



Chiefdoms at the threshold: The competitive origins of the primary state

Elsa M. Redmond*, Charles S. Spencer

Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th St., New York, NY 10024-5192, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 July 2011

Revision received 27 September 2011

Available online 14 December 2011

Keywords:

Complex chiefdoms
State origins
Competition
Administration
Cahokia
American Bottom
Monte Albán
Oaxaca

ABSTRACT

The origins of the primary state are examined, paying particular attention to the interacting complex chiefdoms that precede state formation. A comparative analysis is undertaken of the evolutionary trajectories of two well-documented cases of prehistoric complex chiefdoms in North America and Mesoamerica: Cahokia and Monte Albán. Of special concern are the strategies that the rulers of these powerful, expansionist chiefdoms pursued in response to varying conditions of local competition or resistance. The crucial difference between the two developmental outcomes, the analysis concludes, derived from the varying degrees of inter-polity competition confronted by Cahokia and Monte Albán. The higher level of inter-polity competition in Monte Albán's case required a complete administrative transformation in order for the leadership's goal-oriented, expansionist strategies to succeed, resulting in the successful formation of a primary state.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Since most complex chiefdoms and all the earliest state societies emerged before the advent of written history, the investigation of these prehistoric polities rests in large part upon the archaeological record. The cultural-evolutionary frameworks of the 1960s (Sahlins and Service, 1960; Service, 1962; Fried, 1967) spurred archaeologists' interest in the origins and development of new forms of sociopolitical organization, or social evolution. Crucial to the study of social evolution, argues Marcus (2008, p. 254), are the "transition periods—those brief phases of rapid evolution during which the system changed, or the actors deliberately changed it" (see also Marcus and Flannery, 1996, p. 236). One of those key transition periods is the subject of this paper, the emergence of the primary state in a context of preexisting complex chiefdoms.

Archaeologists have been making important strides in refining our understanding of state formation through improved chronological controls, broader macroregional scales of investigation, and the ability to detect conflict, administration, and leadership in the archaeological record (Wright, 2006). Wright is a leading theorist of this transition by recognizing the key organizational differences between complex chiefdoms and states. He has pointed out that the complex chiefdom is recognized by anthropologists as a rank society ruled by a centralized and hereditary leadership, but its administration is not internally specialized: the "central decision-

making activity [of a chiefdom] is differentiated from, though it ultimately regulates, decision-making regarding local production and local social processes; but it is not itself internally differentiated. It is thus externally but not internally specialized" (Wright, 1977, p. 381). By contrast, the state is a sociopolitical organization with a centralized and also internally specialized administration: "In contrast to a developed chiefdom, a state can be recognized as a cultural development with a centralized decision-making process which is both externally specialized with regard to the local processes which it regulates, and internally specialized in that the central process is divisible into separate activities which can be performed in different places at different times" (Wright, 1977, p. 383). Wright and others maintain that while not all complex chiefdoms have evolved into states, all primary states evolved from precursor complex chiefdoms, and when they did, the organizational change was transformational (Carneiro, 1981; Earle, 1987; Renfrew, 1979; Spencer, 2009).

Recently, Wright (2006, p. 307) has suggested that the origins of the state be viewed not as a single breakthrough but as a complicated experimental process of fits and starts with many innovations and many failed attempts at achieving statehood. When state origins are examined in the context of competing chiefdoms that lack such internal administrative specialization, the challenge is to ask what conditions and goal-oriented strategies enacted can enable some complex chiefdoms to overcome the organizational and spatial constraints of centralized chiefly authority and develop the internally specialized administration of a state. In this paper, we undertake a comparative analysis of the developmental trajectories of two well-documented cases of prehistoric complex

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 212 769 5334.

E-mail addresses: eredmond@amnh.org (E.M. Redmond), cspencer@amnh.org (C.S. Spencer).

chiefdoms in North America and Mesoamerica: Cahokia and Monte Albán. The comparative analysis of these two precocious and powerful chiefdoms offers insight into the developmental dynamics of chiefdoms at the threshold of statehood. We are especially interested in the factors that enable the rulers of a powerful, expansionist chiefdom to develop the internally specialized administration of the state—or, alternatively, to fail in their attempt to cross that threshold. But first, we consider the principal properties and dynamics of complex chiefdoms and primary states that can be detected archaeologically.

Complex chiefdoms and states in the archaeological record

Accompanying the complex chiefdom's centralized but not internally specialized administration is institutionalized social inequality dominated by the hereditary chiefly elite. The members of this distinct social rank compete with each other for succession to a relatively small number of administrative positions and the sumptuary privileges that those offices entail. For this reason, complex chiefdoms are inherently unstable and subject to cycles of growth and dissolution. The paramount chief's optimal control strategy will be to minimize the delegation of authority by controlling from the first-order center a regional administrative hierarchy of lower-order centers and villages, ideally no more than two levels of control hierarchy, though in some developmental trajectories a third administrative level will appear.

“The wise paramount will attempt to reorganize production or to increase his income by seizing productive capacity from his neighbors; the unwise paramount, especially one who has been so foolish as to create more than two levels of hierarchy, will face assassination, fission, or rebellion led by other nobles who believe themselves to have better claim to the office of paramount. Whatever the outcome, nobility and commoners will be killed, political relations will break down, and the building process will start again” (Wright, 1984, pp. 50–51).

Also, there are spatial limits to the growth of a complex chiefdom. Since the centralized but not internally specialized administration of a chiefdom is incompatible with the delegation of partial authority to subordinates sent to distant localities, a paramount chief must rule from the center, which places constraints on the size of territory he can effectively administer. It has been suggested that a paramount chief and his retinue can effectively administer a territory that extends no more than a half-day's travel from the first-order center, with a radius of roughly 28 km (Spencer, 1990). A territory of that size would allow the chief, or a subordinate, to reach any part of his domain and return to the first-order center in 1 day, lessening the need for any delegation of partial authority. As long as a chiefly administration continues to have minimal internal specialization, any attempt at territorial expansion beyond that optimal territory size increases the risk of insurrection and even the political decline of the paramount's authority.

A complex chiefdom has the capacity to cycle between two and three levels of administrative control, often in a context of intense competition, yet all the while retaining minimal administrative specialization. The developmental trajectory of a complex chiefdom will tend to feature a sequence of paramount rulers, with successive paramount centers each spanning a period of several centuries, associated with limited growth in administration and territorial extent (Wright, 1984). A complex chiefdom can be recognized archaeologically by a regional settlement hierarchy of two or three levels of site sizes, with the topmost levels manifesting public sectors, buildings, and monuments commensurate with their position in the polity's administrative hierarchy. The paramount center will be the largest and will feature impressive public

sectors where the rulers lived and presided over large-scale rituals and feasts (Anderson, 1994; Blitz, 1993; Hally, 1996). In keeping with the minimal differentiation of chiefly authority, size is the principal archaeologically observable difference between the buildings constructed at the paramount center for use by the ruling elite, and buildings, often smaller but with similar floor plans at lower-order centers and outlying settlements (Milner, 2003). The institutionalized social hierarchy characteristic of complex chiefdoms will also be evident in the artifact assemblages and mortuary facilities associated with members of the chiefly elite, whose coveted social preeminence may appear to have been largely a matter of degree than of kind (Milner, 2003).

A state is governed by a centralized and also internally specialized administration, which has the capacity to intervene directly into the affairs of local communities, families, and individuals throughout its large domain. Centralized decision-making in a state is both hierarchical—with at least four levels of administrative control, three of them above the level of the village—and also compartmentalized into multiple specialized institutions (Flannery, 1972; Wright, 1977). The state's internally specialized administration allows its rulers to dispatch state officials with narrowly defined parcels of authority to lower-order centers and strategic outposts, with much less risk of insurrection than would be the case in a chiefdom. Archaic states usually exhibit regional settlement hierarchies of four or more tiers based upon site sizes and the presence or absence of buildings having administrative functions. States also feature a diversity of public buildings associated with their burgeoning institutions, among them royal palaces where the rulers reside and govern, standardized temples and the associated quarters of temple priests, and the facilities of state-level industries and military forces (Flannery, 1998; Sanders, 1974; Wright, 1998; Wright and Johnson, 1975). The internal administrative specialization of the state frees its rulers from the spatial confines of centralized chiefly authority and enables them to launch military campaigns to conquer outlying regions, and to post administrators in those distant territories to control and exact tribute from subjugated populations. The violence and destruction accompanying such territorial expansion and the strategic outposts established in far-flung territories can be detected archaeologically (Algaze, 1993; Redmond and Spencer, 2006; Spencer and Redmond, 1997; Spencer, 2009).

One effective pathway to statehood may entail attempts by paramount chiefs to expand their political-economic control into distant territories (Spencer, 1998, 2010). For such a strategy to succeed over the long term, the leadership of the expanding polity would need to develop internal administrative specialization and the concomitant capacity to delegate partial authority to subordinate officials charged with implementing the strategy in targeted regions. From this viewpoint, we would expect a successful transition from complex chiefdom to state to be associated with a considerable enlargement of the territory controlled by the emerging state.

The developmental trajectories of two complex chiefdoms

Let us turn to the developmental trajectories of the paramount chiefdoms founded at Cahokia on the American Bottom and Monte Albán in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley. Both have been viewed as unprecedented and precocious in their founding periods, experiencing dramatic population growth and a rapid ascent to regional prominence. Yet, when the respective antecedents and socioenvironmental contexts of Cahokia and Monte Albán are taken into account, we can detect certain key differences in their developmental trajectories (e.g., Drennan and Peterson, 2006). The aim of this comparison is to analyze variation in the competitive conditions

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1035008>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1035008>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)