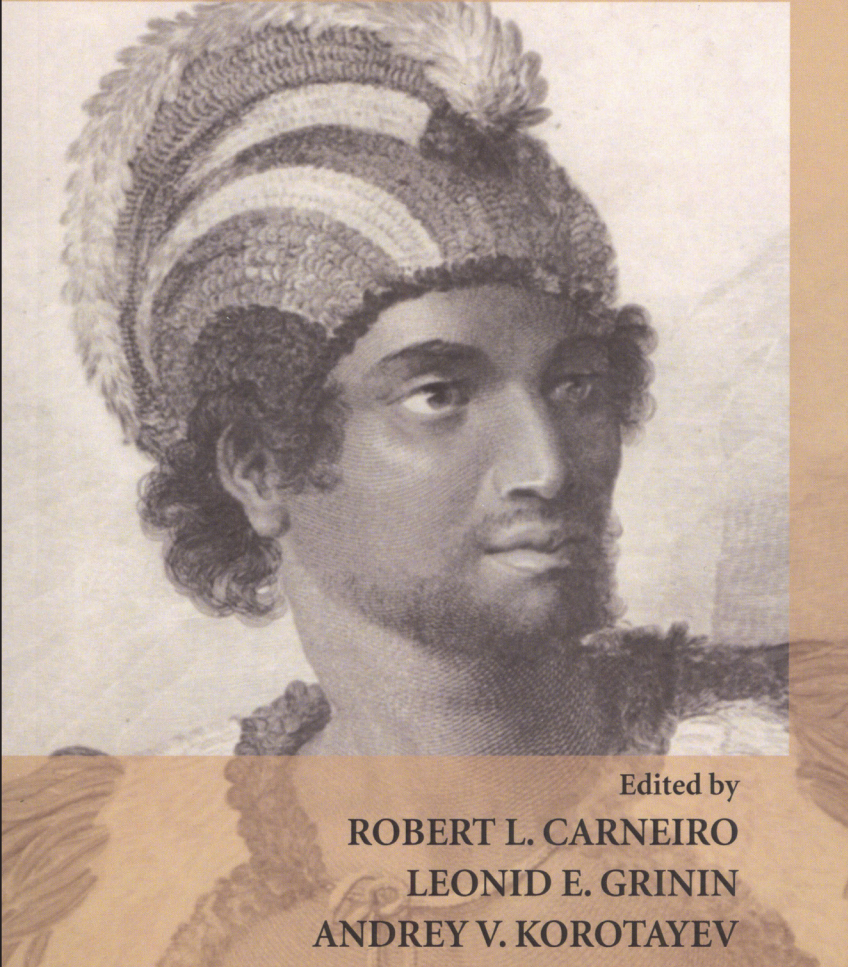


# CHIEFDOMS

*Yesterday and Today*



Edited by

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Edited by

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What many anthropologists regard as the major step in political development occurred when, for the first time in history, previously autonomous villages gave up their individual sovereignties and were brought together into a multi-village political unit—the chiefdom.

Though long neglected as a major stage in history, in recent years the chiefdom has been the focus of increased attention. As its importance has been more fully recognized, it has become the object of serious scholarly analysis and interpretation.

In this volume specialists in political evolution draw on data from ethnography, archaeology, and history and apply fresh insights to enhance the study of the chiefdom. The papers present penetrating analyses of many aspects of the chiefdom, from how this form of political organization first arose to the role it played in giving rise to the next major stage in the development of human society—the state.

*Cover illustration: "Portrait of Kaneena, a Chief of the Sandwich Islands in the North Pacific" by John Webber (1778–1779). This image is available from the United States Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

*Cover design by Susanne Van Duyne*



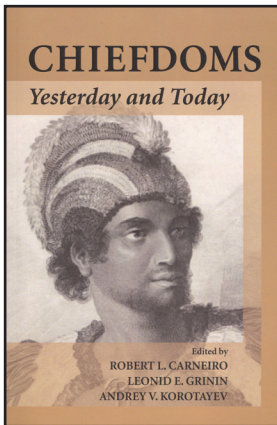
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## Chieftdoms: Yesterday and Today

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*Reviewed by Thomas E. Emerson, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.*

It seems only proper to make a full disclosure at the onset—I am not an advocate of chiefdom typologies or neoevolutionary taxonomies. That is not to say that 25 years ago I did not think that the chiefdom paradigm was the key to understanding late prehistoric complexity in the Eastern Woodlands. However, continued research, fueled by my participation in massive excavations in the American Bottom around Cahokia, revealed to me the relative sterility of the chiefdom model as it is often applied to the vast array of late prehistoric societies in the southeastern United States. So, I went into this volume fully expecting to see models harkening back to Service and Fried touted as the way forward for interpreting mid-range social complexity—essentially the promotion of taxonomic pigeonholing as the end goal of archaeological interpretation. But I was surprised, pleasantly surprised, to find that *Chieftdoms* and many of its contributors, are as inclined to contest as to extol chiefdoms taxonomies.

The twelve chapters include a comprehensive traditional historical review of neo-evolutionary chiefdom theory, discussions of its utility in interpreting middle-range complex societies, its relationship with and role within early states, its presence within today's nation states, and, most interesting to me, the vast array, both historically and in modern times, of chiefdom analogues ranging from traditional third-world chiefdoms, to crime syndicates, and terrorist groups. These authors are well versed in the topic of political evolution, with many of them consistent contributors to the Russian journal *Social Evolution & History* that foreshadowed many of these chapters in a 2011 special volume on *Chieftdoms: Theories, Problems, and Comparisons*. While essays from long-term aficionados of chiefdoms like Robert Carneiro and Timothy Earle will be familiar to most American readers, it is the chapters by the Russian and European scholars that will likely contextualize chiefdoms in a very different framework than most Eastern Woodlands archaeologists have ever envisioned.

Grinin and Korotayev set the stage for the following chapters in a brief introduction that clearly lays out the charge of the participants, i.e., to examine the growth of medium-range social complexity, track the emergence of social and political inequality, and examine the formation of pre-state or complex stateless polities. They see the chiefdom as an important concept in the study of medium complex forms of sociopolitical organization. But, importantly, they view it as only one of many sociopolitical options that include "...more or less centralized chiefdoms; self-governed or civil-temple communities; decentralized, chiefless complex tribes; and various other acephalous, medium-complexity social systems...." (p. 5).

Following this introductory vision of social and political diversity is Robert Carneiro's lengthy exposition (Chapter 2) of the traditional neo-evolutionary position of the chiefdom

as a key type in the evolution of societies, filling the gap between tribes and states. This chapter is best seen as a historical review of Carneiro's nearly four decades long project to interpret the evolution of chiefdoms and warfare which he contextualizes, as he sees it, as occurring within the critical resurrection of evolutionary theory in American anthropology. His unchanging position has been challenged and the reader is referred to an exchange between Carneiro (2010a, 2010b) and Timothy Pauketat (2010) that draws out the theoretical distance between neo-evolutionary theory and more recent evolving positions of agency, practice, and historical-processualism.

Against the backdrop of Carneiro's traditionalist chiefdoms, follow four chapters that greatly elaborate on the variance and diversity of medium-complex societies (among which chiefdoms are but one example). The fullest exposition of this position is presented in Grinin and Korotayev's (Chapter 3) strong depiction of sociopolitical growth in complexity as multidimensional and multilineal. This essay is perhaps the key contribution to the volume in that it clearly elaborates on the concept of "chiefdom analogues," in other words, comparable alternate sociopolitical forms to chiefly complexity. Certain to be contentious for traditional neo-evolutionists, is their argument that political bodies such as the Greek *poleis*, federations of villages, some territorial and tribal groups, autonomous towns, and complex village communities can all be seen as chiefdom-analogues. The authors furthermore subdivide these analogues by grouping them as monosettlements (population clustered in central settlement), horizontally integrated polysettlements, and corporate analogues. This discussion of chiefdom variations is continued by Claessen (Chapter 4) who like Feinman and Neitzel (1984) before him points out the many disconnects between titular chiefs and organizational levels. He argues that "chiefs" and "chiefdom" need to be disconnected. Lozny (Chapter 5) examines the ability of 9–10th century A.D. central European societies to self-organize and evince attributes of medium-complexity while Kradin (Chapter 6) describes the differing hierarchical structures (that he calls "superchiefdoms") that developed among several early Mongolian nomadic empires around the time of Christ. The take-away message of these discussions is that they break the one-to-one correlation between medium-range societies and the chiefdom that has bedeviled so much of southeastern U.S. archaeological interpretations.

The second half of the volume moves onto the relationship of medium-complex societies with emergent states. Gibson (Chapter 7) contends that chiefdom confederacies are understudied in their own right, especially in regard to their role in the development of oligarchic states with underdeveloped political infrastructures. His review of chiefly confederacies in Medieval Ireland, Iron Age Celts, Archaic Greek Boiotian League, protohistoric Korea, and historic Iran indicates that when states emerge from confederacies they tend to possess a feudal or network political and social system. Grinin (Chapter 8) continues his earlier exploration of medium-complex sociopolitical diversity by considering complex chiefdoms as analogues (rather than precursors) of early states making his case in a detailed examination of the oft-studied Hawaiian societies. This chapter, though adhering to a social evolutionary model, strongly advocates for the fluidity of developmental options in state origins.

This same theme, to some extent, is taken up by the long-time proponent of chiefdoms, Timothy Earle (Chapter 9). Earle's contribution is wide-ranging beginning with a repudiation of social taxonomies and emphasizing the study of power and the processes through which it can be obtained and controlled. He elaborates on long-held concerns with political economy, violence, and ideology and brings these factors to bear in his analysis of the rise of Kamehameha I and conversely in his examination of the Taliban and drug cartel chieftaincies as actors within modern states. Continuing into the modern era, Petr Skalnik (Chapter 10), documents in detail a vicious war in the early 1980s between the neo-traditional Nanumba chiefdom and the acephalous Konkomba within the Gold Coast/Ghana state. This study is interesting in demonstrating the correlation of ethnicity with political power and the difficulty of integrating tribal, chiefly, and state citizens into a functioning body—and while it clearly highlights the dangers of elite versus non-elite, religious ideology, difference in economic levels, and ethnic cultures, I am struck by the importance of agency in moving the parties towards or away from violent confrontations. Two final discussion chapters (Chabal, Feinman, and Skalnik, Chapter 11 and Korotayev and Grinin, Chapter 12) drive home the point that chiefdom-like sociopolitical structures are alive and well in the 21st millennium and in fact are increasing in importance within modern states.

*Chiefdoms: Yesterday and Today* is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in sociopolitical development in the past or present and it should be a wake-up call for anyone still clinging to social taxonomies or with neo-evolutionary tendencies. It certainly is a challenge to those who continue to be content to simply label the medium-complexity societies of the American Southeast as “chiefdoms” to extend their research perspectives to consider the diversity of political structures that may have existed in the late prehistory of the region. This volume is enlightening and actually affordable – in this day of overpriced academic presses where else can one buy a 357-page volume for under \$35?

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