

*The Political Machine: Assembling Sovereignty in the Bronze Age Caucasus*  
By Adam T. Smith

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*The Political Machine* is a timely effort to interrogate the role of things in the reproduction of sovereignty, and how the framework of sovereign authority comes to be assembled and sustained over the *longue durée* in the Bronze Age Caucasus. Although ostensibly a book whose subject matter is archaeology, the author also contributes to contemporary political theory by re-inserting material objects into the study of political life. The result is an important and provocative intellectual work, located squarely at the intersection of political theory, materiality studies and archaeology.

The recent material turn in the social sciences is by now quite well-known, and the concept of materiality in particular has left its mark on archaeology. However, this engagement has produced varied results: some scholars have collapsed human and object agency together, while others have subsumed things into human actions and institutions, often losing sight of objects altogether. Materiality studies, both within and outside of archaeology, have frequently struggled to locate space for historical change and variability, and to extend observations of human-material interaction into the political realm in a meaningful way. Much of this difficulty stems from an incomplete understanding of how humans interact with the material world.

Archaeologists have similarly struggled with politics and, as Smith writes, “consistently sublimated the dynamics of sovereignty into other relationships” (page 64), resulting in an understanding of politics as elite control over subsistence resources or exotic trade goods; state power and authority ‘symbolized’ in

material objects; and other partial explanations. Contemporary political theory, in contrast, has sought to exile the material from an idealized community of political (human) subjects altogether. Smith's intervention seeks to do three things: first, to establish how human/material articulations can be theorized in ways that allow for an object-conscious understanding of society; second, to explore the nature of political sovereignty and its requisite conditions; and third, to apply these theoretical contributions to archaeological contexts in a meaningful way.

The book is divided into two parts. After an introduction which outlines the premise and approach of the book, Smith begins by establishing the theoretical basis for reinserting things into political life and interrogating how humans and things articulate (Chapter One). The key conceptual tool holding material forms together is the 'assemblage', as formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). Material objects have effects on the world not as single objects, but through their relations with each other and broader human social and cultural practices and ontologies. These assemblages are efficacious through the ways that human bodies and material objects articulate, which he calls Sensibility, Sense, and Sentiment. The first of this triad refers to the physicality of things, both in their unique material qualities and in their transubstantiations from one state to another (clay into pots, stone into tools, etc). Sense, in contrast, is the domain of semi-osis, values and ideologies. The last concept, Sentiment, describes the imagined capacities of things to take part in social life, often in a magical or divine manner.

Chapter Two turns to exploring the matter of sovereignty and how material/human articulations can be theorized as socially grounded and politically generative. In this chapter, Smith argues convincingly that despite the relegation of things to relations of possession, ownership or commodity in Western intellectual traditions, things do much of the political work of humans. Drawing on the writings of the Giorgio Agamben (1998) and his concept of 'bare life', Smith attempts to tease out the necessary conditions for the existence of political sovereignty. These include the establishment of a coherent public defined by relations of exclusion and inclusion; the definition of a sovereign figure cut away from the community by instruments of social and martial violence; and an apparatus capable of formalizing governance by transforming the polity itself into an object of desire, care and devotion.

These three conditions are established and reproduced through the incorporation of things into social practices. Social practices require the mediation of things; these things are bound by their use together in certain practices. When assemblages become necessary to particular practices, they take on a life of their own, reproducing the social and political relations which constitute the conditions of political authority and sovereignty. It is this capacity of assemblages to operate in the world and make a difference in social life *over time* that transforms a synchronic assemblage into what Smith terms a ‘machine’.

The second part of the book is dedicated to exploring how these machines operated over different parts of the Bronze Age Caucasus to create and reproduce the conditions necessary for political sovereignty, using the concepts of Sensibility, Sense and Sentiment. Chapter Three explores the creation of a coherent public, mediated by material markers of inclusion and exclusion, which Smith terms the ‘Civilization Machine’. During the Early Bronze Age, communities in the Caucasus shared a particular suite of ceramic vessels and other materials known as Kura-Araxes. While typical explanations of the spread and homogeneity of the Kura-Araxes phenomenon have relied on human migrations and influences stemming from Southern Mesopotamia, which was undergoing highly stratified (and violent) social and political transformation at the time, Smith argues that the Kura-Araxes assemblage mediated relations in a society that consciously resisted the processes of centralization and social inequality for over a thousand years. The reproduction of this coherent and self-recognizing public would have been impossible without the consistent Kura-Araxes material assemblage, which was closely implicated in ritual practices centred on the hearth and home.

Chapter Four explores the creation of the second condition during the Middle Bronze Age. The disintegration of the Kura-Araxes civilization machine at the onset of the Middle Bronze Age is linked with the rise of a new kind of public, one linked with a ‘War Machine’, utilizing real and symbolic violence to cleave the social public into discrete components (most fundamentally, one component featuring a charismatic leader, both a part of, and distinct from, the broader public) without undermining the reproduction of this public. The material assemblage constituting this war machine was most visible in the large *kurgan* burial chambers, which featured the conspicuous consumption of wealth and human lives centred on the valorization of singular individual bodies, emplaced within a material frame-

work newly populated by instruments of violence. Competition between elites later in this period also resulted in regional segmentation and territorialization.

In response to increasing violence at the end of the Middle Bronze Age, fortresses began to appear within these delimited territories, marking the start of the Late Bronze Age (Chapter Five). These fortresses represented the emergence of a single polity that built and occupied multiple sites in the region. They served as sites of governmental power and authority, but also facilitated the flow and production of materials that were crucial to the reproduction of authority (particularly metal objects such as jewellery). These assemblages of authority increasingly depersonalized and routinized charismatic rule, transforming sovereignty itself into a kind of object, capable of captivation and self-reproduction independent of any single individual human. In the process, they created a 'Political Machine' that operated alongside—or rather, depended on—the continued reproduction of the Civilization and War Machines.

There is a clear ambition to Smith's writing: he is seeking to make important theoretical contributions to the field of archaeology, and indeed he provides a new set of conceptual tools to explore the constitution and reproduction of political sovereignty that have wide applicability. I could not help but read this book in the context of his earlier work, *The Political Landscape* (2003), which explored the role landscapes played in the constitution of political authority; indeed, there are a great deal of theoretical overlaps, and one could easily say they are best viewed as companion books. One area where this book adds a considerable contribution is in refocusing the lens of sovereignty on the *longue durée*: the conditions for sovereignty are necessarily in place long before the emergence of particular regimes.

Generally, Smith's writing is evocative, cogent and clear; the one exception is in the deployment of Agamben in his discussion of political sovereignty, which comes across as confusing and peripheral to his larger project. The book also suffers from other small flaws of omission. Although Smith touches on the issue of the role of assemblages in moments of social rupture, political change and resistance in the Conclusion, I found this theme to be largely underdeveloped. I also wish he had gone into a deeper description of the actual material objects in his discussions of the archaeology of the Caucasus; while I recognize it does no good to bog the reader down in excessive detail, I found Smith erred on the side of too cursory descriptions in many cases. Despite these minor complaints, this book is

a major contribution to understanding the role of material objects in human life. It should be required material for anyone interested in engaging in this subject.

### References

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