

Origins of Social Complexity: Trade Chains

ANP 452 North American Archaeology

Spring 2016

Archaeologists have long debated over the definition of social complexity in North America. While many factors can be argued to contribute to the formation and definition of a socially complex culture, the development and practice of trade appears to hold special value for complexity in history. Can cultures essentially ceiling in their growing complexity causing collapse? Or does society continue to become more complex without limit? Understanding how trade effected/changed past cultures and the implications it had on the sociopolitical entities, can possibly allow further insight into on-going debates concerning the effects of import and export levels between nations during the 21st century which interests me with regards to my focus of economic disparities of present day and solutions to this occurrence.

First I would like to focus on the interactions between California and the Southwest culture regions to better understand if trade encourages new categories of hierarchy and dependency. Next narrowing the focus more to the Southwest region I would like to explore how trade dependency brings both positive and negative aspects to the culture, which could have a larger role in societal collapse. The type of dependency developed is also important when relating it to societal collapse. “This system of surplus transfer connects not just the two regions directly interacting but also any additional areas that exchange with either partner.” (Fauvelle & Smith 2015: 712) This argument provided by Andre Frank and Barry Gills stresses the impact trade can encompass even through indirect contact. They also describe this system as the action responsible for creating a “causal inter-dependence between structures of accumulation and between political entities”. This type of dependency on a system adds to the complicated relationship between cultures differing environments and the fluctuations they experience.

Trading between Costal California and the Southwest is well documented and Pacific shell beads were arguably one of the highest exported resources from the coast being found in

great distances to the east spanning North America. The Southwest regions were known for ceramics and textiles in exchange for shells believed to hold religious meaning in the region and later currency value. “These beads have been interpreted as a form of trade currency, driving the formation of what several scholars see as a burgeoning “market economy” in the Santa Barbara Channel region.” (Fauvelle & Smith 2015: 713) Jane Schneider explains that what people today may view as simply material or luxury goods that are not essential or impactful if made unavailable, these goods can be understood as necessities for the functioning of elite political economies”. (Fauvelle & Smith 2015: 712) California’s dependency on shells as currency shown by the ethno historic records in the Southwest I believe shows how the same resource can gather multiple reasons for being depended on which results in a complex system of dependency resulting in multiple cultures holding a common vulnerability all tied to Coastal California and its ability to function and its production speed.

“In the Ancient Puebloan area of the modern four-corners region, the number of identified *Olivella biplicata* shell beads found in archaeological deposits increases from eight during Pueblo I to 518 during Pueblo II (Smith 2002: 52) indicating a drastic increase in trade with coastal southern California. It is also noteworthy that the transition from Pueblo I to Pueblo II in the Southwest coincides with the expansion of sedentary towns with stone and adobe architecture.” (Fauvelle & Smith 2015: 714) Trade serves as a way to obtain items that are not available in an individual’s area. Hunter and gatherers would theoretically not have as much use for trade due to seasonal migration, which was not conducive to holding surplus. When we see the increase in trade alone with a shift to more of a sedentary lifestyle, although trade still requires travel, less people are moving across expansive distances. I believe this factor of travel being reduced but still present would have allowed some individuals the ability to gain

knowledge back to their own people. Knowledge is a reflection of power, which can open up new categories of hierarchical status. The shell beads of California specifically the manufacturing on the northerner Channel Islands is described as having scarce population of land animal for hunting but a diverse marine exploitation. The inhabitants were highly dependent on the specialized shells that came from the area. The ability of this group to live on the islands can be contributed to the exploitation of the shells. The Chumash culture is described as highly complex with emphasis on canoe making. The people participated in large amounts of regional trade and said to be near the apex of hunter-gatherer complexity and later rose to a simple level Chiefdom. (Arnold & Munns 1994: 475)

Craft specialization in the Channel Islands Region is increasingly being related to “increasing social differentiation, inherited positions of leadership, and the formation of larger communities, many located in prime coastal territory.” Craft specialization taking the making of material goods a step further can be seen as competition in the market and the presence of elites able to pay higher prices. People who specialized in crafts are recorded in a number of instances as operating directly under patron-elite households, compounds, or districts. (Arnold & Munns 1994: 475 - 478) The reasoning for this relationship can be attributed to by some as resulting from “circumstances such as inadequate subsistence provisioning or patchy distributions of resources.” (Arnold & Munns 1994: 476 - 478) Over time specialization occurs which I note as important to recognize as the point where I view certain negative aspects are made possible to form. Specialization shows most importantly advancing technology on production, which can be seen as a result in demand and a way to combat competition from other regions. (Arnold & Munns 1994: 475 - 478) Arnold and Munns suggest that the case with the Channel Islands “might correspond to the degree of risk inherent in the attempts of large sedentary populations to

adapt to environments with unpredictable, high-magnitude environmental changes such as observed in Pacific Coast marine ecosystems.” (Arnold & Munns 1994: 484 - 488) Trade for all these reasons can be looked at as essential to increasingly complex societies and a key factor if not the key factor in building complexity.

Understanding the role trade plays in the formation of sociopolitical organizations that predate us is important and being able to track its trajectory if understood correctly can allow us insight to what is known as the concept of carrying capacity. Carrying capacity measures the varying constraints of an environment’s ability to care for, a particular number of humans with a chosen subsistence system. “Successful demographic responses to stress involve population reductions to maintain the number of people below the carrying capacity.” (Doyle & Dean 2006: 4) Trade can be attributed to alleviating systemic stress but through dependency can also bring new problems like we are facing in our world today. The dependency created when trade is specialized rings to the tune of putting all of ones eggs in a single basket in my personal opinion after analyzing the Southwest region who’s culture we see collapses for a period of time do to changing environmental components that would have complicated materials that were depended on for trade. (Upham et. Al. 1989: 307-329)

Going forward trade is an important facet of the construction of our society and still many archaeologists continue questions surrounding its formation and purpose in varying areas of North America. Today the questions of preservation through the hopes of creating sustainable development plans by environmental organizations are specifically looking at carry capacity and a reframing of how we view trade and its effects on our environment. The Global Footprint Network is one of these non-profit organizations bringing attention to the fact that over 80% of the population lives in areas that are currently at a deficit causing stress on our planet. They look

to redefine the way we view importing and exporting by not siding with isolation but to find a middle ground of positive trade with lower levels of dependency.

(<http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/>)

Works Cited

Arnold, Jeanne E., and Ann Munns
1994 Independent or Attached Specialization: The Organization of Shell Bead Production in California. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 21(4): 473

Environmental change and human adaptation in the ancient American Southwest
David Doyel - Jeffrey Dean - Julio Betancourt - University of Utah Press – 2006

Smith, Erin M., and Mikael Fauvelle
2015 Regional Interactions between California and the Southwest: The Western Edge of the North American Continental System. *American Anthropologist* 117(4): 710–721

Traditions, transitions, and technologies: themes in Southwestern archaeology: proceedings of the 2000 Southwest Symposium
Sarah Schlanger - University Press of Colorado - 2002

Upham, Steadman, Kent G. Lightfoot, and Roberta A. Jewett
1989 *The Sociopolitical structure of prehistoric Southwestern societies*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO