

ANCIENT COMPLEX SOCIETIES

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COMPLEXITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Complexity is a thorny topic. At the start of this book project, the two authors probably did not define it in the same way; in fact, we avoided any discussion of what we meant by “complexity.” By the end, we may have come to a common understanding of what complexity means to archaeologists and the methods by which they identify and analyze it. We hope that our readers will see it our way, though we certainly understand that you may not.

How did things get so complicated? In the chapters and case studies that follow, you will encounter cultural diversity in all its splendor. Yet the ancient societies we present are all generally agreed to have been “complex”—that is, archaeologists recognize a common set of institutions beyond kinship or family bonds that guided political, social, economic, and religious organizations. Complex societies typically exhibit centralization of population (but rely on rural members for sustenance) and a hierarchy of economic political positions (but with a variety of mechanisms to level out and disguise differences). Complex political systems integrate numerous interacting social groups so that conflicts of values and goals are avoided and peaceful relationships (on a human and cosmic level) are maintained. Yet conflict and competition fuel innovation and change, producing social dynamics and new formations that may merge the old and the new.

Theories and Theorists of Complexity

Studies of complex society got their start in the 19th century, as scholars in the newly developed fields of anthropology and sociology began to categorize extant societies into types on the basis of population, kinship and religious institutions, economic organization, and political structures. Characteristic of this work were the social evolutionary schemes of Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Tylor that traced the development of human history from savagery and barbarism to civilization (Trigger 1989). This classificatory passion reached its peak with the work of Marshall Sahlins (1958) and Elman Service (1962), who independently outlined the features of four types of societies: band, tribe, chiefdom, and state. Sahlins and Service understood these categories to be ideal types, each distinct in terms of demography and its social, political, economic, and religious institutions. Still, their work contributed to a pre-existing tendency to see societal types as evolutionary, with a group of people “advancing” from one stage to another in an inevitable progression toward the institutions of modern life. Those that never “rose” to state level might be regarded as maladaptive, and every society was forced into one of the types, even if its components only partially

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matched the ideals. Numerous scholars in the social sciences have theorized the development and functioning of complexity since this time; we can divide them into those who look at all elements of society and those who see developments in terms of a “prime mover”—a single feature that led to the creation of state-level society.

Big Picture Theorists

One school of theory examines complexity in terms of the interacting and integrated “systems” of a society; these systems are the interwoven economic, social, religious, and political organizations that structure societies. Systems theory in archaeology had its origins in the 1960s, when archaeology as a discipline in the United States and Britain became more closely aligned with anthropology (after several decades of a “culture historical” orientation). Among the most prominent scholars studying the rise of complex societies using a systems framework were Kent V. Flannery and Robert M. Adams. They, and others, regarded every society as comprising a unique combination of interacting systems, on the model of the organs in a body. For example (see Chapter 5 for more detail), 1st millennium BCE Mesopotamia relied on an agricultural economy with a high level of craft specialization, possessed social and administrative hierarchies that divided surplus wealth and distributed power, housed a multiethnic population, featured a polytheistic religion with a warrior god at its head, had a full-time military led by the king, and took an imperial stance that required constant expansion of territory. A change to any element in this overarching system—such as the accession of a weak king, incapable of leading the army or of bringing the priesthood under his control—would lead to changes in all other subsystems, including the loss of territory, military challenges, and social upheavals. The systemic whole might eventually be re-established after temporary instability, or permanent change could ensue that resulted in economic, social, religious, and political reorganization.

Challenges to systems models emerged in the 1980s, as archaeologists criticized them as too mechanistic and not flexible enough to account for human behaviors and social relationships. Still, the idea that culture may be divided into interrelated and interactive subsystems continues to generate theories of culture change, even ones that focus on social relations (Bender 1978; Hayden 1995). Among more recent scholars of culture, studies of power, its development, and its working through the subsystems of culture, have become prevalent. The anthropologist Eric Wolf (1999) and sociologist Michael Mann (1986) fall into this category. These scholars are particularly interested in tracing the causes of changes in the configurations of power and have devised a set of potential “push” factors that would present opportunities for aspiring leaders to acquire permanent powers by attracting increasing numbers of followers who permanently entrust a leader with rights over their labor and resources. Any one of these “sources of social power” (Mann 1986) could arise at any time in a group’s history; only under particular social, environmental, and historical circumstances will they become causes for political change. Mann (1986: 22–27) has identified four main potential sources of power, in what he calls his IEMP Model: ideological, economic, military, and political. Typically, no one source develops on its own, but some or all can be intertwined, working in concert to shape societal change.

Mann’s delineation of sources of power, and his initial application of the model to a number of ancient societies, generated a great deal of elaboration by scholars, and the refinement of categories and of their connections is ongoing (Yoffee 1993, 2005). Ideological power derives from the capacity to control meaning and perceptions, most often in support of an individual’s position. Economic power has a number of potential dimensions, including control over scarce or previously untapped resources (Eerkens 2009), or over property (Earle 1991a). Economic power can also originate in the accumulation of surplus staple goods, mobilized in feasts or at times of food scarcity (Bird and

Bliege Bird 2009), in such a way that fosters a sense of social indebtedness. Control over labor and its products can lead to economic power (Arnold 2000, 2009; Berdan 1989). A number of scholars have investigated the benefits that accrue to individuals who manage long-distance trade, gaining access to particular exotic items (Helms 1993; Kipp and Schortmann 1989).

Military power denotes the management of both defensive protection and offensive territorial expansion. A leader with troops under his or her charge also commands respect and fear within a society, with the potential to recruit additional supporters (Stanish 2009). Finally, political power is the decision-making capacity described earlier and the organizational or management capability to carry decisions out.

Mann's categories serve as ideal formulations, and the precise mechanisms of change in any given society may be difficult to determine, especially when one must rely only on archaeological evidence.

Theorists with Narrower Focus

Even before systems theory became a dominant framework for examining culture and, especially, relations of power, a number of theorists had identified specific elements or subsystems as the ones they thought best explained the development of inequality and of advanced civilizations. We will call these scholars "small picture theorists" because they focus on a much narrower range of cultural components than those described earlier. This does not mean that their ideas have had less impact on our understanding of complexity.

Chief among the theories that one element of culture has been responsible for the rise of civilizations across the globe are those that focus on economy—whether subsistence, technology, or exchange. Beginning in the 1930s, Karl Wittfogel (1957) proposed that, in the great river-based agricultural societies of the Old World (Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and the Indus Valley), political power was in the hands of individuals and groups who controlled the flow of water through irrigation systems. Wittfogel's "hydraulic hypothesis" envisioned a circumstance in which those who relied on irrigation for survival and prosperity became permanently dependent on the few people who regulated and maintained irrigation canals. Wittfogel's hypothesis obviously does not apply to environments, like Greece and Rome, where agriculture is dependent on rainfall, nor did archaeological evidence for the earliest state organizations support his ideas.

V. Gordon Childe, in the 1920s, also tied the development of state systems to economic concerns. Childe's work was especially focused on major societal shifts in land and labor organization, changes he called, in the Marxist terminology of his day, "revolutions." Both the Neolithic (agricultural) and the Urban Revolutions were topics of Childe's archaeological and theoretical studies (1936, 1950). To explain the origins of agriculture, he posited a major environmental change that brought humans, plants, and animals into proximity. With the development of agriculture, the harvesting of surpluses of food made possible the next step, as some people turned from agricultural pursuits in the countryside to occupational specializations (metallurgy, especially) in towns: the Urban Revolution.

These environmental, subsistence, and labor-related explanations for major transformations in human history are very much in keeping with economic models of human behaviors proposed in later decades. Chief among these is Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems theory (1974), first developed to explain the rise and dominance of capitalism over the world's economies. In Wallerstein's view, powerful nation-states impose an extractive economic system on weaker and dependent states. The dominant states form a core, extracting raw materials, subsistence, goods, and labor from their peripheral dependencies, then transforming these materials and selling the finished products back to the peripheral nations. Wallerstein believes that such unequal economic relationships had

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their origins in Renaissance Europe but that the system spread and expanded into a system of political dominance as western European states sent colonies to Africa, the Americas, and Australia. Since Wallerstein's formulation of World-Systems theory, a number of scholars have attempted to apply its fundamental principles of an unequal set of economic relationships between cores and peripheries to a variety of settings in the ancient world, with varying degrees of success. Perhaps most useful here is the idea that these economic relationships across cultural boundaries have the potential to transform all societies that are part of the network.

While the majority of theorists who focus on just one or two aspects of society as primary factors in major societal changes prefer to see economics as the prime mover in cultural evolution, a few point to non-economic causes. Primary among these is Robert Carneiro (1970), whose "circumscription theory" proposed that, in areas where a population is geographically circumscribed, meaning that environment and subsistence practices, especially agriculture, prevent people from easily moving away, warfare promotes state development. Because a defeated population is tied to its land, it must submit to its conquerors, thus expanding the amount of land and numbers of people they control. Carneiro applied this theory to early state development in Egypt, China, the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia, and parts of Peru. Scholars have expanded on Carneiro's ideas by suggesting factors beyond geography, such as social and religious ties, as responsible for circumscription.

Critiques of Complexity

Two powerful critiques of the archaeological study of complex society, from the mid-2000s, built on a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the concepts of cultural evolution and the stages proposed by Sahlins and Service. Norman Yoffee's *Myths of the Archaic State* (2005) took on the idea that early states could be characterized by a list of traits; to Yoffee, the word "complexity" itself implies intricacies of interrelationships among people and institutions that elude classification. Timothy Pauketat's *Chiefdoms and other Archaeological Delusions* (2007) makes a similar point about the difficulty and danger of making generalizations about ancient societies. Both Pauketat and Yoffee focus on "difference" as the most characteristic quality of societies; every civilization has a unique set of characteristics, and the impetuses that guided changes in societal organization worked in distinctly different ways. Complex societies can thus be hierarchical or not; hierarchically organized societies may retain and even promote heterarchical or heterogeneous aspects. Regional and historical contingencies play a significant role in the development of every culture; predictable or inevitable trajectories toward complexity are, therefore, nonexistent.

The Book in Your Hands

Keeping in mind these critiques, the book that follows is necessarily detail oriented, with attention to environmental, historical, and socioeconomic conditions that contributed to the development of complex societies. Our approach will be open-ended and bottom-up, emphasizing circumstances and conditions over direction. It is also heavily archaeological, with additional evidence provided by the written record, as these evidentiary sources provide the raw data on which reconstructions of daily life and social relationships depend.

Organization

This book is intended to provide you with a wide array of studies that will present the concepts and data for studying complexity in the ancient world. The two chapters that follow this one (Chapters 2 and 3) introduce much of the terminology of complexity and the cultural institutions (social,

economic, and political) that comprise it. Chapter 3 also describes the major political systems, ranging in complexity from forager to state, and the evidentiary basis by which those categories are constructed. A final chapter in this section, Chapter 4, examines several societies whose placement into one of the four main sociopolitical categories is debated. These provide archaeologists with the opportunity to examine variability in the organization of cultural institutions, and to challenge the utility of using the blanket typology of political forms.

The bulk of this book is devoted to case studies of ancient complex societies around the globe. Chapters 5 through 7 look at the geographic regions and cultures of the Middle East and Mediterranean, areas perhaps most often noted as the “cradle(s) of civilization” and of Western political values and institutions. In Chapters 8 through 10, three south and southeast Asian regions are examined, while Chapters 11 to 13 turn to the ancient cultures of the Americas. While these areas are not the only ones that exhibited complexity in antiquity (northern and western Europe are notably absent here, as they fall outside our own areas of expertise), they provide examples from a wide range of physical environments and exhibit significant variability in the configurations of social and political institutions they possessed. A final chapter (Chapter 14), on collapse in complex societies, will make the point that full societal collapse and dissolution is a rare circumstance; more often in the ancient world, the upper echelon of political leaders may have been displaced, and some of the trappings of administration may have disappeared. But cultural systems, values, and populations remained relatively stable.

We hope that this book encourages you to explore these ancient cultures and their institutions further. An extensive bibliography at the end of the book should help.

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HUMAN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Critical Elements in Complex Society

Introduction

We use the phrase “cultural institutions,” which derives from cultural anthropology, to refer to the pillars that combine to create every human culture. Although there are many “cultural institutions,” including aspects of human societal structure such as art, marriage and residence patterns, and education, this chapter takes up the components that comprise the societal institutions often cited as the elements of “complexity” in ancient civilizations. Four cultural institutions, central components of human social organization, are explored here: kinship relationships and associated social relationships, religious belief systems, economic systems, including aspects of exchange patterns, and political structures. It is the latter two, economic and political systems, that are most often associated with the development of complex society, and these receive the most discussion here.

Kinship, Social Networks, and Social Differentiation

At the heart of human social institutions is kinship, which embodies far more than just who an individual considers to be “family” and who is not (Foley 2001). Primary to human societies is survival; kinship structure can serve as a critical factor in risk management activities, particularly in highly mobile or small-scale sedentary societies, in which individuals depend on cooperative family relationships for survival. Kinship relationships not only provide social identity and confer status but are also crucial for determining appropriate marriage partners and economic and political allies, and they often dictate proper methods of worship and ritual behaviors. This can then be contrasted with the types of social relationships that are more commonly found in early state societies. Though not universal, it is common for kinship ties to become less influential in state societies, while other factors that define a person’s identity become far more important. The reasons for the de-emphasis on kinship are myriad and complicated and are also integrated with many other elements that can be seen as both “causing” and resulting from increasing complexity in a society.

The method of analysis used to assess the role “kinship” plays in less complex versus more complex societies draws upon studies primarily concerned with the use of resources in small scale societies, including foraging groups (Lee and DeVore 1968; but see Arnold 1993). Though there is a constellation of socioeconomic and political elements that might serve as valid comparisons, the following three are, arguably, most closely associated with kinship relations. First is *social identity*;

how is an individual's social standing perceived within a culture, and how does this correlate with kinship affiliation? Does membership in certain families confer privileged standing in the society, or is individual accomplishment (such as becoming very wealthy) of greater import? *Rights to labor and ownership of property/resources* are critical factors for survival; who has access to the products of a person's labor is a strong indicator of how a society is organized socially and economically. In most less complex societies, access to the products resulting from labor is limited to the family and sometimes the surrounding community. In more complex societies, products of labor can be controlled from outside the family circle, indicating a more complex socioeconomic and political system. Finally, kinship sometimes plays an important role in *power and politics*. The role of kinship in the growth of complex society will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

Religion and Ritual

Religion operates differently, is practiced differently, and means different things in societies at varying levels of complexity. Religions in less complex societies tend to be more household- and community-based, while those in complex states are usually more centralized and structured. While residents of a state may continue to conduct private rituals in their homes, they are also usually required to acknowledge and respect, and often participate in and contribute to, state rituals conducted by secular and religious elites. It is here that the strong element of control over a population's religious life emerges in the ancient (and modern) state. There is a very strong relationship between the development of the archaic state and the consolidation of power by emerging leaders; quite often some of that power emanates from the ability to control religious beliefs and practices.

Anthropologists and archaeologists have noted that a culture's religion is quite reflective of the culture itself (Steadman 2009: 47–49). For instance, a culture that relies on hunting for a significant portion of its diet, such as the Inuit who live near and within the Arctic Circle, will have a great deal of animal symbolism in their religion (Kluckholm 1942; Pelly 2001); the same would be true of a herding culture such as the Nuer of Africa who care for vast herds of cattle and whose religion revolves around cattle symbolism (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Cultures relying, therefore, on agriculture might emphasize fertility and the growth cycle in their belief system, while cultures that engage in a significant amount of warfare to defend or expand their lands would likely include a supernatural being, or at least rituals, meant to enhance their fighting skills or to protect them against attack. In the same vein, religions reflect not only a culture's subsistence or social interaction strategies but also its social complexity (Steadman 2009: 41–44).

Although not always true, it is often the case that the more stratified (economically and politically complex) a society is, the more stratified the religion, not only in the supernatural realm, but also in the actual practice of worship, ritual, and number and rank of religious leaders. Therefore, while a mobile foraging society may have a religious specialist, known in anthropology as a “shaman,” who carries out spiritual activities on a part-time basis (for illness, a request of the spirits to bring rain, etc.), archaic states may practice religions that feature a supernatural pantheon containing dozens, even hundreds, of gods and goddesses all ranked hierarchically, each with their own purview over some element of the human experience. A complicated set of religious specialists, including priests and priestesses, will usually serve as full-time specialists to guide the populace in the religion. This hierarchy of religious specialists often wield a fair amount of power.

Religion is inextricably tied to a culture's other social institutions such as marriage, family, economic subsistence strategies, and, quite often, its political structure. Archaeologists can sometimes trace religion as one important catalyst to the emergence of complex society. In fact, religion can have a rather direct tie to social change (Aldenderfer 1993) and even the emergence of a state. It can be an exceedingly powerful motivator for people to act in ways that are conducive to the

development of increasingly complex societies. For instance, a leader may marshal people to build a temple or to attend a ceremony never before open to commoners; at the same time as the leader is publically honoring the deity, he or she is also advancing a level of control over the people, their religion, and how it is conducted. This, in turn, can lead to other instances in which an emergent leader collects more power to accomplish tasks such as territorial enlargement, expansion of trade, control of subsistence production, and other factors that are constituent in establishing an archaic state (e.g., Spencer 2010). The most direct route to acquiring absolute power over a population is for a ruler to not only control the society's religious, political, and economic ideology but to become one with it (Blanton et al. 1996; Knapp 1988). For instance, a thousand years ago, Khmer rulers, who upon ascension to the throne declared themselves one with a Hindu god (usually Shiva or Vishnu), coerced thousands of commoners to build massive stone temples and religious compounds to acknowledge the glory of the living, divine rulers (Chapter 10). Another example comes from ancient Egypt (Chapter 6). Not only did divine pharaohs command their people to build lavish tombs for their eventual deaths, but the pharaohs' ascension to then live among the gods ensured continued worship at religious centers dedicated to them. While it is not necessary for social control to be achieved through an ideology based solely in religion—Joseph Stalin and his terrifying control of the mid-20th-century Soviet culture and its people is an excellent example of a secular ideology allowing a leader to manage every iota of his people's lives—more common is a ruler's use of religious ideology to achieve complete control.

Economic Organization

Economic institutions, like social relations, are at the root of social organization. While the modern academic discipline of economics generally deals with money and finance, the word “economics” derives from the Greek term *oikos*, meaning “household” or “family.” The economy, then, is the material foundation for the health and maintenance of the household in every society.

Resources

Fundamental to the economic organization of a society, large or small, are the ways it makes use of the resources at its disposal. Resources include available subsistence goods, ecological and mineral-ogical materials available on the landscape, and human labor.

Subsistence and Social Complexity

Subsistence economy refers to how a society procures food. Even in the modern world, social groups may pursue a range of strategies of food procurement and production, including farming, herding, foraging, and scavenging. The degree of reliance on wild foods versus domesticated food production is really a continuum and depends on factors such as ecological conditions and environmental change, resource availability, and competition for resources.

Subsistence strategy is connected to mobility or sedentism, but this linkage is not always consistent; foraging groups tend to be more mobile than agriculturalists, but archaeological and ethnographic examples of sedentary foragers and of mobile agriculturalists abound. When foraging groups have made the transition to part- or full-time agriculture and/or pastoralism, their choices weighed factors such as climate change, which affects mobility strategies by eliminating, moving, or making available new food groups, against dietary needs and preferences (Barker 2006). Long-term investment in plots of land for crops requires seed storage for sowing, fallowing, and provision of water. These strategies foster and may grow out of a sense of territoriality or ownership of land or herds.

Raw Materials

Non-subsistence resources are those naturally occurring minerals and other materials that are esteemed as valuable by a group of people. Value is embedded in a culture's ideological and economic systems. High-value or prestige resources may be regarded as derived from gods or ancestors or may be items difficult to obtain or coming from a great distance (Helms 1993). Value may also be externally generated, imposed, or inspired by an outside group. Societies also vary in their perception of who owns natural resources. Among some foraging groups and most agriculturalists, resources belong to either the group or to some subsection of it, whether an individual, a family, occupational specialists, or a class (Ingold 1979). Ownership, as with surplus subsistence resources, can be the foundation for stratification and other forms of power. Differential access to certain materials seems to be universal to human groups but is more firmly held and ideologically supported in regional polities and states (Earle 1987, 2001; Hirth 1978).

Labor

A third category of resources is human labor, mentioned earlier. Labor denotes a social relationship: someone works for himself, or works for another person, often a family member. Although it is nearly impossible to quantify, subsistence-related labor comprises the majority of work in any society; among state-level agricultural societies, estimates run as high as 70% to 90% of total labor (Trigger 2003: 313). Among foragers, most subsistence work is done collectively and its products shared evenly. Among village agriculturalists with some form of land ownership, farming is most often done by kin in shared fields. These circumstances favor larger households, often extended family groups; shared work creates obligations among family members (Arnold 2000; Bernbeck 1995).

In societies with higher levels of complexity, land owned by institutions (royal or temple lands, for instance) will be worked by non-kin. This may require a *corvée* system, by which tax obligations are met through labor. Institutions might require labor for other purposes as well, including craft production, public works, and military service. These forms of labor stretch back in time as well, but in stratified societies, the products of this labor—from prestige goods to monuments to military conquest—provide ideological support for elite power. Since labor can be in shorter supply than other resources, institutions derive significant power from their ability to coerce or control labor (Arnold 2000).

Technology and Craft Production

The discussion of labor brings up another component of economic organization: the degree of craft specialization and the more general role of technology in a society. Technology may be defined as a set of means and methods to get things done. Archaeologists more often use the term “technology” to describe ways of making things that leave physical evidence, including raw materials, tools and spaces for performing a task, and finished products, which sometimes bear the marks of production processes. Technological production takes place within a cultural context, in which group membership, values, typical ways of doing things, and divisions of labor may be outside the conscious control of the person making a particular item.

Looking at technology in terms of sociopolitical complexity raises the issue of craft specialization, characterized as a person's acquisition of the skills, knowledge, and materials necessary to afford them at least part of their income from pursuits other than subsistence production. Craft specialists occur in every kind of society, but the degree of specialization within a society varies;

among the dimensions of variability are the social identities of craftspeople (sex, age, social class, ethnicity, religion); the types of items made; and the intended consumers. Some of these components are linked to complexity. The number of craft specialists within a society and the intensity of their work largely depend on the market for their products. Specialists may work independently, or be attached to leading institutions. This category (attached vs. unattached) is really a continuum: craft production for an institution may be full-time; it may be seasonal or *ad hoc*; or it could be performed in fulfillment of tax obligations (Brumfiel and Earle 1987).

A large number of productive activities may be practiced by craft specialists, although archaeologists focus on those with the greatest visibility. Ethnographic accounts caution that societies may have included categories of specialization in ritual, communication, fishing and other subsistence pursuits, transportation, music and dance, etc. Those specialties discussed most often in archaeological literature, especially on complex societies, include lithic and ceramic production, weaving and other textile production, architecture and construction, sculpture and other artistic work, woodworking, and basketry. Practitioners vary in the wealth they accrue and the status accorded them by their societies, both among the various specialties and even within a given craft.

A final technological topic to consider is change, and the correlation of technology change with, and impacts on, changes in societies. Technologies may change as part of adaptation to physical and social conditions. Groups and subgroups may invest in technology in an effort to increase their status and political position. But there is no set evolutionary movement from one technology to another, just as there is no single route from one type of social structure to another; the contexts are too variable for predictable patterns of change (Pfaffenberger 1988). Technology solves problems, extending and enhancing the human capacity to accomplish a task, whether that task has a physical or psychological result. Technology change may be imposed on a producer from the outside or developed from the inside.

Exchange

How items circulated will be discussed in each chapter that follows. Ancient methods of exchange were embedded in social relationships, as ancient economies (really, *all* economies) are interconnected with social and political institutions. Mauss's (1967) insight that exchange is a "total social fact"—created, maintained, and undone by means of particular connections among people—remains a central tenet of archaeological studies of exchange today. Compared to a state of general consensus 30 years ago, scholars today are much less willing to assume a linkage of particular methods of exchange to certain stages of sociopolitical complexity. This uncertainty is a result of richer ethnographic and historical studies as well as a more nuanced understanding of the archaeological record and its limitations. Economic transactions are embedded within particular sociopolitical relationships and strategies, no matter how complex or simple a society is judged to be. And political context is key to the determination of value, a major component within any transaction, providing a set of rules and restrictions that constrain how an object is evaluated and who may exchange it (Appadurai 1986). At the highest level of political complexity, the state, multiple types of exchange coexist, and objects may move through all the different types. At lower levels of complexity, fewer options may exist.

Methods of Exchange: Definitions and Evidence

Scholars have delineated three major modes or methods of exchange: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. While most objects can circulate in any one of these ways, there are distinguishing characteristics that justify separating them. Reciprocity, a form of exchange that occurs in all societies, is giving one thing for another. It defines a relationship that is basic to humanity and

grounds all social relationships. The things given can be the same or different (food for food, child care for laundry services). It is often embodied in gift-giving, but it requires no special occasion. Reciprocity should not be confused with “generosity”; a reciprocal transaction requires a sacrifice to be made by each side. Nor are the goods and services exchanged necessarily equal in value: reciprocal relationships may be balanced or unbalanced. To give is to expect something in exchange; reciprocity creates and underlies potentially long-term relationships of giving and receiving, as exemplified by the famous Polynesian Kula Ring, wherein named and famed shells are exchanged among powerful men of the islands (Munn 1986). While it usually takes place locally, it may also be the principal method of long-distance trade, especially in valuable and symbolic goods (Hastorf 1990). The Kula Ring is an example of the latter type, as was the royal gift exchange system of the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean region, described in Chapter 5.

Redistribution is typical of societies with some degree of centralization. It is the extraction of subsistence, manufactured goods, and/or labor from a population in order to support the activities of administrators. Taxation is a form of redistribution; funds are collected from a population at large and mobilized, at best, on projects that are agreed upon to serve a public good: health, education, infrastructure, military activities, etc.

The final mode is market exchange, a nebulous concept that was long denied a role in antiquity. Market exchange frequently involves the exchange of goods and services for money, with prices fixed according to supply and demand, and the value of money guaranteed by a state authority. Because coinage was invented only in the mid-1st millennium BCE in the Old World, economic historians once saw no role for market exchange before the Greeks. But in fact, many societies had standard units of currency before that time, so an absence of coinage is not sufficient to deny that market exchange took place in an ancient culture.

This matter of currency is important, however, because it removes the element of trust from the transaction; participants do not have to develop a social relationship with mutual understandings and negotiation for a transaction to take place. This makes the exchange distinct from reciprocity. States may provide locales where buyers and sellers come together (marketplaces), but any physical space can be used for a market-type transaction. Cultural rules may restrict market exchange involving particular types of goods and services, guaranteeing that certain kinds of objects (and people) never become available to populations at large. The degree to which objects are commoditized—i.e., available on the market—varies widely by culture.

Barter is best understood as a variety of market exchange in which two unlike objects, whose value is agreed by the participants to be equivalent, change hands (Appadurai 1986). Like market exchange using currency, the transaction is the point of the exchange; no social relationships are enacted or sustained by the process. Barter transactions take place in nearly all societies, including those that have money and government oversight of currency. It cannot, therefore, be assumed to belong exclusively to less complex societies (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992).

Economic Differentiation and Complexity

The chapters that follow will devote considerable space to the issue of economic differentiation and its ties to political complexity. Differentiation or ranking, which denotes the economic status of one person or group relative to others, combines the concepts of resource extraction (both natural and human resources), production (subsistence and non-subsistence), distribution (exchange systems), and consumption, all of which have been delineated in this section. While there is a relationship between differentiation and complexity, it is not a simple causal relationship: increased differentiation within a society does not bring about a rise in political complexity. Nor is there an easy correlation: a society with a larger number of economic classes is not necessarily more complex than one with fewer.

Built into all human relationships, and therefore all societies, is some degree of wealth inequality. This is true even of small foraging groups. Similarly, groups experience changes over time in their degree of differentiation and often have regulating mechanisms to reduce inequality (Bird and Bliege Bird 2009). Archaeologists study economic differentiation within a society, and between two periods, by using various indicators of wealth: access to rare or high-status resources and items, command over the labor of others, and efforts to display difference, particularly in public events and funerary ritual.

Inequality is rooted in human physical and intellectual differences, as well as in recognized distinctions that come from age and experience. Evidence for age- and sex-based divisions of labor, present in all groups from foragers to states, goes back to the earliest *Homo sapiens*, if not before (Kuhn and Stiner 2006). Wealth inequalities within more complex societies are however distinctly different from these more basic differences. They originate in principles of ownership or possession of land, resources, or the labor of others, which are not features of simpler societies. How these practices came about is probably different for every society (Eerkens 2009). Inequalities may also derive from social relationships, alliances within a group or with outsiders that provide an individual with enhanced access to goods and labor, to be leveraged for wealth and position (Bender 1990).

Accumulation of wealth begins as differentiation within one's kin group and then extends to unequal economic relationships with non-kin. Where it begins to cross over into political power is the capacity of those with wealth to manage, or make decisions about, a group's economic strategies. As noted earlier, power or influence in one cultural sphere (there religion, here economy) does not have to impart power in another, but the categories easily bleed together. The sorts of decisions being made about economic direction include those affecting subsistence (where and what to hunt, what land to farm and how, how much of the yield to store, and how to use surpluses); labor (on what projects to deploy it: subsistence, resource extraction, construction, or military action); technology (what innovations to support); and exchange (who to trade with, what items to make available). In more complex societies, a proportionately smaller number of people manages the economy for a larger number of non-kin (Brumfiel 1994b).

For economic inequality to become a route to political power in a society (i.e., for management of the economy to transition to long-term political leadership), with permanent positions of power, two additional factors must emerge. First, wealth must be inheritable, together with the decision-making capabilities it enables. In societies where wealth is not inherited, positions of influence and leadership are informal and dissipate after the death of their holders. Second, economic power will not be converted to political power—will not be institutionalized—without manipulation of symbols of difference and authority. Leaders must control ideology, the beliefs and representations relating to power, to maintain their positions (Gilman 1991; Hastorf 1990). Economic wherewithal is central to being able to acquire symbols of power.

Political Organization and Complexity

The final element of cultural organization and complexity that runs throughout the case studies in this book is political organization. As noted previously, political structure cannot be separated out from social and economic behaviors. But politics also means leadership, generally defined as the capacity to make and enforce decisions for a segment of society beyond one's immediate kin.

Definitions

Most scholarly studies of power define it as the ability to exert one's will and accomplish one's goals by getting other people to acquiesce. Power is therefore relational and social, and its achievement places one person over another (Foias 2013: 24). All interactions have power embedded in them.

A leader may gain consensus or may coerce others to do his or her will. Leadership requires followers, or “factions,” and a leader’s power is only as great as his capacity to maintain or add to his followers, rather than losing them. Most often, the decisions made by a leader have to do with the allocation of resources: natural, human, and intellectual (Kantner 2009).

Political units consist of the people who recognize the authority of one or more leaders. Units may be geographically bound, such as the populace of a state. They vary in size and in their degrees of centralization and of hierarchy; ethnographic and historical examples range from leaderless foraging bands, where all decisions are reached by consensus, to highly centralized states, like Shang Dynasty China. A major feature is how long political power may be held by one person or inherited within a dynasty. Inherited political offices are found among ranked societies but rarely among foragers and village agriculturalists.

Dimensions of Political Complexity

Complexity, typically defined in political terms, is a continuum along which societies may be arranged. But no one aspect of political organization provides the definition for complexity. For this reason, complexity may be seen in terms of three axes of variability: centralization, differentiation, and integration. Each feature, while primarily defined in political terms, impacts social and economic systems as well.

Centralization

One component of complexity is the degree of centralization of a society. This refers to the degree to which decision-making power is concentrated in society: invested in a single person or a few or dispersed across society (Foiás 2013: 111). Within state-level society decision-making, at least for the state as a whole, is usually concentrated in the ultimate leader’s hands (whether a singular individual or a collective entity). Centralization is also measured in terms of the geographical extent of a polity, and its population, although as with urbanism there is no strict number of settlements or people that distinguishes among a village farming group, a ranked society, and a state. More centralized political systems tend to control more land and resources than decentralized ones and have more labor at their disposal. Settlement patterns—the arrangement of sites across a landscape, and their relative sizes—are a frequent source of information for archaeologists.

Archaeologists since the 1960s have examined political organization by delineating settlement hierarchies: distributions of settlements of various sizes clustered around large sites in such a way as to maximize the efficiency of communication and movement of goods across the landscape. We may read that an ancient state society had a site size hierarchy of four or five tiers (with a city or capital at the top), while a less centralized chiefdom had only three levels of site sizes. Sedentary foragers and village agriculturalists may live in small and large villages of up to several hundred people. In ranked societies and states, mechanisms for consensus-building, decision-making, and conflict avoidance allow for the growth of significantly larger settlements (Flannery 1998). The protection offered by central authorities encourages the development of buffer zones between the settlement clusters of rival territories (Algaze 2008). In practice, these size and hierarchical categories have often proven dissatisfying, even assuming perfect representation of site sizes in the archaeological record, because they offer little understanding of practical issues of governance or the lived experience of being governed.

Differentiation

A second component of political complexity is differentiation, which refers to the number and levels of political roles within a society. Often, “differentiation” is used as a near synonym to complexity

itself; at other times, scholars use the term “bureaucracy” in reference to political differentiation. At the state level, a hierarchy of political ranks may be centralized or may be spread across the territory of a polity, resulting in a less hierarchized division of roles (Foias 2013: 47).

While economic status and political rank are not the same (women, for example, may be excluded from political office while belonging to the upper class of their society), political leaders have often been drawn from the upper classes, as defined by both wealth and family background. Political ranking frequently derives from competition for prestige among individuals and groups of similar background and wealth; the winners in this competition are those able to accumulate more, and more valuable, resources (staple goods, wealth items, and labor) and to pass these privileges on to their chosen successors (Clark and Blake 1994). As differentiation and hierarchy increase, more limits are placed on who is able to hold political power and on the routes by which one may move through the ranks. Within states, ideological authority and ritual reinforcement are used to legitimate and justify individual achievement of rank (Marcus and Feinman 1998; Rowlands 1987).

Integration

A final dimension of social complexity is “integration”: the interconnectedness within and between the social, political, and economic organizations within society (Pool 2012). Management or achievement of integration could also be said to be the main function of government organizations. It is probably more common to think of political leaders and institutions as integrating the economy of a land: this “political economy” would include the collection and redistribution of surplus foods, mobilization of labor, regulation of reciprocal and market exchange systems, acquisition of exotic materials from outside sources, and sponsorship of a variety of craft specialists. But social integration is just as important; political leaders employ a combination of coercive and persuasive means to bring disparate people into cooperative relationships (Sneath 2007). The distances over which leaders can integrate people are limited by topography, transport and communication technologies, and competing interest groups; these factors may have limited the size of early states (Feinman 1998).

Architecture provides a powerful signal for behaviors within a settlement and therefore serves to assimilate populations within a political organization. Monumental building projects are often connected to the emergence of central authorities and typically are carried out by commoner labor (Pauketat 2000). But monumentality is not the only mark of leadership; the presence of a range of architectural types indicates a diverse bureaucratic organization, which may include palaces, temples, and additional public administrative buildings (Redmond and Spencer 2012). Only states could collect taxes and tribute in the form of *corvée* labor to build palaces for rulers (Flannery 1998). Similarly, temples provided a legitimizing force for leaders (Marcus 1998).

Sociopolitical integration may be achieved by additional means. The use of coercive force—warfare and oppression—is often cited in historical sources, and interpersonal violence is sometimes attested archaeologically by mass graves containing skeletons with traumatic injuries or by incidences of human sacrifice. The threat of coercive force may sometimes be just as effective; one mark of state organization may be the maintenance of a standing army, and leaders may stress their military prowess in artwork and ritual acts. An ideological focus on “order” is the counterpart to coercion; individuals and groups are encouraged to suppress their personal goals for the good of all, guaranteeing the smooth functioning of society and even the cosmos. Social order may be depicted in ritual and art; it can be reinforced in the built environment by the repetition and standardization of buildings and spaces (Earle 1990; Rautman 2013).

Scholars have also pointed to the potential for resistance to power and to political integration. In the absence of coercive forces, people may walk away from situations where their rights are

co-opted (Eerkens 2009). Communities are built through consensus, relying on a set of relationships, alliances, and shared beliefs to bring people together (Pauketat 2007: 195). Common labor projects impart material form to a community. To build cohesive larger communities, aspiring leaders must provide opportunities to develop collective identities (Pauketat 2007: 199). Within larger political units, different groups may pursue different strategies, some complying with those in power, and others resisting (Stark and Chance 2012).

Other archaeological evidence exists for integration of populations into a political unit. Writing and other administrative artifacts served to communicate and store economic and other information that was central to the success of a government (Johnson 1973). Writing was, for many societies, a development that followed the growth of a bureaucracy and one that facilitated economic integration (Steinkeller 2004). It was not, however, required, even in societies with state organization: the Inca Empire, notably, did not develop a formal writing system for record-keeping. That does not mean the Inca lacked records or a communication system; they kept elaborate mnemonic records using knotted ropes called *quipu*. In many states, however, writing was a major tool of bureaucracy, facilitating agricultural planning, tax collection, tracking of raw materials and finished products, and promoting communication among trade and political partners and dependents (R. Adams 2004; Steinkeller 2004).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the principal cultural institutions of human societies, and identified their main archaeological correlates. In the chapters that follow, evidence for social, religious, economic, and political structures will be highlighted and examined for the contributions each of these systems made to the development, maintenance, and decline of complexity within individual societies.

3

ANCIENT SYSTEMS

From Forager to State

Introduction

The previous chapter outlined in some detail the various human cultural institutions that are the building blocks to ancient, and present-day, societies: kinship and social relations, religion, economy, and political structures. This chapter is devoted to interrogating the role that these human social institutions played in the emergence of civilization. It is too simplistic to say that any given social institutions “caused” civilization to happen; nor is it correct to say they were simply impacted by social factors as more complex societies emerged. Rather, the interactive nature of human actions and perceptions, as they relate to family, belief, economic organization, and political structure, were intricately interwoven into the fabric that made up “civilization” in the ancient world.

Archaeologists continually grapple with the concept of “complex society” and all it entails. When does a society officially become “complex,” and what makes it so? In large part, that is a question this book seeks to address. Most anthropologists and archaeologists acknowledge that large regional polities, which can be labeled “chiefdoms” in some contexts, fall into the “complex” category, and of course, archaic states are the epitome of such in the ancient world. Conversely, cultures that practice a hunting-and-gathering economy, also known as “foraging groups,” have political and economic structures that are generally viewed as resting at the opposite end of the “complexity” continuum from states. Falling somewhere between foraging group and regional polity are the sociopolitical structures found in cultures living in small and medium villages with economies based on farming and animal husbandry. It is these four very broad socioeconomic and political structures that will be briefly described here.

Chapter 2 outlined the differences between non-centralized and centralized political systems, the former including foragers/hunter-gatherers and village-based societies and the latter including regional polities/chiefdoms and states. Standard anthropological thinking identifies foraging groups as the least complex with regard to these cultural institutions, with states at the opposite end of the complexity spectrum. The following sections explore each of these social institutions as they are constituted in terms of human social structures that range from those typically identified as less, or more, or most, complex.

Mobile Foraging Groups

Societies that practice the hunting and gathering of wild game and plants typically practice some level of mobility so as not to over-exploit any particular landscape. Mobile foraging societies are

also usually described as “egalitarian,” referring to the practice of complete equality regarding social status and distribution of power; while true on some level, there are various ways to be “egalitarian” and still practice social differentiation. Foraging groups are necessarily small, usually no more than 50 individuals but more usually consisting of 20–30 members, and are typically comprised of extended family groups related through blood and marriage ties.

Kinship and Mobile Foraging Groups

Kinship is the primary social bond between individuals, and it is the main factor determining the formation of a group. Individuals define their own social identity through their kinship ties and gauge their relationship to others according to what is often a complex system of close versus more distant family connections. Even strangers, such as anthropologists, are eventually incorporated into the kinship system (Lee 1984: 56–57). Kinship relations form the basis of survival for all hunter-gatherers in that interdependence on kin members for adequate subsistence provision is at the heart of daily activities.

Economic Strategies and Mobile Foraging Groups

Foraging societies must engage in risk management strategies in order to ensure subsistence provision. Mobility is one key since groups can move more frequently if resource availability (due to drought or other environmental factors) is deficient (Gregg 1988). In truly egalitarian foraging societies, all members have equal rights to every group member’s labor. In foraging cultures where close family (nuclear or extended family groups) cooperate more closely within the larger camp, all family members have rights to each other’s labor, but the entire camp participates in cooperative relationships to ensure group survival (Leacock 1982). Resources in mobile foraging societies consist of natural food sources (plant and animal) and materials necessary for tools, weapons, and craft-making. Typically in such societies, all members have equal access to any resources, though exploitation may be gender-based, i.e., males hunt the animals and acquire stone for tools and weapons, women gather plants for food and make items such as reed baskets. Surplus is not a factor in mobile foraging societies since it would be a detriment rather than a positive feature. If occasional surpluses are acquired by some, they are then shared by all.

Power, Political Standing, and Mobile Foraging Groups

While the foregoing describes the traditional view of foraging groups, ethnographic work has determined that larger groups of more sedentary “complex foragers” may in fact possess individually owned equipment for food processing technologies and engage in surplus storage (Bettinger 2001). Such practices can result in social inequality even in foraging groups (Flannery and Marcus 2012: 67–74). For instance, if excess food is kept or controlled by one or just a few people, they may choose to deploy it for purposes other than long-term community welfare. A surplus may be used, instead, to create or maintain social relationships outside the community, with prestige accruing to the surplus-holder (Bender 1990; Hayden 1995).

Religion and Mobile Foraging Groups

Religious belief systems in foraging societies are usually tied strongly to subsistence strategies and the elements that are critical to survival. There is little hierarchy in hunter-gatherer religions, in either the supernatural or human worlds. Religious specialists, termed “shamans” by anthropologists, do not necessarily command greater power or prestige than non-shamans, and there is rarely

a set of strictly ranked gods or spirits in whom the people believe. The supernatural world is largely reflective of the human one. There may be individualized spirits, or gods, who have duties to perform for the people, and/or collective spirits, who are meant to protect the people and guide their behavior. In general, all of these receive attention through ritual performance and other activities, and all are considered important within the belief system. The type of hierarchical order of supernatural beings found in more complex societies (e.g., Classical Greek religion) is largely lacking in hunter-gatherer societies.

Small-Scale Sedentary Villages

The social dynamics change in significant ways in cultures that typically practice small-scale cultivation as their subsistence practice, accompanied by hunting and sometimes basic animal husbandry. Many cultures that practice horticulture or small-scale farming live in more permanent settings in order to tend their crops. Though they may practice “shifting cultivation” (cultivating different fields every few years, sometimes accompanied by residential relocation), they still live together in small hamlets or villages for extended periods; individual and group mobility is thus reduced significantly (Bocek 1991). While populations in villages vary, the numbers tend to range in the hundreds rather than the dozens. Village structure, organized along kinship lines, consists of households (of either nuclear or extended families) of cooperating individuals who possess a variety of material goods, including cultivation tools, crafts, weapons, and other items associated with sedentary living. These material possessions are essentially owned by the members in each household rather than shared across the village.

Farming societies, as well as nomadic pastoralists, have some degree of complexity. How much depends on group size and mobility and on other resource issues. Decision-making methods vary in these societies; significant subsistence-related choices may include whether to intensify production to cope with increased population and demand or to split a community and relocate at times of food scarcity. The development of leadership structures is rooted in predictable subsistence production, but other features play into it. The foundations of economic inequality among agriculturalists rest, in part, in differences in land and soil quality, which can lead to differences in food production. With better land, some families will be able to produce larger surpluses, and perhaps grow different kinds of crops, producing an advantage over others within the society. This occurs in areas where land is not held in common, but where individual families have rights to specific parcels of land. The environments in which agriculture developed and the particular crops on which it was grounded vary significantly.

Kinship and Small-Scale Sedentary Village Structures

Who your close family is becomes somewhat more important in small-scale sedentary societies than in mobile foraging groups. Family ties are more solidified since people are required to remain permanent members of the household production group (except when adult children, usually daughters, marry and leave for a spouse’s household). Village populations often consist of several kinship groups (unilineal descent groups, for instance). Social identity therefore may consist of several levels, the primary being with the family with whom an individual lives and works, secondarily with other kin members living in other households in the village, and finally with other kin members in other villages (Gregg 1988: 24–25). Such ties may be complicated, however, by interpolitical issues where loyalties must lie with the village leader rather than with kin members in outside settings. Coupled with kinship membership is the family’s position in the village. The village residents may view a member of the tribal leader’s family as possessing greater importance