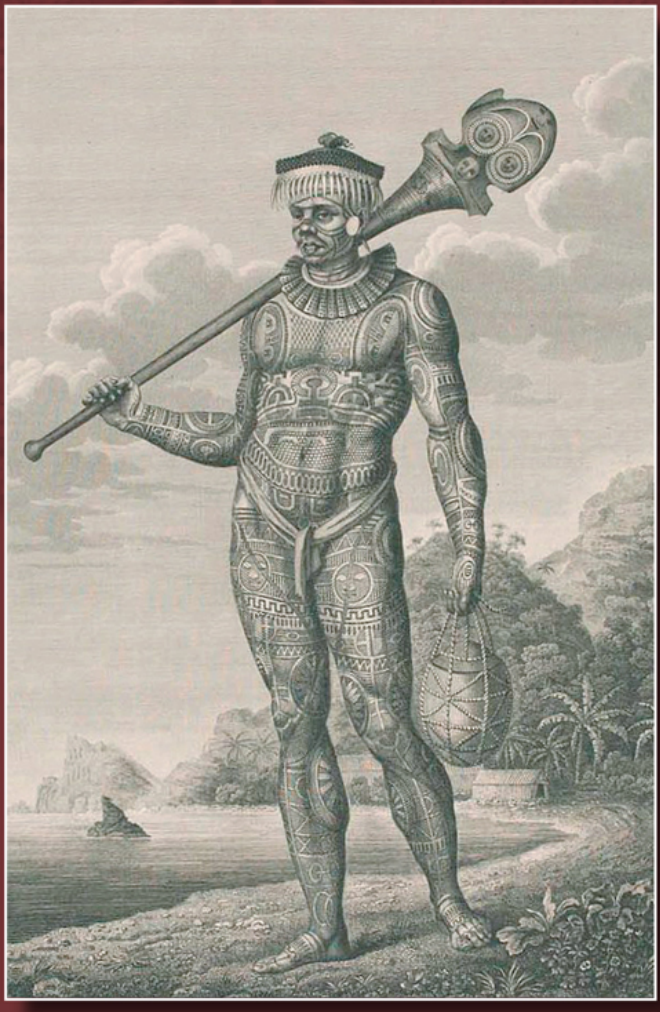
PRINCIPLES OF ARCHAEOLOGY

A PRIMER ON CHIEFS AND CHIEFDOMS



TIMOTHY EARLE

A PRIMER ON CHIEFS AND CHIEFDOMS

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To Andres Moya Castro of Ataura in the Mantaro Valley—
UMARP team member, local authority, solver of all
problems, and dear friend

PROLOGUE

Historical science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the streams of history, like the grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed . . . is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes to making the future.
(Dalberg-Acton 1895, p. 3)

What is it about chiefdoms? They are traditional societies and many might inquire about their relevance for our modern world. In this book I argue that studying chiefdoms is essential to understand the role of elemental powers in social evolution. Anthropological archaeology is a social science able to study comparatively the natural experiments of long-term historical processes. To illustrate this point, I look at chiefs and their power strategies in historically independent prehistoric and traditional societies and discuss how they continue to exist as powerful actors within states.

Who are chiefs? They are political operatives holding titles of leadership over groups larger than intimate kin-based communities. They rule with some consent of their group, but they are all about building personal power and respect. They are inherently highly variable. Sometimes I refer to chiefs as chieftains. Although these terms are largely interchangeable, I use the terms somewhat differently to designate relative variations in institutional versus personal power. Chieftains are more self-made leaders and chiefs are more institutional leaders, but all chief-like leaders come to power and perpetuate power as conjoined political processes.

My engagement with chiefdoms has been long. I went to college in the mid-1960s when student activism was on the rise. It was time for revolution, we thought. We anticipated major progress for racial integration, world peace, ending social injustice, and erasing income inequality. As did many of the sixties generation, I was easily radicalized and questioned authority. My determination to understand our political system encouraged me to become an anthropologist and raise the question of why people would follow leaders, often against their own interests.

Power corrupts and progressive movements depend on ways to tame chiefs. We can build on humanity's better instincts to fashion order that balances human needs and interests. But how is this possible? Comparative stud-

ies of human societies propose alternative institutional formations and their implications for human justice and sustainability. Throughout my academic career, my optimism has been rooted in archaeology and its perspective on deep history. Here the quotation by Lord Acton is relevant: history (archaeology) offers a social science of political institutions, which includes the lessons that chiefdoms tell.

CHIEFDOMS

Chiefdoms are the first societies with institutional leaders. Many scholars have viewed chiefs as problem solvers—defending groups against aggressors, resolving disputes, providing support under hardship, organizing labor for community projects, and redistributing goods among those in need. Chiefs do these things, but much of what chiefs do is to accumulate benefits for themselves, staying in power and legitimizing control. Chiefly supporters pledge undying support in return for guarantees of payoffs.

Perhaps this sounds familiar. With the evolution of state societies, chiefs have become partly domesticated by the rule of law, but their presence is still visible everywhere—from business entrepreneurs to urban drug lords to local politicians. The challenge of modern societies is to domesticate the entrepreneurial spirit of chiefs to the rule of law that channels their efforts for the broader good. Is this feasible? Based on lessons from the past, I think it is.

THERE IS NO END TO HISTORY

Although present conditions (whether poverty, power, or environmental warming) may appear inevitable, societies continually change—often for the better but too frequently for the worst. There is no end to history and archaeology offers key insights. Human societies have been incredibly variable and creative; social and economic conditions are never predetermined. We can understand what is possible and the outcomes of one political system compared with others as recorded in prehistory.

Archaeology documents long-term processes with opportunities to understand and create alternative pathways for change. Over the last twenty thousand years, human have built vastly larger and more diverse societies and centralized political power has strengthened, but has also relaxed. During the twentieth century, for example, the apparent imperial destiny of world powers (Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union) expanded only to collapse. States now stand under the full gaze of world criticism. We are learning better how humans organize at different scales.

These social scales have distinct and often competing interests and capabilities. History shows how balance is possible with powers shifting back and

forth. Prehistoric societies offer opportunities to study the implications of a wide range of human organizations. Finding the correct balance between scale and organization (family, community, region, and state) is an empirical question for which history provides alternative resolutions.

ARCHAEOLOGY IS A SOCIAL SCIENCE

Archaeology is a social science able to discover long-term principles and consequences of human actions. With a sweeping increase in archaeology's capabilities to describe social systems in action, we are able to use large data sets to uncover alternative pathways by which humans have organized themselves and the outcomes of those natural experiments.

No longer is archaeology simply the recovery of the oldest this or the origin of that. It has the potential for systematic scientific understanding of human societies as a means to help fashion future policy directions. To match our increasing methodological capability, we need sophisticated theory to guide our research. Linking theoretically to political economy, recent archaeological work considers political ecology, meaning simply the ways in which human societies create anthropogenic environments—some destined for degradation and collapse while others are sustainable over the long haul.

To enable an archaeology relevant to modern problems of change and stability, we should continue the work archaeologists have always done—finding, excavating, and analyzing material evidence and its changing patterning in the past. We must take the past as fundamentally knowable, developing new ways of recovery and conceptualization of historical conditions. Have leaders helped solve human challenges or have they been an emerging problem channeling resources to their personal benefits? These are fundamental questions that archaeology is well equipped to investigate with the study of chiefdoms and their leadership institutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To understand chiefdoms a lifetime of collaborations, discussions, and reading with many anthropologists, historical sociologists, and political scientists have guided my career. I look to my intellectual "ancestors" including Robert Carneiro, Colin Renfrew, Marshall Sahlins, Roy Rappaport, and Eric Wolf. These professors and friends formed my approach to social evolution and the emergence of strong leaders.

I did graduate work at the University of Michigan, where my fellow graduate students and I created a cohort with common theoretical interests that pioneered new approaches to archaeological research. These included especially Elizabeth Brumfiel, Gary Feinman, Antonio Gilman, Allen Johnson,

Patrick Kirch, and Kristian Kristiansen. My own graduate students at UCLA and Northwestern have provided daily interactions in seminars, discussions, and fieldwork that have always been central to my career. I think especially of Luis Jaime Castillo, Terence D'Altroy, Elizabeth DeMarrais, Christine Hastorf, and John Steinberg. They always knew how to speak to authority, keeping me honest and current with new ideas and approaches.

The evidence that supports the argument of this primer comes from many sources, including anthropology's rich ethnographic record and the mounting archaeological record of chiefdoms. I do not cite individual sources in the text, but they are credited in each chapter in the Additional Readings section; each source has a detailed bibliography.

I draw heavily on my personal field projects in the Pacific (Hawaiian Islands), the Andes (Peru and Argentina), and Europe (Denmark and Hungary). Full summer field seasons in these countries have offered excitement and reward from different cultures, peoples, and landscapes. In each field project, I have been embedded within large teams of scholars, students, and workers laboring together. I hold particular affection for the skilled non-academics upon whom I depended for their labor, personal skills, local knowledge, and insights. The community members in the Mantaro, Thy, and the Benta made my work possible.

From 1967 to 2008, the National Science Foundation funded my research—first as an undergraduate participant and then as a graduate student and senior scholar across five major archaeological projects. I am deeply grateful for this support; the many reviewers who sharpened my research; and John Yellen, the longtime director of NSF's Archaeology Program who nurtured my science-based approach bringing together a strong theoretical perspective with carefully designed, data-driven research. I have learned that my ideas can be usefully wrong, as field results correct my theories and point me in new directions of thinking and practicing. Details of the extensive financial support of my field projects are found in my publications.

This primer stands as something of an intellectual biography, for which the support and understanding of my family is central. In 1967 I met my wife Eliza as an undergraduate on an archaeological project in Arizona, and after marrying in 1969 she accompanied me on many of my field excavations—endlessly discussing my ideas and providing basic support mapping, preparing illustrations, digging, and washing sherds, My daughters learned to think like archaeologists, working with me in Argentina and Denmark and always ready with pointed advice. Perhaps most importantly my family listened with excitement to my rambling ideas and commented thoughtfully on my writings. Why should I be so lucky?

Eliot Werner invited me to write about the study of chiefdoms and as his reward has had to work tirelessly to realize the book. I am particular grateful for his help and also to Gary Feinman, whose insightful and timely guidance helped me see what was needed.

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Chapter 1

CHIEFDOM ETHNOGRAPHIES OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

To begin our study of chiefdoms, we discuss some definitions related to intermediate-level societies; each concept has a history of different usages and meaning but still captures fundamental characteristics of regional polities. I want to emphasize that chiefs and their chiefdoms are highly variable—reflecting specifics of histories, environments, subsistence practices and technologies, interregional relations, and sources of power.

Having said this, the processes involved in the formation of chiefdoms across many cases show common patterns based on their political economies. To understand these political processes, I adopt broad categories of chiefs and chiefdoms that share elements of social stratification and power differentials.

CHIEFDOMS AS POLITICAL SOCIETIES

Chiefdoms were political societies, meaning that they had leaders able to coordinate political action with thousands or even tens of thousands of people. Typically, chiefdoms regionally organized multiple village-sized communities, although single communities with large populations could also be so structured. To integrate regional-scale polities required social, economic, religious, and especially political institutions. Chiefdoms were (and still are) about power, the ability to influence and coerce groups with divergent interests and identities. Chiefdoms represented a spectrum of political formations.

Power is fundamentally distributive—all humans have power to act independently, if only not to act when ordered. This is what allows both families and communities to operate quite autonomously of their chiefs for much of everyday life. As parents quickly learn, even within families and despite authority hierarchies based on age, physical size, and nominal control, much of the time children do exactly what they want despite parental orders. A strong human principle is anarchy: individuals, families, and communities follow their own inclinations. Everyone can claim powers and the