

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Chiefdoms: Yesterday and Today

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19m7119v>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 38(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

Authors

Carniero, Robert L.

Grinin, Leonid E.

Korotayev, Andrey V.

et al.

Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed

of indigenous trade networks in the region, remote though the site may have been, such a small number (0.4% of the entire artifact assemblage) is surprising. The discussion of the beads and cones is well done; however, there is only one specimen of several artifact categories, and therefore little can be said about their presence. The authors consider this in their discussion of an apparently thrown horseshoe recovered in the roof strata. They hypothesize that its presence at the site might imply that it was given a symbolic meaning, though they present little evidence for why this might have been so. While the chapter is complete (given the paucity of objects available for analysis), it would have greatly benefited from a theoretical discussion as to why certain European-produced materials, tools, and objects might have been locally rejected, removed from the site by the occupants, or collected at a later date.

The volume concludes with a spatial analysis of the Fur Trade-period strata at Housepit 54, followed by an expanded spatial analysis of indigenous St'át'imc households. These are the first chapters in the book to really introduce the inhabitants to the archaeological record of Housepit 54, and they are what make this volume unique and a truly important contribution to

Fur Trade archaeology. The GIS-based spatial analysis of distribution and organization is well-defined and described, although the graphic presentation of the data is very difficult to parse and understand without careful study. The spatial analysis provides a great deal of important information, not obtainable through more traditional research methods, on such topics as activity areas, gendered spaces, and patterns of storage and discard.

The authors of this study succeed in their ultimate goals—to place St'át'imc culture, and its peoples' responses to external social, economic, and environmental pressures during the period of the Fur Trade in the Middle Frasier Valley—into a local indigenous context. They show through artifact and spatial analyses that St'át'imc peoples successfully maintained traditional lifeways while participating in greater regional activities, including the Fur Trade, however peripheral they may have seemed to be to the colonial world and its associated contemporary written history. This volume should be considered a model for how to approach future archaeological investigations of indigenous sites occupied by peoples who actively participated in and/or were directly affected by the colonial Fur Trade.



Chieftoms: Yesterday and Today

Robert L. Carniero, Leonid E. Grinin,
and Andrey V. Korotayev (eds.),
New York City: Eliot Werner Publications, 2017,
400 pp., ISBN 978-0989824989, \$34.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Scott D. Sunell

Department of Anthropology, UCLA,
375 Portola Plaza, 341 Haines Hall,
Box 951553, Los Angeles, CA 90095

As with many other edited volumes that rely on previously published material, *Chieftoms: Yesterday and Today* struggles to find a unique voice and to make a contribution beyond its source material. At its best, *Chieftoms: Yesterday and Today* approaches cultural evolution with a historical eye that demonstrates the value of thinking beyond the state in both past and present.

The individual chapters, written largely by established scholars, are excellent. This work also provides an additional venue for English-language access to Russian scholarship on these issues, beyond the journal in which they were originally published. The drawbacks of the book unfortunately outweigh these positive factors. The editors hew too closely to theory that has been revised significantly in recent decades, narrowing the overall scope of the volume. This book may be of interest to scholars focusing specifically on the issues addressed, but the framing of the work is too constrained by its treatment of chieftoms to be of general appeal. These papers would therefore have been best left in their original context rather than republished here.

The book is organized into five sections, the first and last stating the goals of the editors and framing the work (the only material unique to this volume). The middle

three sections are grouped topically. The second section contains chapters that address political evolution. The third section has chapters focused on the relationship between chiefdoms and states. The fourth section focuses on contemporary examples of chiefdom organizations in multiple contexts. The bulk of the chapters (chapters 3-9) are drawn from the March, 2011 edition of the journal *Social Evolution & History* (Vol. 10, No. 1). Chapter 10, co-authored by (the late) Patrick Chabal, Gary M. Feinman, and Petr Skalník, is drawn from the book *The Early State, Its Alternatives and Analogues* (published in 2004, also edited by Grinin, Carniero, Bondarenko, Kradin, and Korotayev).

Chiefdoms: Yesterday and Today does not build on the earlier works of which it is composed to present a new argument. The vigorous debate on chiefdoms in archaeology is largely sidestepped, with only a few nods in the introductory and first chapters. The result is an uneven volume in which the argument is at some points presented as though much of the past two decades of research (or more) had not occurred, while at others engaging with that work. This might be forgiven within the scope of an edited volume derived from a journal issue on a single topic, neither of which were necessarily oriented toward those debates specifically, but the second issue of framing is even more glaring considering the editors' stated goals. This book aims to address change through time in human societies, yet the treatment of cultural evolution is generally narrow. The earlier chapters (e.g., Ch. 2 [Carniero] and Ch. 3 [Grinin and Korotayev, a typology of chiefdom analogues]) articulate more clearly with the work of Leslie White and Elman Service than with recent scholarship. This includes a focus on the construction and elaboration of typologies without advancing arguments about cultural change through time. The field of cultural evolution has expanded greatly in its methods and goals since the mid twentieth century, and archaeologists have long recognized the trap of creating such typologies (discussed by Earle in Ch. 9 of this volume). Much current and potentially relevant work based in evolutionary thought goes untapped in these chapters, while many of the later chapters do not follow this approach. These differences in both the treatment of chiefdoms and of cultural evolution are not well framed by the editors. *Chiefdoms: Yesterday and Today* therefore falls short of drawing together

material to make a compelling contribution. In a journal these issues of scope and coherence were not problems. In a book, however, the editors had time and space to make critical choices about what to republish. They could have included other works to enhance the arguments they advance in the introductory chapters.

While the work struggles to find a voice as a coherent whole, the quality of the scholarship is excellent throughout. The bulk of the work in the second, third, and fourth sections is devoted to strong treatments of chiefdoms as organizational systems at multiple scales, and in distinct forms diachronically. Some chapters (e.g., Ch. 4 [Lozny, on northern Europe] and Ch. 5 [Kradin, on the Mongolian steppes]) review case studies not often addressed in treatments of chiefdoms and cultural evolution specifically, true of the modern and historical examples as well (e.g., Ch. 9 [Earle, including discussion of the Taliban and drug cartels], Ch. 10 [Skalník, on Ghana], and Ch. 11 [Chabal et al., reviewing modern examples generally]). This historical approach and the willingness to think flexibly in terms of sociopolitical organization, especially as it pertains to the durable power and relationships among individuals within these systems, is a refreshing note overall in a field that has sometimes neglected such accounts. The quality of the contributions made by these authors is obvious in each chapter.

These contributions are valuable, but the book itself is flawed. The clearest example of its problems, and the most egregious, is the failure of the editors to include a single non-male scholar among the authors. Such individuals certainly exist, and their previously published material could have been included here had the editors so chosen. The fact that the efforts of the editors yielded such a narrow perspective should give potential readers pause. Because of these choices, *Chiefdoms: Yesterday and Today* misses the opportunity to offer something new beyond its source material.

The strength of the work shines through in the chapters individually, and as a collection of articles there is value here for specific interests. Unfortunately, for an edited volume of republished material, that value was already present at the time of original publication and these works are not enhanced by their inclusion here. Readers would therefore do well to pursue the works of contributing authors individually beyond this volume.