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978-0-521-44896-3 - Chiefdoms: Power, Economy, and Ideology

Edited by Timothy Earle

Excerpt

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The evolution of chiefdoms¹*

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This book developed out of a seminar on chiefdoms held at the School for American Research. The seminar sought to understand the processes that underlie the origins and evolution of complex stateless societies. Discussions quickly focused on the nature of power: how chiefs obliged others to follow their direction. The participants in this book deal with the bases of power in chiefdoms; they all argue that a society's economy and ideology stand in different ways as the infrastructure and justification for developing political domination.

A chiefdom was rather loosely defined as a polity that organizes centrally a regional population in the thousands (Carneiro 1981; Earle 1987a). Some degree of heritable social ranking and economic stratification is characteristically associated. The question then becomes how we can understand the evolution of these societies out of a milieu of more simply organized community groupings, the development and cycling of these chiefdoms, and their eventual collapse, stasis or state formation.

Based largely on comparative studies of ethnographic cases, the

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accepted theoretical position on the evolution of chiefdoms has been to see central leadership as a social solution to particular ecological and economic problems. Since Malinowski, chiefs have been viewed as tribal bankers who manage their group's economy for the benefit of all (see Steward 1955). For example, redistribution of chiefdoms was thought to handle the need for local specialization when a growing population settled down to farming in an ecologically variable environment (Service 1962; cf. Earle 1977). Population growth was seen by adaptationalists as creating subsistence problems and the need for technological and social solutions (compare Boserup 1965; Johnson and Earle 1987). To understand the evolution of leadership was thus to identify the economic conditions coming out of a society's adaptation which require central management for their effective and efficient operation.

This established consensus has been criticized in a number of studies looking at the evolution of chiefdoms in particular regions of the world (summarized in Earle 1987a). In chiefdoms, redistribution did not seem to integrate specialized subsistence economies; irrigation systems seemed to be too small-scale to require regional organization; and repeatedly population densities were quite low. With a general agreement on the inadequacies of earlier perspectives, the seminar sought a new consensus that would change the way social evolution within chiefdoms is conceived and studied.

An issue that stirred debate was how an evolutionary typology could be constructed (Kristiansen, Chapter 2 below). Chiefdoms as a uniform unilinear stage of evolution was rejected because of the considerable variation within the category. Some advocated developing a refined social typology to break down the variability into structural types. Kristiansen, for example, argued that although important variables might well be the same across a general type such as chiefdom, the way that the variables were structured was fundamentally different. These structural differences then resulted in inherently different dynamic properties. He thus draws the distinction between chiefdoms and stratified societies as based on contrasting structures of the economy and ideology. Others, while accepting the concept of chiefdom as a useful analytic category, emphasized the importance of studying systematically variability in certain critical dimensions.

Within chiefdoms, three schemes for understanding variability were used repeatedly in the seminar:

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- (1) The scale of development, although probably continuous, can be dichotomized as simple vs. complex chiefdoms (Earle 1978; Steponaitis 1978; Wright 1984; Johnson and Earle 1987). Simple chiefdoms have polity sizes in the low thousands, one level in the political hierarchy above the local community, and a system of graduated ranking. Complex chiefdoms have polity sizes in the tens of thousands, two levels in the political hierarchy above the local community, and an emergent stratification.
- (2) The basis of finance, although representing admixtures in individual cases, can be characterized as to the medium of payment, staple vs. wealth (D'Altroy and Earle 1985). Staple finance, often in the absence of extensive exchange, involves the mobilization and disbursement of food and technological goods as payment for services. The simplest form of staple finance involves providing feasts, common in virtually all chiefdoms. Wealth finance involves the procurement of items of symbolic value, either through long-distance exchange or patronized craft production, and their bestowal on supporters. The possession of these wealth objects is desired because they define an individual's social position and economic prerogatives.
- (3) The structure of chiefdoms may be distinguished as group-oriented vs. individualizing (Renfrew 1974). Group-oriented chiefdoms emphasize the importance of group definition through investment in corporate labor constructions that are so common in chiefdoms. Individualizing chiefdoms rather emphasize the distinguishing of elites by status defining adornment (often items of wealth) and special housing and burial monuments. These schemes to understand variability are of course complicated by the historical conditions that affect individual cases. The point to hold in mind is that variation as seen in the schemes determines the dynamics of societal developments, and it is these dynamics that we wish to disentangle in our analyses.

The seminar also agreed that, to understand evolution, research must focus on sequences of long-term change (Drennan, Chapter 11 below; Kirch 1984; Kristiansen 1982). Despite a utility in developing

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evolutionary theory, further cross-cultural studies of ethnographic cases have limited utility. Emphasis on ethnographic cases tends to stress functionalist theories with little possibility for rigorous evaluation. Rather research should now document archaeological and historical sequences and evaluate the similarities and differences in societal change from region to region (Drennan, Chapter 11 below).

With this accord on the importance of variability and diachronic studies, the seminar focused on understanding the dynamics of chiefdoms as political institutions. As the chapters in this book make clear, this perspective departs quite substantially from the established adaptationist position. Specifically, each author investigates the various economic, political, and ideological means by which rulers try to extend and maintain political control. The unstable and cyclical character of chiefdoms is apparent in our cases; political centralization often fails.

In considering power relationships, discussions frequently returned to the commoners' evaluation of the costs of compliance with a leader's demands compared to the costs of their refusal (Haas 1982). To construct a complex polity, leaders must bind followers to themselves; the leadership must be able to control the commoners' labor (Feinman and Nicholas 1987). What keeps them from "voting with their feet" and moving away from the centers of power and extraction? Larger groups do not form naturally; technological and social adjustments are necessary to concentrate and coordinate increasing numbers of people (Johnson 1982).

Is it population pressure which is to blame? In contrast to the adaptationist position, population growth as a prime mover for cultural evolution received little support in the seminar. Drennan, Feinman, and Steponaitis emphasized the very low population densities that have been documented by intensive surveys for the chiefdoms in the Oaxaca Valley of highland Mesoamerica, for the Black Warrior Valley of Alabama, and for the Valle de la Plata in Colombia. Population density appears also to have been low for the early chiefdoms of southern England (Bradley). Population increase, however, certainly was associated with the evolution of political systems in the Marquesas and in Greece. On the Marquesas, population growth and resulting environmental deterioration created a susceptibility to severe drought that bound a local population to its leader and his large central stores of breadfruit (Kirch). In Greece, population growth accompanied

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Mycenean state formation and, following the precipitous “Dark Age” decline, contributed to the emergence of the polis (Ferguson).

Generally, seminar participants were willing to accept that demographic pressure was a cause for social change, especially where resulting pressure could be demonstrated to intensify circumscription, as in the Marquesan case. However, the largely unspoken consensus favored Cowgill’s (1975) argument against population as a prime mover. As Feinman and others emphasized, population growth rates are so highly variable in prehistory that changing rates must themselves be explained. Referring to the basic Darwinian model of natural selection, Gilman reminded the seminar that as far as the family was concerned, population pressure was constant, as family sizes always press against their ability to feed themselves. Any search for ecological and economic prime movers, such as population pressure, seemed in the seminar to meet with the discrediting counterexample: “But among the . . .”

Rather, the seminar focused on the nature of the political process responsible for the creation and maintenance of regional polities. Simply phrased by Gilman, what do the bosses do to gain and extend power? A listing of ten potential political strategies included the following:

- (1) giving (inflicting debt), feasting, and prestations;
- (2) improving infrastructure of subsistence production;
- (3) encouraging circumscription;
- (4) outright force applied internally;
- (5) forging external ties;
- (6) expanding the size of the dependent population;
- (7) seizing control of existing principles of legitimacy (the past, supernatural, and natural);
- (8) creating or appropriating new principles of legitimacy;
- (9) seizing control of internal wealth production and distribution;
- (10) seizing control of external wealth procurement.

In strategies (1) and (2) leaders attempt to seize economic power derived from control over the means of production and/or distribution. To the degree that a people’s subsistence is controlled, options of refusing to abide by central decisions are very limited. This control may result in a system of staple finance in which the surplus generated

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as rent was used to support a nonproducing sector of the population. The ownership of the irrigation systems in southeastern Spain (Gilman) is such a circumstance. The development of the field systems in the European Iron Age (Earle) may well represent a land ownership system elaborated and formalized as a means to control subsistence production. In pastoral chiefdoms, such as the African Twareg chiefs (Sáenz) and the European Neolithic and Bronze Age societies (Bradley, Kristiansen), ownership of animals offered another basis for economic control. Alternatively, the chiefs' domination of long-distance exchange with external urban markets may offer control over productive technology and staple foods (Sáenz). Such exchange relationships were certainly important in the Aegean, where an export economy directed at the eastern Mediterranean civilizations contributed significantly to Minoan and Mycenaean state formation (Gilman).

Strategies (3)–(6) may involve an elite who exert control internally and extend control through conquest and external alliances. Warfare has been recognized as a common characteristic of chiefdoms (Carneiro 1981), as warriors were used to conquer new communities (and their tribute base) and to intimidate communities reluctant to give up their full share to the overlord. At the end of the Greek Dark Age, for example, Sparta expanded through conquest (Ferguson). Interestingly, the potential for control based on military force seems quite limited and unstable. In the Iron Age of Europe (Bradley, Kristiansen), the Argaric Bronze Age of southeastern Spain (Gilman), and the Mantaro Valley in Peru (Earle), warfare was prevalent but local chiefdoms were apparently unable to expand spatially to incorporate sizeable regional populations. Many of the small Greek poleis remained politically independent for a long period and were not incorporated into the expanding states. The naked force of warriors would appear to be difficult to marshal, such that a likely trajectory was for local groups to retain political autonomy by defending themselves in fortified locations virtually unassailable with the tactics of war characterizing chiefdoms.

Strategies (7)–(10) depend primarily on power derived from an ideology that strengthens the legitimate position of leaders as necessary to maintain the “natural” order of the world. In many cases this involves the leaders securely connecting themselves to the past. For the English Neolithic and early Bronze Age monuments, burial

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mounds seem to plant a community's leadership line on a hill or ridge that dominates the landscape (Bradley 1984). Equally important is competition for external ties to a new ideology, often associated with an "international style," which is used to set the ruling elites as a people apart (see Flannery 1968; Helms 1979). For example, the warrior elite of northern Europe identified themselves with such symbols as the war chariots and stools from the distant Mediterranean (Kristiansen 1987a). The increasing control of long-distance wealth exchange and the use of that exotic wealth to attract and control local labor appear important facets of chiefdom development in highland Mesoamerica (Feinman); a similar pattern would appear to exist for the Mississippian chiefdoms (Steponaitis). Elites justified their position with reference to external sources of power inaccessible to others. The special wealth objects were often associated with powers that both symbolized and encapsulated the elites' divinity or at least nonlocal legitimacy.

The importance of ideology as a source of chiefly power has several historical examples. In the emergence of the polis, the myth of a Golden Age served as a ruling ideology; each polis held myths of heroes and patron gods important for creating the group's political identity (Ferguson). The Saharan nomadic chiefs likewise used the external Islamic state ideology in their political maneuverings (Sáenz).

The use of esoteric wealth, with associated external ideologies, can serve as status defining markers and as political currency used to materialize political relationships. The importance of controlling the distribution of foreign objects can thus be used to draw in a local population and reward their participation. An ideology derived from the external relations is, however, vulnerable to changing international conditions of trade and exchange. As such it is inherently less stable than a staple finance system. The different character of this finance system may thus give distinct dynamics to the chiefdoms in terms of scale of integration and stability of control.

Some stability may be gained by linking these esoteric objects to local ceremonies, as seen clearly in their association with ceremonial architecture in the Formative cultures of highland Mesoamerica (Feinman) and in the Mississippian culture (Steponaitis). As in the Wessex case, these ceremonial places may have been tied to land ownership. It likely was not coincidental that the first ceremonial architecture was probably for activities creating and reinforcing com-

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munity bonds, rather than stressing status differences (Drennan). Many early chiefdoms appear to fit comfortably within Renfrew's model of a group-oriented chiefdom (Kristiansen).

Perhaps the most heated discussions in the seminar focused on the question of the priorities of power. Drennan, Feinman, and Steponaitis argued strongly that in the Mesoamerican and Mississippian chiefdoms, no convincing argument could be made for strict economic control, as would be seen in ownership of land or central storage. Rather, populations seem to have been drawn into sociopolitical systems in part through manipulated "smoke and mirrors," an ideology of religiously sanctioned centrality symbolized by the ceremonial constructions and exchanges in foreign objects of sacred significance. Those in the seminar who remained skeptical of this position were quieted by the argument that in simple chiefdoms the actual amount of labor and goods being mobilized from a dependent population was sufficiently small to present a low cost of compliance; the question of any necessary economic coercive power became mute as the cost of refusal need be only minimal and could be ideologically based.

On the other side, both Gilman and Earle kept returning to the position that power differential, although ceremonially sanctioned, must lie in the control over labor through control over subsistence. At least in some circumstances, as in the Polynesian cases and those from southeastern Spain, evidence for this economic control through ownership of land, productive technology, and storage is evident.

Earle argued that the development of complex political systems relies not simply on having access to a source of power but on the ability to control that power. Multiple sources for power certainly exist in the economy, military, and ideology (Mann 1986b), but the establishment of a social hierarchy would seem to depend more on being able to exclude others from power than simply on the existence of the power sources. One must ask whether a source of power is open to all or only to a select few; for example, what is it in a group that restricts access to the supernatural powers important to establish legitimacy? Political systems based on sources of power that cannot be easily controlled will be unstable. It was asserted by Earle that political stability ultimately depended on the ability to tie alternative sources for power to controllable aspects of the economy.

This position became somewhat grudgingly accepted, but with an

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important caveat – what after all is “real economic control?” Kristiansen argued that, prior to true class formation, ideology penetrated social life as a cosmology of natural order and therefore served as a necessary element in control of labor and production. For example in Mesoamerica, economic power seems to have derived from a complex and interdependent system of ceremony, esoteric wealth obtained from long distances, craft production and local markets (Drennan, Feinman). Several participants felt that the strict economic controls discussed by Earle and Gilman were inappropriate for understanding the origins of chieftoms but became important only in more complex chieftoms where a class system existed.

The resolution of this debate was based on a recognition by all participants that the three components of power (i.e. control over the economy, war, and ideology) to some degree present alternative strategies. Ferguson emphasized how polities contain overlapping, layered and linked authority patterns with different factions and institutions competing for power (compare Mann 1986). These different factions within a single chieftom or between competing chieftoms may opt for different strategies to attempt to dominate each other. The Marquesan case (Kirch) illustrates how chiefs, warriors and inspirational priests with their different power bases competed with each other without an ability for any sector to dominate. The complexity of the political dynamics of the Marquesan chieftom, rather than representing an odd exception, may characterize many chieftoms. Effective domination would seem to depend on interlocking the different strategies so as to concentrate power and overcome the limiting characteristics of the individual power sources.

As an example, considerable attention was given to the European Neolithic and Bronze Ages. An important source of power was certainly the society’s ideology which involved both elaborate local ceremonies of place and status identification with foreign symbols. At the end of the Neolithic period, these two forms of ideology appear to have been at odds, each used by competing groups in Wessex (Bradley). Both forms of ideology were strongly grounded on economic control. The elaborate ceremonial constructions, associated with both funerary and cosmic ritual, would seem to have grounded the ideology in the economy through the use of the monuments to define productive territories controlled by the chiefs (Earle). Elites could retain leadership by affirming their necessary roles in maintaining local sub-

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sistence economy through ritual. Essentially the monuments materialized a social and ritual landscape that could be owned by those maintaining and defending rights to the monuments. The land over which ownership was proclaimed was largely open pasturage for animals. These animal herds contributed significantly to the society's subsistence, but more importantly the animals would have served as a concentratable and productive form of wealth used to finance elite strategies for control. The animals appear repeatedly as the foods for feasts, in which leaders would have compensated followers for their support (Bradley). At the end of the Neolithic period, the ideology became based more on the use of wealth (especially the metal) obtained from a distance. Chiefs were identified by an elite international style and ideology that both legitimized their distinguished status and, in the case of the metals, created a technology of warrior domination through force (Kristiansen). Most importantly, though, access to this new ideology could be controlled by the fact that it was economically based. The wealth objects had to be obtained through long-distance exchange open only to elites (Helms 1979), and then had to be worked by a few craftsmen who could be controlled through elite patronage (Brumfiel and Earle 1987).

The success or failure of the various political strategies (and ultimately the success of the chiefly institutions on which they are based) would appear to be in part determined by the ecological and social conditions. The nine "environmental" conditions most responsible for differences in successful trajectory of political development are listed below:

- (1) natural productivity and potential for intensification;
- (2) regional population density;
- (3) existence of external markets;
- (4) natural circumscription;
- (5) concentration of productive resources;
- (6) proximity to needed nonfood resources;
- (7) proximity to avenues of trade and communication;
- (8) social circumscription;
- (9) structural preconditions of hierarchy.

As Steponaitis emphasized when making up this list, these conditions are certainly not sufficient cause for chiefly development. Cases exist