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## THE COMPARATIVE ARCHAEOLOGY OF COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Part of a resurgence in the comparative study of ancient societies, this book presents a variety of methods and approaches to comparative analysis through the examination of wide-ranging case studies. Each chapter is a comparative study, and the diverse topics and regions covered in the book contribute to the growing understanding of variation and change in ancient complex societies. The authors explore themes ranging from urbanization and settlement patterns, to the political strategies of kings and chiefs, to the economic choices of individuals and households. The case studies cover an array of geographical settings, from the Andes to Southeast Asia. The authors are leading archaeologists whose research on early empires, states, and chiefdoms is at the cutting edge of scientific archaeology.

Michael E. Smith is Professor of Anthropology in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. He has published widely in scholarly journals on Aztec society, Mesoamerican archaeology, ancient urbanism, and the comparative analysis of early state societies. He is the author and editor of eight books, including *Aztec City-State Capitals*, *The Aztecs*, and *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World* (coedited with Frances F. Berdan).

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Edited by  
Michael E. Smith  
*Arizona State University*



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## FOREWORD

*The Comparative Archaeology of Complex Societies* is a terrific book that should be read by every advanced undergraduate and graduate student with interests in the rise of preindustrial cultural complexity. Why am I so enthusiastic about the volume? My enthusiasm rests on both the high quality of its chapters and the signal importance of the subject matter and general approach in the book. This volume is a clarion call for archaeologists to take advantage of the rich database now available to them to significantly advance archaeological elucidation of the development of complex societies through time and space.

But such a goal seems so obvious. Why is a forceful argument for its importance necessary, especially because understanding the reasons for the rise of complex social, political, and economic organization has been of great interest to anthropological archaeologists for a long time?

In recent years, empirical data about this key emergent process, generated by a host of archaeological research projects, have grown quite strongly, and new insights into some of the principal elements involved in complex development have emerged. However, despite such attention and interest, strong theoretical explanations for the development of cultural complexity, in general, and the rise of the urban state, in particular, have not been in abundance.

The building of new theory on early state emergence has been hampered by a number of factors. One of the most important has been the relative lack of good comparative studies. The dearth of such studies is due in part to what can best be called pernicious postmodern influence, which at its most extreme does not see the utility or legitimacy of large-scale comparison (each case is seen as unique), and in part on a widespread concentration on site-specific empirical research. In addition, the relative lack of detailed

regional settlement data until recently (not just single-site data) from around the world has impeded further theoretical thinking.

But now we have a sufficiently rich database from around the world that should allow theoretical advances that will provide clearer understandings of the reasons for this key evolutionary transition that provided the cultural foundation for the modern world, and this volume clearly illustrates a host of comparative approaches that promise to shed new light on and insights into the processes of complex cultural developments, and that make this volume's arguments even more promising.

My own interests in comparative archaeology are long standing, but so is my appreciation of the difficulties of this approach and the resistance of many archaeologists, albeit often passive, to such endeavors, particularly large-scale ones. Partly, my interest derived from the teaching of Gordon R. Willey, who championed the comparative approach in archaeology in his teaching and writing. For example, Willey's 1962 article "The Early Great Styles and the Rise of the Pre-Columbian Civilizations" remains a masterpiece in this regard. It also derives in part from my own teaching. Forty years ago, when C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky and I began preparing an introductory general education course at Harvard University, modestly titled "The Rise and Fall of Civilizations," we quickly realized that there were no comparative ancient civilizations texts that would fit the goals of our course. Robert McC. Adams' superb 1966 volume *The Evolution of Urban Society* was available, but it was not really suitable as a freshman-level introduction to the subject. So, we ended up writing our own 1979 textbook, *Ancient Civilizations: The Near East and Mesoamerica*. We also edited a 1974 reader on the topic: *The Rise and Fall of Civilizations: Modern Archaeological Approaches to Ancient Cultures*, as well as a 1975 comparative volume, *Ancient Civilization and Trade*, that emanated from an earlier School of American Research advanced seminar.

However, in the 1970s, although we had strong interests in comparative archaeology of complex societies, we did not have the kinds of data available today that allow much more productive comparisons. Ironically, in the decades that followed, as the databases grew richer, the interests in comparison appeared to wane. Now with the combination of better information and a resurgence of attention to both small- and large-scale comparisons (see Gary Feinman and Joyce Marcus' 1998 edited volume *Archaic States*, Bruce Trigger's monumental 2003 book *Understanding Early Civilizations*, and Joyce Marcus and my 2008 edited volume *The Ancient City*, among many recent examples), the highly promising approaches discussed in

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FOREWORD

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*The Comparative Archaeology of Complex Societies* should have great appeal and strong effects on scholarly understandings of this key subject.

Jeremy A. Sabloff  
President, Santa Fe Institute  
Santa Fe, New Mexico  
December 2010



## PREFACE

This volume presents the results of an advanced seminar dedicated to exploring new approaches in comparative archaeology. The seminar grew out of a planning meeting held at the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University in October 2007. Robert D. Drennan, Timothy Earle, Gary M. Feinman, Michael E. Smith, and Barbara L. Stark discussed current directions in research on early complex societies and agreed on the value of an invited advanced seminar focused on the diversity of rigorous comparative methods being used today.

The advanced seminar was held at the Amerind Foundation in Dragoon, Arizona, March 3–7, 2008. The session was organized by Michael E. Smith and sponsored by the Amerind Foundation and Arizona State University. The participants were: Robert D. Drennan (University of Pittsburgh), Timothy Earle (Northwestern University), Gary M. Feinman (Field Museum of Natural History), Roland Fletcher (University of Sydney), Michael J. Kolb (Northern Illinois University), Peter Peregrine (Lawrence University), Christian E. Peterson (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa), Carla Sinopoli (University of Michigan), Michael E. Smith (Arizona State University), Monica L. Smith (UCLA), Barbara L. Stark (Arizona State University), and Miriam T. Stark (University of Hawai'i). ASU graduate student Juliana Novic participated as an assistant and notetaker. Figure 0.1 shows the participants at the Amerind Foundation.

A strong consensus was reached about the importance of comparative analysis in archaeology and about the need for new approaches that encompass the vast variation within and among societies of different kinds. The participants wrote a joint programmatic statement on comparative analysis; that statement appears as Chapter 1 of this book. After the seminar, summaries of the main points were presented at a public forum at Arizona



**Figure 0.1.** Participants in the Amerind conference. Front row: Barbara L. Stark, Miriam T. Stark, Juliana Novic. Back row: Monica L. Smith, Gary M. Feinman, Robert D. Drennan, Timothy Earle, Michael J. Kolb, Roland Fletcher, Peter Peregrine, Carla Sinopoli, Christian E. Peterson, Michael E. Smith.

State University. Peter Wells (University of Minnesota) served as a respondent and provided insightful and helpful commentary on the presentations. Carla Sinopoli and Miriam T. Stark were unable to contribute a chapter to this volume, but their participation in the seminar was dynamic, interesting, and valuable.

I would like to thank the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, for funding the initial planning meeting and the participant costs for the advanced seminar. The Amerind Foundation kindly hosted the seminar in a setting that was highly conducive to intellectual exchange and advance. I thank John Ware and the entire staff of the Amerind Foundation for their help in making the seminar a success. ASU student Sara Robertson provided help with editorial and manuscript preparation tasks.