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978-0-521-17269-1 - The Transition to Statehood in the New World

Edited by Grant D. Jones and Robert R. Kautz

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Preface

The chapters of this volume are the final outcome of a conference entitled, “The Transition to Statehood in the New World: Toward a Synthesis,” held at Hamilton College, January 19–21, 1979. This conference was organized by us, with the financial assistance of The Winslow Lectureship, an endowed fund of Hamilton College. Each author of the contributions that follow presented his interpretations to an audience consisting of both fellow specialists and nonspecialists. The extensive discussion of the issues presented took place in this public forum, often with comments and questions from observers. This was an unusual and stimulating setting for a conference on such a broad and controversial subject.

As evidenced by the degree of change in several of the papers presented at the conference, compared to the chapters in this volume, this meeting of minds had its desired effect—to stimulate new ideas and to move beyond earlier issues. Most of us realized during the final sessions that only a portion of the knowledge shared and the ideas generated had stemmed from the papers themselves, in light of which each author would be forced to reevaluate his ideas. These chapters, in essence, then, represent the continuing impact of the conference discussions upon the authors’ original contributions.

The phrase “transition to statehood” reflected our concern as organizers of the conference that the discussion should be directed primarily toward the prehistoric conditions and processes that stimulated the development of the first state level societies in Mesoamerica and Peru. That is, we hoped that participants would address, in particular, those problems that archaeologists must face in their direct analysis of physical remains of the past. Although ethnohistorical and ethnographic analogies have long been regarded—and rightly so—as essential to the study of prehistoric processes, their uncritical application to the special phenomena characterizing “pristine” state development has its problems. A primary concern is with the “paradigm lag” (Leone 1972:16) that can result from the dependence in archaeology upon old ethnographic models; such dependence can even take the

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form of unwittingly withholding new and readily apparent archaeological insights from the model-building enterprise.

An equally significant problem is a frequent lack of awareness of changes in social anthropological and ethnohistorical thinking that might cast doubts on older analogies. Such issues were frequently addressed during the conference. Although they were not always broached specifically, the contributors appear to recognize a growing need for better archaeological solutions to the state origin problem and for more sensitivity to the problems as well as to the possibilities of ethnographic analogy.

A glance at the Works Cited section informs the reader of the remarkable growth of the anthropological literature concerning state origins. The references are worldwide in scope, theoretically diversified, and varying in their emphasis upon particular aspects of state origins. Thus it was no surprise, given the diverse points of view of the contributors, that whereas some perspectives were fully agreed upon, others were subjects of lively debate. Points of consensus included an antidiffusion bias (inherent, perhaps, in the conference title itself), an acceptance of an evolutionary framework, and a general—(although not totally shared)—suspicion of universally applied monocausal theories of state origins.

One source of debate centered around definitions of “the state,” because such definitions are generally derived from varying and often conflicting theoretical positions. Several participants disliked the emphasis placed by others upon “stages” rather than upon processual development. Some intense disagreements were due to varying theoretical biases. This was anticipated, both in the selection of participants and in the organization of the three-day conference into one-day sessions, emphasizing, respectively, ideological, sociopolitical, and environmental factors in the explanation of state origins. With certain shifts this framework has been maintained in this book, and the reader will discover how the lines of argument are drawn.

Robert L. Carneiro, who had been assigned the difficult task of serving as synthesizer for the conference, did so with balance and tact, at the same time infusing his overview with a summary of his insights on the subject. Carneiro’s ideas are expanded in the chapter on chiefdoms, situated squarely within the context of a political explanation of the evolution of the centralization of power.

President J. Martin Carovano of Hamilton College, Alice Maxfield, who at that time was Assistant to the President, and Assistant Dean Carol D. Locke provided valuable assistance and support in the planning and execution of the conference, which led to the preparation of this volume. We are grateful for their help and encouragement. We also wish to thank C. Duncan Rice, Dean of the College since 1979, for his continuing support of our efforts to see

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this work through to publication. Our departmental colleagues Douglas A. Raybeck, Henry J. Rutz, and Michele Teitelbaum who were enthusiastic supporters of the project, made our task easier by their encouragement and advice. Various Hamilton colleagues, especially those of the Government Department, offered valuable suggestions on the ideas presented in Chapter 1. Most of all we owe an immense debt to the contributors of this volume for their patience, their tolerance, and the intellectual stimulation that they brought to the entire project.

Grant D. Jones
Robert R. Kautz