During field seasons in 1994, 1996, 1998 and 1999 archaeological teams from the United States and Argentina worked at the site of Yutopian, and additionally in the nearby town of Santa María, to recover and analyze cultural material from what proved to be an unusual Formative period site. The area where we worked, the northwest region of Argentina, comprises the southern end of the Andean chain, and within Argentina it is the mountainous part of the country where traditional lifeways and languages, crops and communities are the least directly impacted by Argentina’s modern state apparatus. Many of the joys of the project have come from being able to live and work, if only for short stints of time, among agricultural people who recognize North Americans as being as equally remote as Argentineans who come from the faraway capital city of Buenos Aires: we are all strangers made to feel welcome according to our generosity, with expressions of conversation as well as more material formulations.

The site that this book focuses on, Yutopian, was first occupied during what Argentineans call the Early (or Lower) Formative period, 200 BCE to 500 CE, the period when intensive agriculture and sedentary village life were first practiced in this region. By generalized accounts, differentiated camelids (suggesting domestication) appear in the Argentinean highlands by 2000 BCE (Olivera 2001:94), and corn is identified roughly around 100 BCE (Gil et al. 2006:201). Settlements belonging to this period vary according to the region in which they occur but in general—and particularly in Catamarca where we worked—the settlements are homesteads characterized as replicative, dispersed individual or clustered structures, either freestanding or interspersed among walled agricultural fields and animal corrals; few examples of these have been excavated (Berberián 1989; Gero and Scattolin 2002; Núñez Regueiro 1998; Olivera 2001; Scattolin 1990). Nearby, in the Tafi Valley, domestic sites sometimes include standing worked stones called by their excavators menhires (Gonzáles and Núñez Regueiro 1960), although these are otherwise absent at Early Formative sites, and in the Alamito region there are well-published examples of what have been described as Early Formative ceremonial sites composed of circles of mounds with a central patio (Tartusi and Núñez Regueiro 1993).
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Throughout the central area of Northwest Argentina, this same period is characterized by the circulation of exotic goods, including complex ceramics such as Condorhuasi polychrome and Candelaria modeled and incised wares, copper and gold ornaments, and bronze bracelets and bells (Fig. 1), although often these elaborated goods lack excavated provenience (Tarragó and Scattolin 1999). It was difficult for us to reconcile the dispersed population settlement pattern and apparent lack of social complexity in the central portion of NOA (Northwest Argentina) with the obvious complexity of circulating manufactured goods that exhibited high investments of productive energy and sometimes rare raw material composition. We defined this apparent paradox as the focus of our research project: identifying sites where some of these goods may have been produced and sites where these elaborated goods were used or consumed, in relation to the supposedly uniform low-density “egalitarian” settlement system. The fact that we ended up working at Yutopian was either the luckiest of coincidences or a wonderful example of finding what you want to find.

Over the years Yutopian proved to be a surprising site for many
reasons. Not only was the site unusually well preserved with its living floors apparently abandoned and intact, but it was also a rich source of prehistoric materials, some of which were new to the profession and some of which were newly revealed in Early Formative contexts and arrangements. From such rich data, we can now produce new information about the Early Formative period in Northwest Argentina and the particular site of Yutopian, some of it requiring paradigms to be rewritten and some of it relevant on more local scales: for the first time we can document the presence of established villages in this region during this period; we can describe the organization of Formative production sequences in distinct technological areas; we can show different trans-generational household arrangements as well as the remarkable persistence of agricultural regimes over more than a thousand years. Significantly, we can point to the appearance of new forms of power relations closely intertwined with other social developments and emerging at a time when egalitarian societies are supposed to have predominated.

These archaeological conclusions are among the results reached after we had spent three field seasons at Yutopian, one additional season conducting analysis in Santa María, and a field season at the site of Cardonal. But not surprisingly, as we were working toward new archaeological understandings, we were also learning about how to do archaeology most effectively in this region. For instance, we came to know how our flotation systems needed to be modified by water availability, how to recognize and treat rodent burrows, how the daily morning frosts in July and August changed our field schedule. We also came to know what risks were entailed in our long- and short-term storage arrangements, whom we should employ on the project to accomplish our goals and keep peace in the community, what local materials could be pressed into service when “northern” products or procedures proved inadequate, how the Argentinean permitting system restricted and opened researchers’ access to project areas, how to answer questions about why North Americans come to excavate in Argentina.

As we acquired knowledge about doing archaeology at Yutopian, we also became familiar with Andean lifeways more generally; we learned which work tasks are gendered and which are not, what people mean by particular local phrases or gestures, what subjects or actions are never discussed/undertaken by local people, how seasonal schedules of subsistence and ritual obligations are observed, where community leadership lies and how it is defined, how meals are organized, what foods are portable, how settlements and population movement have changed over time, where given resources are gathered and what they were used for, and much more.

Finally, we constantly learned about ourselves as we worked at Yuto-
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pian: about how consistent we were able to be in our decisions, whether we operated better giving incisive instructions or preferred a consensual style on the project, who was most affected by hunger or fatigue or cold, with whom we worked well, and what we could and could not tolerate: Messiness/fastidiousness? Obsessiveness/relaxed work modes? Working constantly in two languages? In fact, we learned a lot about our individual strengths and weaknesses in the field. All these areas of new learning were absolutely critical—and inevitable—as the project moved forward; they constituted an intertwined and parallel learning trajectory to gaining archaeological knowledge.

For significant reasons that I explain in the next two “frameworks,” I have chosen not to erase these histories of our knowledge making at Yutopian and not to shut out the wonderfully unfamiliar context in which we worked. Here the scientific work is not foregrounded at the expense of obliterating its context, but instead the context (regional, historical, political, intellectual, professional) is recognized as modifying the work at every turn. Possibly because I collaborated very closely with Argentinean archaeologists and archaeology students in this project, and because sometimes we didn’t take the same approach to our field studies (see Bit 11, “The positionality of practice”), I recognize that the decisions made in conducting field research (or in any scientific undertaking) play a fundamental role in shaping the knowledge produced in that project. That is, a wide range of considerations and alternate choices ultimately contribute to what we recognize as our knowledge outcomes, and it is not irrelevant that this project was undertaken by a joint US/Argentina research team, nor that I had conducted previous research in other parts of the Andes, nor that I identify as a feminist and that my interests include gendered accounts of the past, nor that my Argentinian collaborator had distinct research interests at the time, nor a host of other things that matter to how we did archaeology at Yutopian. Different researchers, a different research context, different concerns would all produce different knowledges, which does not make our outcomes less trustworthy, only more singular.

The book I’ve written here explores the venerated genre of archaeological writing called “the monograph,” wherein a field researcher reports her methodology and findings on a specific, self-contained project. The conventional format for such a work is highly specified: it begins with an introduction to why the research is important and describes the location of the study area with its topographic features and environmental aspects. Then the methodology employed at the site is offered in more-or-less generalized terms, and the results detailed one area at a time, or more commonly by one raw material class after another. A final section called “Conclusions” and/or “Discussion” ends the work.
While this format for reporting archaeological work served the discipline well for many decades (and I still use some of these conventions), its empirical and atheoretical bias has put it out of favor more recently. Moreover, it leaves out much of interest. The people who worked at the site are invisible; the constantly changing emotional landscape that accompanies hard physical labor with unfamiliar peoples in faraway locations is seldom mentioned; the puzzlement and lack of closure about interpretations and the crucial strategic and methodological decisions we must constantly make are almost never brought up. Painfully, the unfamiliar codes of behavior and expectations between visiting archaeologists and host landowners/land workers—which are constantly being negotiated and redefined—are buried deep beneath the surface accounts of what “happened” and what was “found.”

There are many reasons for these omissions. Archaeologists carefully circumscribe what they write about, not just merely to observe page limits and produce books of manageable sizes. And it is not only to keep focused on the archaeology that they regularly omit so much of beauty and interest from their accounts. I believe much of the broader visual, cultural, emotional and intellectual context is kept “off site” because the veracity of archaeological accounts depends on it. Indeed, objectivity, the notion that lies at the heart of science itself, requires that all unique, personal experiences be considered largely irrelevant and removed from consideration; to include emotions or cultural practices discounts the veracity of what was “discovered.” Needless to say, I don’t accept this view.

This book narrates our investigations, describing the chaîne opéra- toile of research practices employed in collecting data and summarizing the results of our archaeological investigations. If it is a “site report,” it has been reconfigured by contemporary interests and understandings. Most notably, I highlight the contingent aspects of the knowledge we are building, how our knowledge depends on and takes form around what was previously known/not known, and how the actions and decisions of specific individuals are closely tied to how this specific knowledge was produced, as opposed to other bodies of knowledge that other investigators might have produced. Personalities, time constraints, convictions and uncertainties all play major roles here.

If the content of this “site report” is odd, so too is the manner in which I have organized it. Although the presentation of material more or less follows the chronological order in which we proceeded, I have tried to distinguish separate threads, with each section, or “Bit,” designated as belonging to a particular thread. I lay out a basic chronological “Narrative” that explains our work at each stage of the project, but then intersperse the central narrative with “Arguments,” my term for the a priori intellectual positions I brought to the project which colored my
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understandings and my research decisions; “Episodes” (identifying and describing segments of archaeological fieldwork); “Backstories” (offering background information); “Andean Ways” (relating particularly vivid moments or activities at Yutopian, not as ethnographic parallels but rather to stir the imagination about how lives are lived differently, where other peoples’ daily routines and foundational assumptions nudge us to think broadly and creatively in reconstructing prehistoric life); and “Socio-politics” (where we are forced to confront the social, moral, economic, and politic realities of both the immediate and the larger worlds in which we practice archaeology).

The partitions I use are often awkward, partially because everything here is, after all, a narrative of one sort or another, and “Narratives” do not always separate cleanly from “Episodes” while “Socio-politics” admittedly underlie many aspects of work, etc. Taxonomies are always messy. Perhaps the most difficult thread to construct has been the interspersed segments called “Data,” where I link summaries of what we actually found and what we learned at Yutopian, making it easy for readers to get a no-nonsense picture of the “results” of our excavations and analysis. This has been especially frustrating because “data” are everywhere, clinging to parts of the narratives at every point and intertwining themselves throughout our observations and procedures. I’ve done what I can, sometimes separating “raw data” (e.g., numbers) from “descriptive data,” and sometimes recognizing the “cooking” of data, but I’ve also been forced to concede that this thread hardly does justice to all that we learned about Early Formative life from Yutopian. Still other insertions into the basic narrative are not threaded but punctuate the text to draw attention to contingencies that impacted the research. In general it can be seen that narrative and contextual bits figure more heavily in the earlier stages of research while research results (data) congregate in the concluding sections.

One further complication: all the work at Yutopian was conducted by me in conjunction with an Argentinean collaborator, M. Cristina Scattolin of CONICET and the Museo Etnográfico “Juan B. Ambrosetti” as well as the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Lic. Scattolin contributed essential and extensive background knowledge about Formative period sites in the region, offered critical information about ceramic forms and designs and phases, brought wonderful well-trained students to the project, introduced sophisticated and productive archaeological techniques into all phases of work at the site, and suggested constructive and innovative ways of thinking about Yutopian. But Scattolin has since distanced herself from my interpretations of the site in several important regards—some of which I will take up specifically—and declined to collaborate in writing this book. Thus although all credit is due to