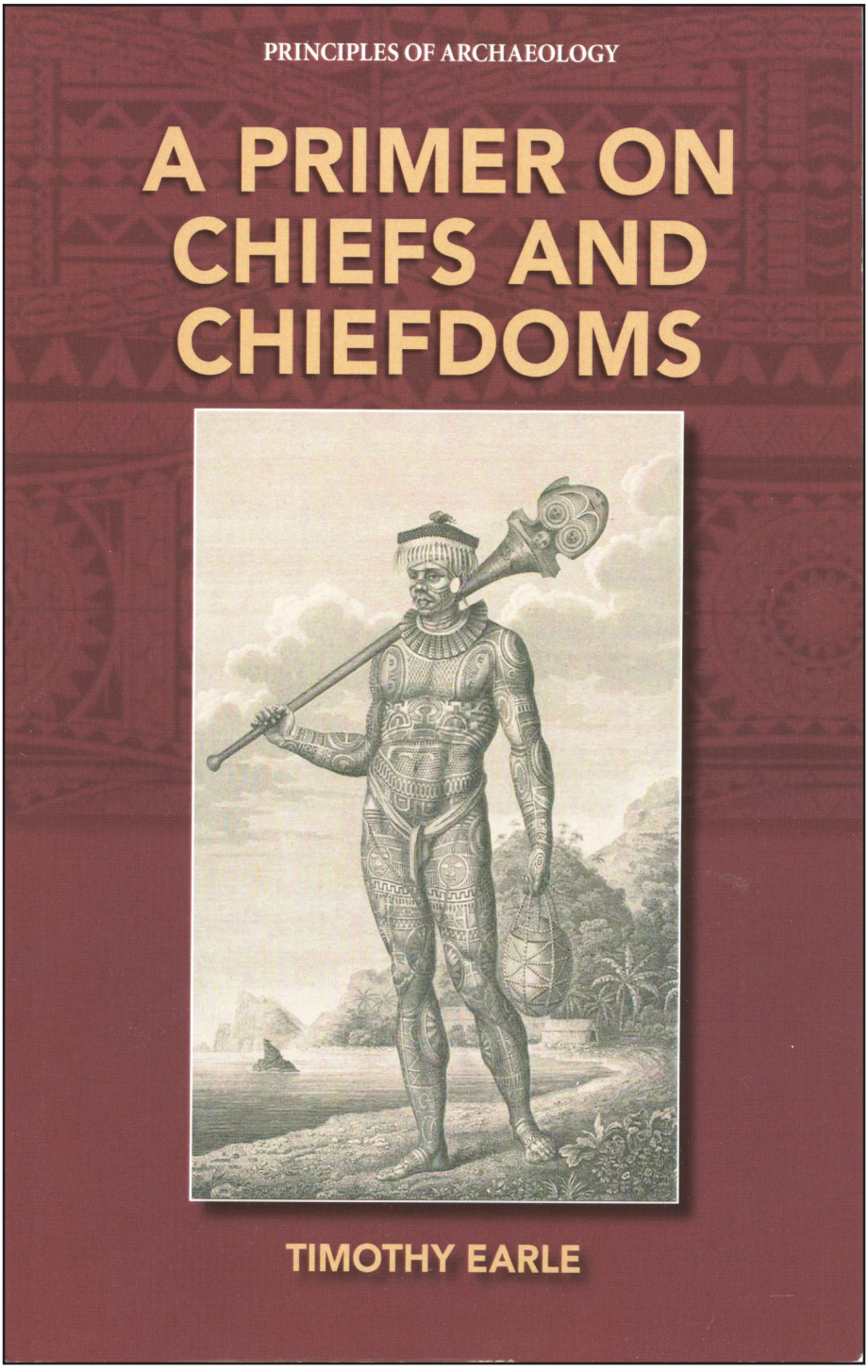

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PRINCIPLES OF ARCHAEOLOGY
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A PRIMER ON CHIEFS AND CHIEFDOMS

TIMOTHY EARLE
Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

Prepublication praise . . .

"A synthetic tour de force for general readers. Earle navigates theoretically complex waters and makes good sense of the complex ethnographic and archaeological record that we call chiefdoms. The book is a unique blend of archaeology and political science—well crafted, reader-friendly, and inspiring."

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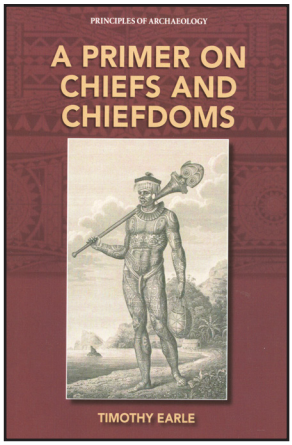

A Primer on Chiefs and Chiefdoms

Timothy Earle. 2021. Eliot Werner Publications, Inc. Clinton Corners, New York. vii–x, 168 pp., 22 figures, references. $32.95 (paperback). ISBN10: 1-7342818-3-9.

Reviewed by Thomas E. Emerson, Upper Mississippi Valley Archaeological Research Foundation, Macomb, Illinois.

Few taxonomic configurations have been more controversial over the past few decades than those associated as descriptors of social-political formations and social evolution. In that context, Timothy Earle has been a strong advocate for at least four decades for the study of one such political formation, the chiefdom, and its positioning within a theoretical evolutionary framework. Consequently, the *Primer on Chiefs,* representing a distillation of those many years of field excavations and theoretical considerations, is of great interest to all who study the politics of power in all societies, both past and present. Furthermore, Earle maintains that the study of past political variation and organization through the lens of archaeology has social value in the present.

In a brief but valuable prologue and two introductory chapters, Earle summarizes some of his basic premises in examining chiefdoms—given the abuses of chiefly taxonomies these are critical to understanding the remainder of the volume. He stresses that 1) chiefs, chieftaincies, chiefdoms, and chiefly confederacies are tremendously variable, 2) that chiefs represent examples of operationalized politcal power, 3) that the identification of a political system as "chiefly" does not allow one to predicate its attendant social or economic conditions, and 4) that such political systems can be best understood through an examination of their political economy.

Let there be no doubt that the subject matter of the *Primer on Chiefs* is power. These channels of power operate via a series of strategies recognized as a ritual mode premised on control of religious ideology, a corporate mode involving control of land and military power, an Asiatic mode where central control of an engineered landscape (e.g., centralized irrigation or terracing systems) is apparent, and a predatory mode of wealth control (likely more familiar to readers as prestige economies) of exotics and sumptuary goods. The author cautions that such "pathways to power" are not types and individual societies involve an interweaving of these modes at different levels, fluctuating intensities, and in different forms. For each mode of production Earle identifies a "bottleneck" or "chokepoint" where those in power can exert control over a dependent society. These models encompass a theoretical perspective of societies being organized within a dichotomous "top-down" versus "bottom-up" structure with those on top falling into Brian Hayden's "aggrandizers" who operate primarily on the principle of self-enrichment.

Of course, the challenge is to identify how we measure power and its derivative archaeological signatures. Earle rightly critiques the use of trait lists that required the presence of distinctive markers such as settlement hierarchies, status burials, chiefly palaces, sumptuary goods, and so forth to identify a chiefdom. Rather, he promotes the study of, "…regional

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and centralizing processes of organization, control, and acceptance." (p. 47). Parenthetically, the measurable variables of these characteristics he proposes include, "settlement hierarchies, economic inequality, monumental construction, and warfare." (p. 49)—some of the same crucial attributes generally included in many chiefly trait lists. Despite the similarities Earle makes a critical distinction between what he advocates and earlier trait lists—that is the recognition within the chiefdom political structure of extensive variability and the diverse mutual interaction of these venues of power whose effects can only be comprehended within the specific cultural and historical context of a polity.

As exemplars of the diversity and range of possibilities in chiefly political systems extensive sections of the volume are dedicated to the description and discussion of chiefdom societies from around the world. These discussions are enriched by Earle's personal archaeological field work with instances of chiefly societies in Hawaii, Peru, Argentina, Denmark, and Hungary. The range of societies covered is both interesting and instructive. These cases form a central part of his explication of the various modes of production—each being aligned as examples of such modes. While there is an awareness of the danger of projecting the ethnographic present into the past, it is sometimes hard for the reader or the researcher to avoid this. Of course, presentism and dominating analogies are a pervasive dilemma for archaeological interpretation in general, not just for those who study chiefly political organization. And, of course, the domination of such approaches ensures that the past cannot, by default, differ from the present. As an aside, the multitude of historical and ethnographic sources that Earle brings into play is both impressive—it makes the volume a fascinating read and should be especially valuable for those who were previously unfamiliar with this material. Even more encouraging is his observation that only through detailed archeological investigations of a society's culture history can such political structure and variation be identified and understood.

Perhaps the most challenging part of Earle's discussion (Chapter 2) comes in his advocacy of social evolution as the theoretical framework for studying political structuring within human societies. He traces the place of evolutionary theory's development in anthropology from early versions of Social Darwinism to recent postprocessual critiques, along the way noting his own roots in the University of Michigan's political archaeology focus. This review highlights the inherent dangers of evolutionary thought when it becomes burdened with insidious innuendoes of progress and when political structures turn into types. Archaeology is seen as providing the historical depth necessary to, "evaluate alternative hypotheses of social evolution [and]…test hypothetical explanations of social change and diversification"(p. 44). Despite these cautions, statements such as all societies share the, "…political drive towards devel-oping regional institutions based on the accumulation of power through manipulat-ing economies, warrior, and religious activities" (p. 20) seem to be infused with subtle hints of progressive change in the centralization of power and increasing complexity. Additionally throughout the volume, chiefdoms are positioned between lower-level anarchistic village societies and states where Earle positions them as the basal political structure for state development, again, suggestive

of progressive change. Few deny the basic premise of evolutionary theory of descent with modification. Unfortunately, social evolutionary theorizing has accumulated so much detrimental baggage that is difficult for most researchers to disregard.

Earle's *Primer on Chiefs* is a worthwhile read, regardless of your theoretical bent on the nature of political structure, power, or political economies in past societies. This stance accepts his view that they, "represent regional institutionalization(s) of power and authority" and, "were the first political machines, not a societal type." (p. 155). As such they reward careful study. This is not to say that Earle's discussions are flawless. Despite his protestations that chiefdoms are not social types his persistent positioning of them between villages and states and insistence that they represent the foundation of subsequent state developments make it difficult to see them in other contexts. His image of society as comprised of elites versus commoner and their interactions as a top vs. bottom dialectic obscures the actual reality of most societies as graded and graduated, often with ambiguous transitions between the top and the bottom. The emphasis on leadership as essentially aggrandizers of power and wealth (i.e., seeking control of the political economy) seems over-simplified. Despite these caveats, if you are interested in the social, political, and ideological engines that drive the creation of complex societies, you need to have Earle's *Primer on Chiefs* on your library shelf.