are immense phenomena and ought to leave commensurately large traces in the archaeological record. But they are also fickle entities that change shape with unpredictable and sweeping rapidity: 'the spatial scale, geographic and organizational variability, and the rapid rates of change in empires pose considerable challenges to archaeologists, whose focus of research is necessarily a small part of a large phenomenon' (Sinopoli 1994: 173).

Some ideas on approaches to empire are summarised in Table 5.1, compiled on the basis of a broad survey of studies of empires of both the Old and New Worlds, from late prehistory to modern times, including elements presented in those studies as well as original suggestions. What has not been essayed before is the tripartite nature of the approach. Listed in the first column are those characteristics of politics, economy, society and ideology that help to define an empire as an anthropological entity. The presence of isolated characteristics in any particular past society is unlikely to lead to a safe definition, as many of the suggested characteristics may individually be present in non-imperial societies. The more attributes that can be identified, the stronger the case for imperial identification will be, and there is certainly scope for exploration of how some characteristics and correlates might be of greater significance than others. The attributes in Table 5.1 have been gleaned from wide-ranging cross-cultural studies of empires throughout history (Alcock *et al.* 2001; Sinopoli 1994; Smith and Montiel 2001; Taagepera 1978a; 1978b), and others could be added to the list.

The second column represents an attempt to summarise those archaeological correlates that may come to represent, in the recoverable archaeological record, the anthropological reality of empire. Again, the more correlates ticked off the stronger the case that can be made. Rarely will there be a one-to-one correspondence between the first two columns. We are dealing with highly complex political entities, as well

Table 5.1 Empires: characteristics and correlates

Anthropological characteristics	*Archaeological correlates*	*Textual correlates*
1 IMPERIAL CORE		
Large complex urban centre as capital	Dominant settlement in core region	Archives at capital
	Dominance of capital in local settlement hierarchy	
Occupational specialisation in core	Evidence for craft specialisation	Profession lists Scribes
Social stratification, from elite to slave	Variation in housing	Content – slaves
	Differential distribution of goods	
Ethnic diversity at capital	Clumping of material culture	Multi-lingual? Non-language specific?
Agricultural intensification in core	Irrigation, landscape control, storage	Content – agriculture
Crop management strategies	Changes in archaeobotanical evidence	Content – crops
Animal management strategies	Changes in zooarchaeological evidence	Content – animals
Technological advantage in core	Technologies originating in core	Texts as administrative technology Seals and texts
Imperial ideology at capital		
Militarism and use of terror	Imagery of battle, conquest, subjugation	
Glorification of state		
Labour investment in public building	Massive public monuments	Content – labour
Glorification of ruler	Imagery of royalty	Content – rulers
Charismatic individual rulers	Imagery of individual	Named rulers – legends
Core appropriation of peripheral ideology	Peripheral cult-status/ images removed to core	

contd

2 DOMINATION OF PERIPHERAL POLITIES		
Economic interaction between core and periphery via coercion/exchange	Goods taken/imported from periphery to core	Texts in periphery?
	Goods exported from core to periphery	
Political control of periphery		Language shift?
Military control	Destruction levels in peripheral sites, hoards	Content – war
Imperial infrastructure across entire region	Roads, garrisons, fortresses	Content – geographic
Imposition of tribute/tax on periphery		
Increased agricultural intensity in periphery	Irrigation, landscape control	
intensity/standardisation of craft production in periphery	Evidence for craft specialisation/standardisation	Texts in periphery?
Control of peripheral populations	Nucleation of settlement patterns in periphery Establishment of regional centres	
Imperial co-option of peripheral elites	Core high-status goods in peripheral elite contexts	
Peripheral elite emulation of core elite	Core high-status goods in peripheral elite contexts (e.g. burials)	
3 EMPIRES IN GLOBAL CONTEXT		
Economic influence		
Trade/exchange beyond empire	Exotic goods from beyond empire in core zone Goods from empire found beyond borders	Exotic toponyms
Political influence		
Military policing of borders of empire	Fortresses, defences in border zones	Garrison archives
State formation in adjacent zones	Shifts in settlement patterns	
Cultural influence		
Elite emulation of imperial styles	Shifts in material culture in adjacent zones	
Elite emulation of imperial gods/rituals	Copies of temples, cultic paraphernalia beyond empire	

4 CYCLE(S) OF EXPANSION, CONSOLIDATION, COLLAPSE		
Expansion	Spread of material culture/settlement	
Slow-quick-slow sequence		
Consolidation	Continuities in material culture/settlement	
Collapse	Discontinuities in material culture/settlement, hoards	End of texts
Economic downturn	Regional abandonment, no movement of goods	
Environmental downturn	Regional abandonment, environmental evidence	

as an archaeological record subject to various and complex depositional and taphonomic processes. In many cases there will be uncertainty about whether a particular archaeological aspect is diagnostic of empire, of non-empire or, most often, of neither. We need to keep in mind the subtlety of the relationship between cultural and political identity: 'We have no agreed-on criteria for distinguishing archaeologically between conformity imposed by external forces and that arising from the voluntary congruence of an integrated cultural system, independent of political control' (Postgate 1994a: 3). Furthermore, the archaeological impact of empire on any specific region will vary according to the duration and intensity of interaction. Fleeting control might leave no detectable traces, while long-lasting military and administrative intrusion might leave recoverable evidence in a wide range of material culture fields.

The third column of Table 5.1 gives some tentative ideas about how empires might manifest themselves in the written record as recovered from the ground. That is to say, if we look at texts as archaeological artefacts, are there ways in which they are distributed, composed and structured that might betoken an imperial context? This view of texts goes beyond, but will also include, the import of their content. There has been little previous discussion of the potential significance of texts as artefacts in studies of states and empires (but see Postgate *et al.* 1995). As already stressed, texts are archaeological artefacts with meaningful contexts and associations well beyond the nature of their content. As Robert Adams has said, it is up to us as archaeologists to give the body of textual evidence 'the attention that its *anthropological* significance warrants' (Adams 1988: 42; italics in original). It is also up to us to ensure that cuneiform texts found in excavations are published with adequate information concerning their physical contexts and associations within an excavation, so that their full significance can be appreciated (Ellis 1983).

It is vital to distinguish the three elements of a holistic archaeological approach to empires, as represented by the three columns of Table 5.1. In previous studies there has commonly been confusion, particularly as to the first two columns, the assumption being that the definition of an anthropological aspect is sufficient end in itself for the study of empires. The table recently presented by Smith and Montiel (2001: 247, table 1; see also Smith 2001: 131, table 5.2), for example, is entitled 'Archaeological criteria for the identification of empires', but most of the elements listed as examples, such as 'militarism', 'glorification of king or state', 'imposition of tribute or taxes', 'imperial co-option of local elites', are not archaeological criteria at all but anthropological characteristics. Arriving at archaeologically meaningful correlates of these characteristics is the main challenge today facing the researcher of past empires, and Table 5.1 represents a tentative step in that direction. There are doubtless many further characteristics and correlates that could be added to the table.

Empires in Mesopotamia and Mesopotamia in empires

The lands of Mesopotamia have hosted, or participated in, a series of empires through history, as summarised in Table 5.2, largely based on the work of Taagepera (1978a; 1978b). The Uruk phenomenon is included in the table, accepting for now Algaze's characterisation of it as an 'informal empire' at least (Algaze 2001a) and Liverani's assertion that empires existed before Akkad (Liverani 1993: 3). The table has been brought up to the modern era in the hope of underlining the significance of Mesopotamia within long-term trends of imperial history. Imperial areas, of course highly approximate and measured as dry land extent of control, are given as measures of Mm^2, or squared megametres, one megametre being 1,000km.

In his innovative comparative studies of empires of the world through time and space, Rein Taagepera has underlined the fragile nature of Mesopotamian empires, as compared to their Egyptian and Chinese counterparts: 'the special problem with Mesopotamian data is that empires rise and fall so rapidly that it is hard to keep track of all of them' (Taagepera 1978b: 185). He has also pointed to chronological

Table 5.2 Mesopotamia and empires

Empire	*Approximate date*	*Core*	*Maximum extent (Mm^2)*
Uruk	3200 BC	Lower Mesopotamia	0.90
Akkad	2250 BC	Northern Lower Mesopotamia	0.80
Ur III	2050 BC	Lower Mesopotamia	0.10
Old Assyrian	1850 BC	Upper Mesopotamia	0.15
Old Babylonian	1800 BC	Northern Lower Mesopotamia	0.25
Mitanni	1400 BC	Upper Mesopotamia	0.30
Middle Assyrian	1300 BC	Upper Mesopotamia	0.40
Neo-Assyrian	700 BC	Upper Mesopotamia	1.40
Neo-Babylonian	600 BC	Northern Lower Mesopotamia	0.50
Achaemenid	400 BC	South Iran	5.50
Seleucid	300 BC	Northern Lower Mesopotamia	4.00
Parthian	100 BC	Northern Lower Mesopotamia	2.50
Sasanian	AD 250	Iran	3.50
Abbasid	AD 800	Northern Lower Mesopotamia	11.00
Mongol	AD 1300	Central Asia	24.00
Ottoman	AD 1550	Anatolia	4.50
British	AD 1920	London	34.00

Source: based largely on Taagepera 1978a; 1978b.

clumping of empires over large regions, as in the later third millennium BC (Akkad, Old Kingdom Egypt) and the later second millennium BC (Hittite, New Kingdom Egypt, Mitanni, Middle Assyrian), alternating with episodes of low imperial activity such as the end of the third millennium BC and the early first millennium BC (Taagepera 1978b: 195), perhaps indicating that, because of their size and complexity, empires rise and fall only as elements in a very broad regional pattern. Environmental factors may also need consideration on this point.

In general, Mesopotamian empires have not received study in the sorts of anthropological ways commonly applied to New World empires, or even to empires of other regions of the Old World, such as the Roman empire. There has perhaps been an assumption that if we have texts from an empire then there is little need to take an anthropological approach and, at the same time, that if there are no texts then there is no need to consider the possibility of empire. North American approaches to New World empires have been more exploratory and innovative in their research aims and methods (Conrad and Demarest 1984), and it may be worthwhile to attempt to import those characteristics into the arena of Mesopotamian imperial studies. Smith and Montiel (2001) try to construct a material culture model for the identification of empires that is then applied to three candidates for empire in central Mexico but, as mentioned, they experience understandable difficulty in distinguishing archaeological correlates from anthropological traits. A recent study by Carla Sinopoli takes a global view of empires as archaeologically approachable phenomena that can meaningfully be compared and contrasted across time and space (Sinopoli 1994). Here, following the structure of Table 5.1, we consider the major elements of Mesopotamian empires and how they might be approached archaeologically.

The imperial core

All empires have a core, a physical focus for political, economic and cultic activity, and regarded as 'the navel of the universe', to use the Inka term for their sacred capital of Cuzco (D'Altroy 2001b: 201). Since the nineteenth century, Mesopotamian archaeology has focused strongly on major urban settlements that have frequently turned out to be the centres of empires. Excavations at cities such as Nimrud, Nineveh, Khorsabad, Aššur, Susa, Babylon and Ur have all explored core cities of long-dead empires. Here could be found the massive palaces and temples of the imperial elite, formally planned and constructed as the physical manifestation of their administrative, military and ideological supremacy, 'a symbol-laden statement of awesome power' as Sennacherib's Nineveh has been described (Lumsden 2000: 820). Here also might be the residences of elite representatives of subjugated populations, and here might we find a material culture diversity and richness to correlate with the ethnic and cultural dominion of the empire. But despite the input of labour and time that has gone into the investigation of these centres, we still have much to learn about the functioning of core centres within their imperial contexts. Our knowledge of them is dictated by the research aims and field programmes, insofar as they existed, of the excavators of the time and their funding institutions. We know a great deal about the architecture and art of imperial Assyrian palaces, for example, but much less about the quality of daily life of the common individuals who dwelt in humbler abodes in the imperial core. We know much about the import and use of exotic raw materials and finished goods to the centre, but less about the political and economic means by which those commodities were obtained, or the maintenance of routes of communication along which they were traded.

The investigation of an imperial core city is not a simple task. By definition such a settlement will be extensive and likely to have been occupied through more than one period, often millennia, as an imperial or at least regional point of focus, as is the case with Nineveh, Aššur, Susa, Babylon and Ur, for example. Such long-term occupation makes archaeological exposure of contemporary structures time-consuming and difficult. It may be impossible to expose earlier levels without destruction of overlying buildings. The implementation of massive building programmes in antiquity, such as frequently occurred at core centres as successive rulers built new palaces and temple complexes, is also likely severely to have disrupted archaeological levels belonging to earlier phases, so that there may be no prospect of attaining a detailed diachronic picture of settlement and activity at an imperial core. Furthermore, the immense and carelessly executed excavation programmes of the early modern era have themselves inflicted significant damage and destruction to the archaeological integrity of many of these sites. Ancient imperial cores may lie buried and largely inaccessible under major modern cities, as is the case with the 'Abbasid Round City of Mansur under modern Baghdad. Another factor is that few of the major imperial capitals have been directly threatened by modern civil engineering projects, such as dam construction, and therefore have not attracted multi-national rescue programmes such as have been routinely conducted along much of the river valleys of Mesopotamia in recent decades. We know less about settlement history in the immediate environs of Nineveh or Babylon, for example, than we do about many peripheral regions of the Assyrian empire and beyond (Parker 1997). Threatened flooding, within the near future, of the Assyrian state capital at Aššur by construction of a dam across the Tigris may lead to an international response and, at the expense of the city itself, an increased understanding of it and its regional context.

The foundation of an imperial capital may in itself serve as an affirmation of power and charismatic identity by a specific ruler, 'the apex in the action of the creator king' comparable 'only to the works of basic creation, owed to the gods' (Liverani 1979: 309). Movement to a new capital may be a means used by rulers of disempowering subsidiary elite groups entrenched in the old capital (Sinopoli 1994: 170). Perhaps the best hope for holistic exploration of an imperial core city lies with single-period settlements founded by individual rulers and abandoned at the death or demise of that ruler. At these charismatic capitals we can gain an impression of the scale and variety of activity envisioned for a capital of empire. An example that has been identified and extensively excavated, and where in March 1843 Botta first discovered an Assyrian palace, is the city of Khorsabad, ancient Dur-Šarrukin, 'built, occupied and abandoned in the space of a single generation', as Seton Lloyd puts it (Lloyd 1978: 201–2).

Let us then look for a moment at Khorsabad as an example of an imperial core centre from ancient Mesopotamia.

Sargon II founded Dur-Šarrukin, 'Fortress of Sargon', in the later eighth century BC as a deliberate statement of his own power and magnificence. Of paramount importance in the layout of the city was the king's palace, located on a high platform dominating the city on the northwest side. The relief-clad palace and the rest of the citadel, with its temples, ziggurat and elite residences, and its immense gates with guardian human-headed bulls, give imposing physical form to the ideology of great kingship of the Assyrian ruler.

At the core of the core, so to speak, lay the throne room of Sargon's palace, its entrances from the courtyard protected by winged bulls. The walls of the throne room rose over 12m in height and were decorated with coloured murals offsetting the relief scenes around the throne emplacement itself. The reliefs in the throne room depicted scenes of the king presiding over the torture and execution of important rebels, an unambiguous message for any visiting dignitary (Reade 1979: 338). Monumental city walls, 24m thick on stone foundations, seven-gated, and enclosing an area of around 280 hectares, define the imperial core in a stark and undeniable manner. Were we to look at other Assyrian capitals, Aššur, Nimrud and Nineveh, the story of imperial greatness manifest in stone and mud-brick would not substantively differ from what we see at Dur-Šarrukin, and it is thanks to the nineteenth-century excavators, and some of their twentieth-century successors, that we know so much about this particular aspect of imperial cores.

What we know far less about can readily be appreciated by a glance at Figure 5.1, which reveals that almost the entirety of the lower town within the city walls, let alone any area outside the walls, has remained

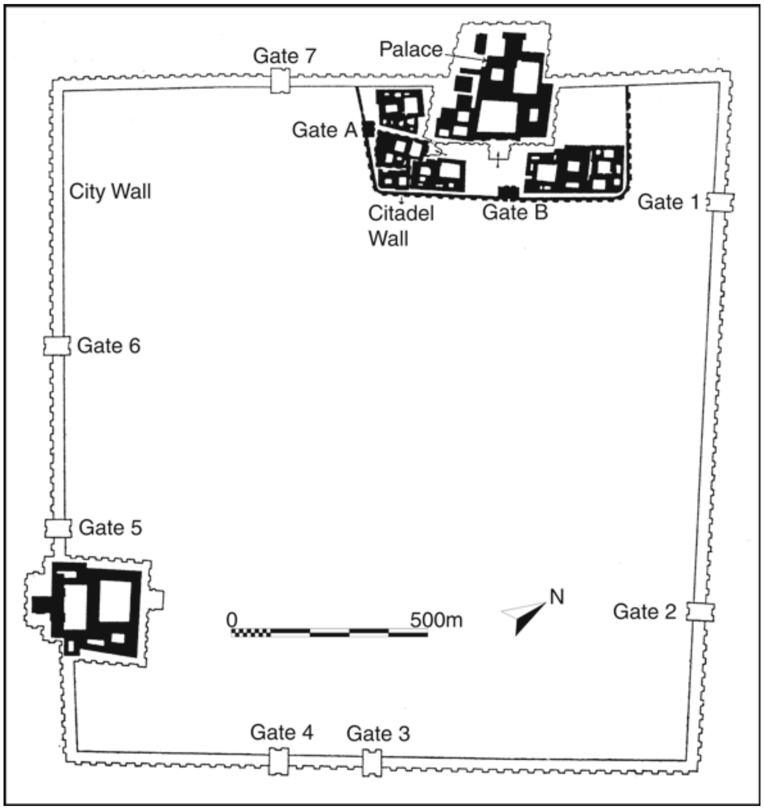

Figure 5.1 Khorsabad, north Iraq. Plan of the city
Source: after Lloyd 1978: fig. 143.

largely unmolested by archaeological exploration. In fact Victor Place did put some small soundings into the lower town of Khorsabad but the techniques of the day did not enable him, nor Botta and Layard at Nimrud and Nineveh, to discern and excavate structures built entirely of mud brick (Liverani 1997: 88–9). We therefore know next to nothing about urban structure, household density, distribution, and differentiation by district within residential areas of ancient Mesopotamian capital cities. We have little or no understanding of such issues as the role of centres within their contemporary and diachronic local settlement hierarchies, where we might expect intensification of land use and enhancement of storage facilities as means of ensuring food supplies

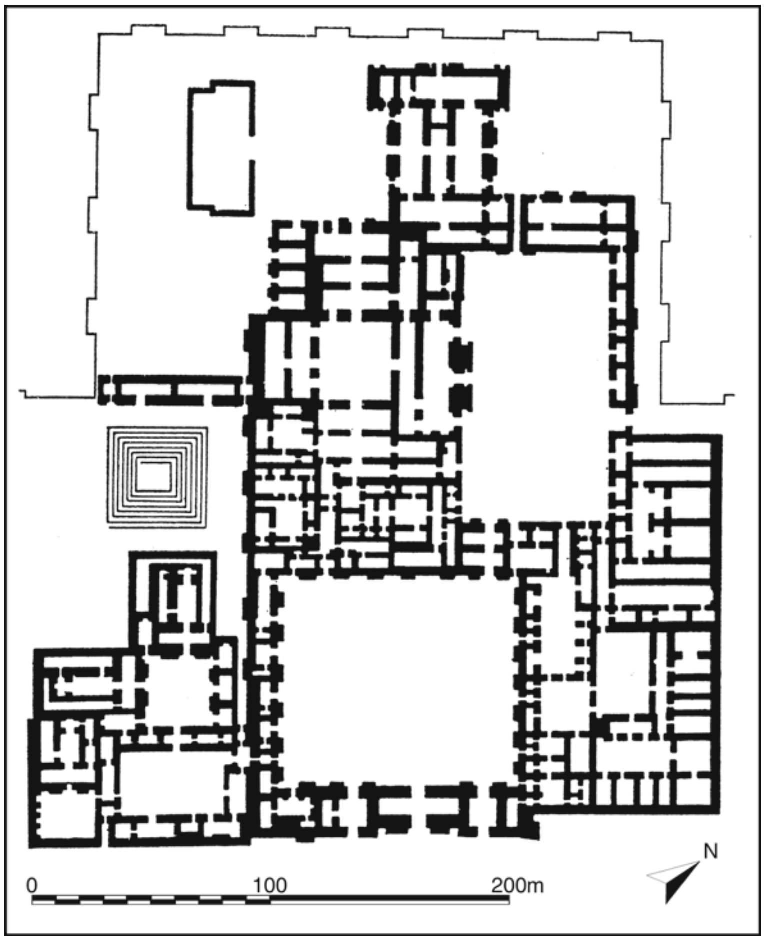

Figure 5.2 Khorsabad, north Iraq. Plan of Sargon's palace
Source: after Lloyd 1978: fig. 143.

against times of conflict (Sinopoli 1994: 170). We also know little about the nature and variability of urban/rural interactions, the scope of labour and craft specialisation within and around the core city, the evidence for social stratification and perhaps ethnic grouping within residential areas of the city, as well as the possibilities of technological innovation and dispersal in and from the imperial core. A unique anthropological study of animal management as attested in the texts of the Ur III empire indicates the possible effects of imperialism on central management strategies, and at the same time provides pointers for how a truly interdisciplinary research programme might tackle such issues, employing the evidence of both texts and material culture remains (Zeder 1994), while study of highly organised grain processing institutions suggests how increased productivity was achieved in order to meet burgeoning imperial demands (Grégoire 1999).

We know from texts that the city wall of Dur-Šarrukin was built in segments assigned to workers from different provinces of the empire (Postgate 1979: 203). Where did these workers live, and what are the prospects of excavating their residential quarters within or around the city and identifying ethnic or cultural groups in the archaeological record? In order to address this and many other issues, we need to investigate the daily practices of diet, economy, codes of living and of ritual and burial that may aid in more sharply defining and exploring the variety and richness of human life to be found in a great imperial capital. Similar approaches might also be employed in investigations of craft quarters or neighbourhoods such as we know existed within imperial cities such as Aššur and Nineveh (Lumsden 2001: 42). This journey has barely begun. The major consolation, as we can see from the unexcavated swathes of the city in Figure 5.1, is that the evidence relating to such questions has so far remained largely untouched by the insensitive hands of early explorers. There is no doubt that future programmes of research will eventually turn their attention in these directions.

As another example of an imperial core, let us glance at the city of Samarra, another city founded, partially settled and abandoned in very short order. Samarra was the capital of the 'Abbasid caliphate from AD 836 to 892 and has been claimed as 'maybe the largest archaeological settlement in the world' (Northedge 1997: 473), extending over 57km^2 along the bank of the Tigris north of Baghdad. Some 5,700 buildings, many unfinished when the city was abandoned, have been identified at the site, and they include a wealth of high-status court facilities such as immense palaces, mosque complexes, military cantonments, racecourses and hunting parks (Northedge 1997). Here again we see the core of empire materialised as a monument to the glory of the ruler and his associates, including the army.

Imperial core cities, then, have hitherto been approached by archaeologists largely in terms of the elements in them that serve to glorify the state and the ruler, that is in terms of their monumental structures. One aspect is the use of art in the service of royal and imperial ideology, a field of increasing interest in recent years (Winter 1997). In the imperial context there is no 'art for art's sake'. Every picture tells a story of imperial grandeur in the form of military achievements of the ruler

Figure 5.3 Samarra, central Iraq, imperial racecourse in cloverleaf plan, photographed from 1,500 feet on 26 August 1918

Source: Public Record Office ref. CN 5/2 385.

and his role as priest-king in the meticulous conduct of state ritual, essential to the prosperity of the empire. Julian Reade has discussed how every detail of the layout and decoration of an Assyrian palace was planned and executed to the individual design of each ruler. The impulse of successive kings to carry out this massive operation led either to a movement to a new, or previously used, capital or to the construction of an immense new palatial complex at an existing capital every time a ruler ascended the throne: 'we therefore have a magnificent succession of palaces, each the memorial of one man' (Reade 1979: 330). More than that, each capital city, and indeed the entire empire through that city, is dedicated to the charisma of a single individual, and the diversity of empire is unified through the ideology associated with that individual, or such might at least have been the wish of that person.

In a hard-hitting essay Mario Liverani has summarised the function of imperial ideology as 'the systematization of unbalance, and in this respect it is the apex of all forms of exploitation … the dominion of the few over the many, the surrender of wealth by classes or groups of producers in favour of non-producing consumers' (Liverani 1979: 297). Like others (Yoffee 1995: 300), Liverani sees the condition of imperialism as being 'not natural' and therefore in need of intensive ideological reinforcement in order to become palatable to the many oppressed and reluctant participants in empire. Political views apart, it is hard to see what is unnatural about a form of political entity that arose time after time in Mesopotamia and many other parts of the world, however fleeting any individual manifestation may have been. In any case, asymmetric relations between individuals and groups of individuals appear to have characterised the entirety of human history, and empires are just one extremity of that human historical spectrum.

Royal inscriptions and titulary can also inform on the developing significance of individual rulers, epitomised by 'Naram-Sin, the mighty, king of the four corners of the world' (A. Westenholz 1979: 111) or the divine ideology of the Ur III kings (Michalowski 1991), but how might imperial ideology impact upon the non-elite elements of an empire? By laying unremitting stress upon an assumed unnaturalness and political repulsiveness of ancient imperial ideology, without at the same time attempting to approach and apprehend the ways in which the messages of ideology were received, transformed and resisted by those for whom they were designed, we run the risk of an excessively 'presentist' view that imposes our own post-colonial stances on the distant past. Before we pronounce too firmly on the iniquities of an ancient ideology, we need to learn more about how that message was constructed, mediated and acted upon by those who came into contact with it, contested it and reformulated it, and that process has barely begun. Further exploration of these concerns will require the recovery and nuanced study of the full range of artefacts from the past, including written documents, in a new holistic and integrated manner that encourages rich interpretations of the past that give voice equally to the oppressed as to the oppressor, such as may come from truly contextual investigations of both palace and hovel approached in the same spirit of integrated enquiry.

One aspect of imperial core cities is the likely presence of archives of written documents, potentially of great importance in understanding the workings of empire. Almost all Mesopotamian imperial core cities have yielded textual archives, and may have been defined as imperial cores principally on that basis. The use of multiple languages in archives of core cities may be a good indication of the scope of interactions engaged in by the core, as well as of its ethnic constitution. In the case of archives from the Hittite capital, Hattusa, for example, seven different languages are attested in imperial documents. While vastly informative on matters of imperial administration and bureaucracy, such evidence needs to be viewed in context. Excavations have hitherto focused on imperial cores and on royal palaces and cultic centres within those cores, with very few published discoveries of private archives from imperial cores, let alone from peripheral contexts (Postgate 1979: 195), so that the textual picture is highly biased towards 'history from above' (Van De Mieroop 1999a). Again, systematic long-term investigation of private residences at core cities might go some way to righting this imbalance.

Domination of peripheral polities

Relations between core and periphery are likely to be of an asymmetric nature in an imperial context, but that does not severely limit the variety of such relations that can exist. For the rather exceptional Ur III empire, it has even been suggested that core and periphery interacted economically in a symmetrical fashion (Steinkeller 1991: 33). In fact a single empire can entertain a host of different sorts of relations with contemporary neighbours, and each of those relations can change through time. Important factors affecting core/periphery relations will include the nature of pre-contact political and social conditions in the periphery, as we have seen in the case of differing responses to the Uruk expansion (Chapter 4), as well as the natural distribution of resources

(Sinopoli 1994: 160–1). Feinman and others have distinguished between territorial and hegemonic empires, the former employing more direct and intrusive means of control and tribute exaction than the latter (Feinman 1998: 109).

Further factors influential in shaping and changing core/periphery relations include the physical distance between core and a particular periphery, where the importance of communications as related to exaction of tribute or suppression of disquiet through military movement, for example, can be critical. Taagepera has pointed out that the radius from core to periphery of the largest pre-Achaemenid empires of Southwest Asia, taking some account of topography, comes out at about 650km, or about one week in terms of fastest available communications (Taagepera 1978a: 121), or two weeks for a round trip. The importance of fast and reliable communications cannot be overstated in this context (Barfield 2001: 30), and surviving evidence may include dramatically improved modes of communication across large areas, exemplified by the Roman and Persian roads of Asia Minor as well as by the textual evidence for imperial Assyrian communications (Kessler 1997). The study of what Adams has called 'the calculus of pre-industrial transport costs' (Adams 1979: 401) has hardly begun. As ever, common-sense assumptions are not necessarily the best guide on this issue. Research on movement and portage by foot in the hills of eastern Nepal demonstrates that human porters regularly carry on their backs loads of 70–80kg, occasionally more than 100kg, over distances of 8 to 11km per day across difficult terrain, principally in order to exchange agricultural surpluses for salt and other products, covering one-way total distances of at least 150km. Applying these ethnographic observations to the pre-Hispanic American Southwest, Nancy Malville deduces much greater potential ranges of contact and interaction than had previously been envisaged (Malville 2001). Nevertheless, the types of commodities transported, whether by foot, animal, river or other means, are likely to vary with distance, luxury items predominating over bulk goods as the distance increases (Stein 1999b: 59).

Once an empire has expanded there may follow a phase of consolidation, during which the management by the core of the periphery is implemented by means of administrative and military control, asymmetric economic interaction and ideological imposition (Sinopoli 1994: 163–8). In this phase, peripheral ideologies may be appropriated by the core, perhaps involving the transport of cult images, and core ideologies may be manifest in the culture of the periphery. Peripheral elites may adopt elements of core ideologies in the way of dress, architecture and rites of religion and burial. Such interactions may be manifest in the form of high-status goods present in peripheral elite contexts, such as residences and burials (Smith and Montiel 2001: 249). But the degree to which a core controls its peripheries is highly variable, an extreme version being the implementation of a provincial system of bureaucratic control administered by officials originating from, and directly controlled by the core city, as occurred in the later phase of the Assyrian empire (Larsen 1979: 92). As an empire stabilises, if it does, there may be a shift in emphasis from military to civil administration in some provinces, as in the case of the Assyrian empire (Postgate 1979: 194). In the case of the Ur III empire, strict bureaucratic control of provincial administration was maintained by the provincial governor, a royal appointee who could oversee production and transport on behalf of the imperial core (Steinkeller 1991).

Imperial domination of peripheries might be manifest in changes in settlement and subsistence patterns (Sinopoli 1994: 171; Parker 1997), including the foundation of regional nodes of power to act as foci for tax and tribute gathering and as delegates of military and ideological control. There may also be intensification of peripheral settlement as a response to the imposition of an imperial peace and/or as a means of achieving tax and tribute targets. In areas of less direct rule, the means of production may remain largely in local hands with an obligation to produce certain quantities of tribute. Storage facilities and physical evidence of land management, such as large estates, terraces, field systems and irrigation technologies, may show themselves in the archaeological record of dominated peripheries (Smith and Montiel 2001: 249; Weiss and Courty 1993: 141), a process of 'ruralization' complementing that of urbanisation (Yoffee 1995: 284). Peripheral estates may be allotted to elite families chancing their hand in the provinces, as with Assyrian families around Harran (Larsen 1979: 97). Populations may be moved around the empire for political and military purposes, with an emphasis on nucleation in controllable towns as nodes of imperial domination (Weiss and Courty 1993: 139). Such a pattern may be contrasted with that of settlement dispersal and contraction associated with the collapse of sophisticated political entities (Peltenburg 2000).

The intensification and standardisation of craft production in peripheral centres is also a possible outcome of imperial control, which may manifest itself as increased scales of production and homogenisation of elements of material culture (Weiss and Courty 1993: 140). There may be a distinction between items of elite material culture whose production and raw material procurement may be under strict centralised control, as against production of non-elite items conducted outside central control (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1996: 77–9). Such a distinction between attached and independent specialists is made by Stein and Blackman in their innovative study of production at later-third-millennium Tell Leilan in Upper Mesopotamia, where they suggest that ceramics, as low-status objects, were produced by multiple independent workshops, while high-status commodities such as textiles and metals were produced by attached specialists under central control (Stein and Blackman 1993). In the Ur III empire there is textual evidence for massive specialisation in commodity production directly under central control (Steinkeller 1991: 17).

In terms of exchange of commodities, imperial domination of peripheries should entail the movement of peripheral goods, often as raw materials, to the core, countered by the movement of core goods, often as finished products, to the periphery. Kohl has suggested that in the case of mid-third-millennium Mesopotamia the exchange of commodities may have been stimulated principally by a desire of the core urban centres to 'dump' their staple surpluses onto peripheral markets (Kohl 1975: 48). But these exchanges are notoriously difficult to detect in the surviving record, especially when so many of the finished products – textiles, clothing, spices – are likely to have been perishable or, in the case of high-status artefacts of metal and semi-precious stone, intrinsically of high value and therefore likely to be reused through time. In the case of the Akkadian empire the prominence of geographical terms such as the 'silver mountains' and the 'cedar forest' might be taken to indicate the importance of these peripheral regions as sources of raw materials for core consumption (Larsen 1979: 79). Careful consideration of both textual and archaeological evidence for Akkadian imperial presence in Anatolia tends to support such a view (J. G. Westenholz 1998).

As regards the Assyrian empire, the principal commodities extracted from peripheries for benefit of the core included metals, dyes, processed foodstuffs (wine, honey), fibres, resins and lapis lazuli, as well as slaves for imperial building projects and horses for the army (Postgate 1979: 207). The processing of raw materials into elite luxury goods at the imperial core is expressed by Liverani as part of the ideological process whereby chaos (the periphery) is transmuted into cosmos (the core) through the channel of the king (Liverani 1979: 314). The assumption that ancient empires engaged in maximum milking of peripheries for minimum input has been rightly queried by Adams, who underlines the paucity of our existing data on the scale of tribute exaction from conquered territories (Adams 1979: 395).

Peripheries may be directly dominated through the imposition of military might, manifest in such form as improved communications for the rapid deployment of troops, and the construction of garrisons and fortresses at strategic locations. There are suggestions, for example of a strong Akkadian military presence, alongside merchant colonists, at Susa in the later third millennium (Foster 1993: 35). Destruction levels at specific peripheral sites may be associated with core/periphery conflict (Smith and Montiel 2001: 249), although there is perhaps too strong a temptation to connect such destructions with historically attested incidents.

At the edge of empires

Empires have effects well beyond their own borders. In material terms, such effects may include the movement of high-status commodities and artefacts between imperial entities, and the conduct of trade or diplomacy with regions beyond imperial control, such as Akkadian and Ur III trade with the Arabian Gulf and beyond. In textual terms the occurrence of exotic place-names, such as Dilmun in the earliest Uruk texts, and Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha in Akkadian texts (Michalowski 1993: 73) may be a suitable material correlate here. High-status artefacts may travel across very large distances, perhaps through exchange between elites of contemporary empires, as in Assyria and Phrygia (Muscarella 1998). Such may be an explanation for the occurrence of Indus Valley artefacts in third-millennium Mesopotamia (Potts 1997). The variety of possible relations between an empire and its external neighbours may receive ideological treatment in the art of the core, as in differing depictions at Assyrian palaces of representatives of foreign states such as Babylon, Urartu, Elam and Egypt (Reade 1979: 332).

The border between an empire and its exterior may be marked by a militarised zone (Barfield 2001: 32), with all the associated trappings of border control, such as the defensive walls constructed along the north and northwest boundaries of the Ur III empire (Larsen 1979: 80). Borders and frontiers can also be highly charged areas where dynamic social, economic, and military interactions take place (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995). Outside the Mesopotamian context, a clear example of a long-term attempt at military domination of a contested border zone at the limits of empire occurs in the northern border of the Hittite empire in the Late Bronze Age, now north-central Turkey. Here the Hittites attempted to bring a dangerous and difficult landscape under control by implanting strategically located fortified settlements at regular intervals across the landscape, which could serve both as permanent garrison settlements and as temporary bases and store-house cities for the royal army as it marched through on campaign beyond the borders of the empire against the hostile peoples of the hills (R. Matthews 1999/2000). The recovery of an archive of cuneiform documents from the site of Maşat Höyük (probably ancient Tappiga) in the same border zone throws into unusually sharp relief the nature of relations between the core city of Hattusa and the frontier garrison town, with references to movements of troops, animals and chariots, the storage of crops and metal objects including weaponry and captured arms and armour, and the disposition of platoons of troops at vital points across the landscape, such as bridges (Alp 1991a; 1991b; Özgüç 1978).

A further effect of the existence of empires may be the stimulus towards political complexity of adjacent communities, the emergence of 'shadow empires' as secondary political phenomena (Barfield 2001). A good example is that of the east Anatolian empire of Urartu whose rise, florescence and demise are inextricably connected with the history of the Assyrian empire to its south. Without the Assyrian empire there would not have been an empire of Urartu, located as it is in a region where no other centralised state has ever existed (Zimansky 1985: 1). Without detailed excavation of multiple contexts in settlements in both empires, however, it will be extremely difficult to distinguish a secondary but independent political entity outside imperial control from a periphery totally subject to imperial control (Smith and Montiel 2001: 250). As always, the more correlates that can be established the sounder the argument will be.

Empires in time and space: expansion, consolidation, collapse

Adams has commented on the fact that ancient empires are 'characterized by wide variability and constant flux' (Adams 1979: 393). Work some time ago by Rein Taagepera on comparative study of the world's empires provides some intriguing pointers to trajectories of imperial development (Taagepera 1978a; 1978b). His study of over one hundred historically attested empires stressed the fragility of empires as political entities, invariably collapsing after relatively brief periods at near-maximum extent. He also pointed to a growth rhythm of slow-quick-slow as empires approached maximum size, and intimated that the slower the rate of growth the longer the duration at maximum extent. Certain key points can be made, based on Taagepera's figures. First, there is a clear trend towards increasing size of empires through time, albeit with severe fluctuations. Second, it is possible to discern three major phases of imperial development on a worldwide basis (Taagepera 1978a: 119). Phase 1 spanned the late fourth millennium (if we accept for now the Uruk phenomenon as imperial) to around 600BC, during which time empires ranged in size from 0.15 to 1.4Mm^2. Phase 2, from 500 BC to AD 1600, saw the largest empires range in extent from 2.3 to 24Mm^2, while in phase 3, the modern era, empires continued to grow in area. Taagepera's deduction is that there was 'a limited number of crucial organizational inventions or breakthroughs during human history, instead of a gradual development' (Taagepera 1978a: 121).

The trigger for phase 1 may have been the pristine formation of complex urban societies on the Lower Mesopotamian plains with their associated technologies of administration and new ideologies of political control. The leap to phase 2, marked by the enormous spread of the Achaemenid empire (Kuhrt 2001), may have been accountable to a shift in the ideology and practice of bureaucratic control: 'the successful introduction of satrapies may have been the secret weapon which suddenly enabled the Medes and the Persians to build an empire of 5Mm^2 in a world that up to that time had seen no empire surpass 1.3Mm^2' (Taagepera 1978a: 121) or, as Adams puts it, a 'more voluntaristic, harmoniously integrated synthesis of plural cultural and political systems' may have enabled the Achaemenid empire to grow as large as it did (Adams 1979: 403). The inception of phase 3 brings us into the age of widening horizons and globalisation in the fields of industry, commerce and communications in the modern era.

Taagepera comments on the relationship between technological innovation and imperial expansion, making the key point that technological advances may give a core area significant advantages over its peripheries, and that as expansion proceeds the increasing technological disparities between conqueror and conquered can make conquest easier (Taagepera 1978a: 122). Subsequent diffusion of technology, however, can later erode these disparities and undermine established political relationships between core and periphery. We could use this model to view the Uruk phenomenon, seeing advances in administrative technology, such as seals and writing, as epitomising a level of organisational sophistication that enabled large-scale expansion into neighbouring areas to the east, north and northwest. In regions such as the Susiana plain where the new technologies quickly spread, as manifest by Proto-Elamite writing and seals, previous political realities were soon overturned and new relationships established. There are numerous other instances where empires might be defined as a fleeting political entity existing only in the time lag between diffusions of ideology and technology.

As to the stimulus for expansion, there is much debate on this point, with issues such as military security, economic aims and ideological fervour all to the fore. For the Assyrian kings, expansion appears to have been regarded as a religious duty owed to the national god Aššur (Larsen 1979: 90), much as Akkadian kings viewed their conquests as sanctioned by the Mesopotamian gods (Foster 1993: 26). Weiss and Courty (1993: 150) have suggested that, where technological innovation is lacking, agricultural development may require expansionary activity. Early Hittite expansion may have been little more than military adventurism (Gurney 1979: 154). One clear and consistent element is something of a paradox. As already mentioned, empires constitute perhaps the single largest anthropological entity studied by archaeologists, and yet even here there appears to be a special place for the role of the individual. Almost all empires can be traced to the actions of a single charismatic individual, right from the start of imperial history. The role of the leader in acting as a focal point for highly various groups within the empire, as well as a diplomatic and military node for interactions beyond the empire, may well have been vital (Sinopoli 1994: 163). Did every empire start with a personal vision? Was the Uruk phenomenon stimulated by the vision and action of a single individual, perhaps the person represented as 'priest-king' on cylinder seals and other art media, or the legendary rulers of Uruk-Warka, Lugalbanda and Gilgameš, venerated by the kings of the Ur III dynasty a thousand years later? Or is it that imperial ideology works most effectively by means of the glorification of the individual as a unifying motif for disparate elements of the empire, and that the successful propagation of such an ideology has continued to make sense even to us today, who thus continue to be taken in by the notion of ancient empires as concrete manifestations of individual vision and will, suckers still for an eternal ideology of empire?

From the Mesopotamian point of view there can be no doubting the significance of a major resource imbalance between the heartlands of Lower Mesopotamia and the world without. Not only basic resources such as timber, stone and metals, but also all raw materials with which to manufacture luxury materials, had to be imported into Lower Mesopotamia from surrounding regions. Larsen has pointed to the open nature of Mesopotamia, accessible on almost all fronts and therefore amenable both to internally inspired attempts at control of routes of trade and communication and to potentially catastrophic incursions from the wide world outside (Larsen 1979: 99). These basic elements of the Mesopotamian condition suggest that, whatever the prevailing ideology of holy war in pursuit of expansion, hard economic logic underlay attempts at empire through time. In this light Larsen has suggested that the Akkadian empire may at root have been an attempt to secure trade routes to the north and west in the face of the emergent power of Ebla in that very region (Larsen 1979: 99). In the same way, the Uruk expansion of a thousand years earlier may have been stimulated by the rise of sophisticated polities along the northern fringes of Mesopotamia by the middle of the fourth millennium, now well attested at Tell Brak and Arslantepe, period VII (Frangipane 2001), which could have threatened Lower Mesopotamian access to invaluable raw materials. Explanations for imperial expansion need to consider multiple possible causes: one scholar has described Spanish imperial expansion into the sixteenth-century Americas as 'simultaneously an invasion, a colonization effort, a social experiment, a religious crusade, and a highly structured economic enterprise' (Deagan 2001: 179).

Empires ineluctably collapse. How often we read of empires in western Asia in terms such as these, used of the Ur III empire of the late third millennium: 'the phenomenal rise of this empire was matched only by the suddenness and completeness of its demise: in less than a century after its creation, no trace of it remained' (Steinkeller 1991: 15), or 'people in ancient Mesopotamia seem to have been well accustomed to cohabiting with collapse' (Liverani 2001: 377). It seems that without infinite and continuous expansion empires become economically and administratively unviable, the costs of maintaining control soon reaching prohibitive levels, 'declining productivity for investment in complexity' (Tainter 1988: 110; see also Liverani 2001: 387–9). But perhaps there is also something in the ideology of empires that underscores the dialogue between expansion and ideology and that precludes the possibility of an essentially static empire. In all cases a range of factors can be delineated in the collapse of empire, ranging from foreign incursions, environmental change and collapse of trade networks, to communication breakdowns, and ethnic, religious and factional conflict (Sinopoli 1994: 169; Yoffee 1988; Weiss and Bradley 2001). A swift change in settlement pattern from nucleation and dispersal may also follow on from, or occur in concert with, the collapse of empire (Peltenburg 2000). Rarely, bodies of those killed in the final hours of an empire may be excavated, as in the case of Nineveh (Stronach 1997).

Collapse of empires at the peripheries may be archaeologically attested by hoards of precious objects and commodities. Hoarding is likely to have been a regular activity in antiquity, as a means of temporarily secreting wealth, but it may be highly significant if for some reason hoards were not recovered by their owners and therefore find their way into the archaeological record. We can almost certainly impart some significance to the discovery by archaeologists of hoards of later-third-millennium date across much of the periphery of the Akkadian empire, including at Tell Brak, Tell Taya and Tell Asmar (R. Matthews 1994). Complexities in dating associated seal impressions and pottery render it impossible to connect these hoards with textually attested incidents such as the revolt against Naram-Sin, but the fact of their deposition and the failure of the owner or relatives to recover them is in itself indicative of substantial disruption. In the case of the HS3 hoard from Tell Brak, the building under whose floor it was buried was subsequently abandoned and there was an accumulation of wind-blown deposits indicative of a major episode of settlement interruption (R. Matthews 1994: 301).

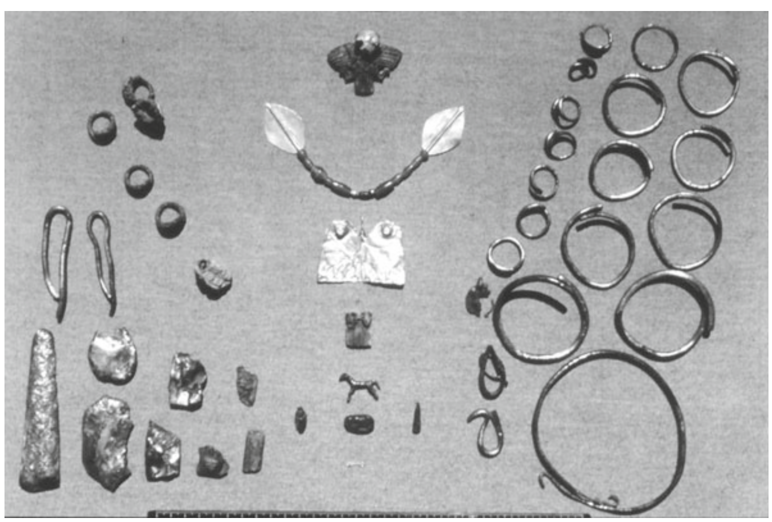

Figure 5.4 Tell Brak, northeast Syria. Hoard of silver, gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian and other items of later-third-millennium BC date

Source: photo by R. Matthews.

Hoarding along the northern frontiers of the Hittite empire, as attested by the spectacular find of silver vessels from Kınık-Kastamonu (Emre and Çınaroğlu 1993), almost certainly indicates raiding and frequent military activity in a highly unsettled border region (R. Matthews 2000b).

An important material corollary of the fact that empires rise and fall with rapidity is the complexity of associating surviving material remains with textually attested political sequences. An extreme case is that of the Achaemenid empire, well known from textual evidence but over much of its large territory poorly or not at all known from archaeological evidence (Moorey 1980: 128). The problems of fitting material culture assemblages, especially pottery, into historical sequences are epitomised in the ongoing debate over what, if anything, characterises Akkadian material culture in Lower Mesopotamia (Gibson and McMahon 1995; Nissen 1993; J. G. Westenholz 1998). Uncertainty in identifying exclusively Akkadian pottery has made it impossible to reconstruct Akkadian settlement patterns with any confidence (Nissen 1993: 100). The bleakest view has been put thus: 'If we didn't know from the texts that the Akkad empire really existed, we would not be able to postulate it from the changes in settlement patterns, nor … from the evolution of material culture' (Liverani 1993: 7–8). The inference is either that we are failing to isolate and identify the specifics of Akkadian material culture, or that a political entity apparently so large and sophisticated as the Akkadian empire can rise and pass without making a notable impact on settlement patterns or any aspect of material culture. On the basis of this dilemma, Liverani has argued for the possibility that archaeological 'methods of proto-historical reconstruction (based on the spatial analysis of settlements and artefacts) prove to be fallacious as soon as we have an outer and comparable set of data' (Liverani 1993: 8).

Liverani's view of the nature and potential of both archaeology and the written record in this context appears to be a further instance of the assaying of archaeology against the 'trueness' of the written record. One could turn his argument on its head and suggest that the existence of a written record, however scant, for the period 2,350–2,150 BC has seduced scholars into believing that they are looking at a principally historical phenomenon when in fact the Akkadian empire is much more an inhabitant of prehistory, or better ahistory, than it is of history. The Akkadian empire falls right on the chronological fault line between archaeology and history identified by Brinkman as existing around 2,350 BC (Brinkman 1984: 170). We have barely begun to look at the

Akkadian empire as an archaeological entity, of which the written records might form only one element of the surviving evidence, but where initial steps have been made through careful analysis of a range of data and hypotheses from all the disciplines at archaeology's disposal, the preliminary conclusion has been that:

> the archaeological and paleoclimatic data suggest, however, the unrepresentative and essentially ahistorical quality of the epigraphic record, particularly for early historic Mesopotamia. Here the cuneiform record misses the early historic climate change, the structure and goals of Akkadian imperialism, the native historical screen enveloping adaptive responses, and the spatio-temporal dynamics of nomadism.
>
> (Weiss 2000: 92)

In short, if we want to approach a reality of the Akkadian empire, or of any past empire, it will be most productive to employ interdisciplinary archaeological approaches that will naturally include hypotheses rooted in written documents as part of their battery of methods, but will not serve solely or principally as a support-act to the headlines of textual history.

It behoves us to recall how little specifically archaeological investigation has been conducted into the phenomenon of the Akkadian empire. The capital of the Akkadian empire has not been located, yet alone excavated; extremely few Akkadian sites have been excavated and adequately published (Nissen 1988: 166), certainly to modern standards. From those that have been excavated, distinctive assemblages of Akkadian material culture have been recovered, even if there are many problems with regard to the details of absolute and relative chronology (Nissen 1993). Material correlates of the Akkadian empire are lying still in the soil of Iraq, the subtleties of their characteristics awaiting investigation through appropriately nuanced archaeological methods. Finally, Adams has forcefully expressed the potential for specifically archaeological contributions to the study of ancient Mesopotamian empires:

> although not the kind of archaeology that is conceived as a process of archival discovery subordinated to strictly Assyriological strategies … the seriously skewed, palace-temple-urban orientation that continues almost wholly to encompass historical Near Eastern archaeological efforts, [but rather an] archaeology that examines

> the mechanics and specifics of empire in terms of demography and the economics of interaction between cores and peripheries.
> (Adams 1979: 396–7)

As yet, we have hardly begun to conceive, formulate and execute such strategies with regard to the great empires of the Mesopotamian past.