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State Formation in Hawai'i

A Review of *How Chiefs Became Kings: Divine Kingship and the Rise of Archaic States in Ancient Hawai'i* by Patrick V. Kirch
(University of California Press, 2010)

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Are the indigenous societies of Hawaii best classified as chiefdoms, or should we instead consider them states? While this may sound at first like a rather limited, academic, question, in fact it has wide-ranging implications. In this book archaeologist Patrick Kirch overturns decades of anthropological orthodoxy (including his own earlier views) to argue strongly that the Hawaiian polities were in fact states, not chiefdoms.

In anthropological research on cultural evolution the indigenous societies of Hawaii have long been viewed as the archetypical examples of chiefdom societies. Chiefdoms are a type of society intermediate in scale between relatively egalitarian and small-scale village farming societies on the one hand (variously called tribes, intermediate societies, or Neolithic villages), and state-level societies on the other (large, socially stratified societies with a centralized government). Although traditional evolutionary typologies—such as the well-known sequence of band-tribe-chiefdom-state—have been criticized by postmodern archaeologists and others (e.g., Yoffee 2005; Pauketat 2007), the chiefdom concept has become established as a useful framework for archaeologists employing a materialist and scientific perspective on the past (Earle 1997; Drennan and Peterson 2006; Wright 2006; Gavrillets et al. 2010; Kradin 2011).

Patrick Kirch is an archaeologist who has conducted much fieldwork on Hawaii and other Pacific islands. In this book he reverses his earlier analyses of Hawaii as a chiefdom (e.g., Kirch 1984; Kirch and Sahlins 1992; Kirch 2000). Leaders like the powerful Kamehameha, argues Kirch, were kings, not chiefs. He builds a strong case, applying both archaeological and historical data to an explicit model of archaic states. I find the argument convincing, and quite exciting for the comparative analysis of premodern states.

A skeptic might argue that this sounds like a mere typological exercise. Does it really matter whether we call these societies chiefdoms or states? What is important, the skeptic would argue, is that we analyze them well and try to

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understand their nature and dynamics; labels don't matter. This perspective makes sense only if one's goal is limited to studying individual societies. But if one is interested in a broader comparative perspective (such as developing a predictive and analytical science of history), then the chiefdom-or-state issue is more than just a labeling exercise.

Kirch addresses the skeptical argument head-on (page 3 and elsewhere). Archaeologists need analogical cases to interpret their sites and artifacts, and shifting the comparative focus of Hawaiian society from chiefdoms to states can generate better insights and improved understanding of the case at hand. Conversely, the addition of Hawaii to the inventory of premodern, nonwestern states helps comparative scholars distinguish general patterns from unique situations in the realm of nonwestern states. Societal types such as chiefdom and state are convenient frames for the analysis of change and variation, helping comparative scholars narrow their domain so that key processes can be isolated and studied in detail.

Most of the book is taken up with an extended explanation of how and why the Hawaiian states developed. The first chapter sets the archaeological and conceptual scene. Kirch's list of the "essential characteristics of archaic states" includes class endogamy, divine kings, an economy controlled by the "king's bureaucracy," a religion that legitimized the ruler, a military controlled by the king, and a luxurious lifestyle for the king (including palaces and retainers). Although this list is not unreasonable, it is slanted toward the Hawaiian data. Were polities with commercial economies (i.e., not controlled by the king) not states? A broader consideration of the variability in ancient states (e.g., Trigger 2003) would produce a different list. Nevertheless, for Kirch's purposes—to argue for states over chiefdoms in Hawaii—this list is sufficient. Also in chapter one, he covers theories of primary state formation and past views of the complexity and dynamics of Hawaiian society.

The second chapter, *Hawaiian Archaic States on the Eve of European Contact*, lays the empirical foundation for the rest of the book. Kirch reviews the size of polities, the nature of social classes and divine kingship, economics, political administration, state-related ritual, and warfare. His basic argument is that 'Ancestral Polynesian' societies were chiefdoms, but by the time Europeans arrived in Hawaii, chiefs had been replaced by divine kings, and social ideals linking rulers to subjects through kinship had been overturned with the creation of a system of class stratification.

Chapter three focuses on native Hawaiian oral history, a particularly rich tradition that tells the stories of kings and battles stretching far into the past. Specialist historians in each royal court kept these accounts of the glories of the king and his ancestors, and in the nineteenth century many of these stories were written down. Kirch reviews these histories, which are claimed by some (almost certainly incorrectly) to reach back to the fourteenth century AD (pp. 82–121). He then synthesizes their implications for the nature of political

dynamics in the Hawaiian kingdoms (pp. 121–23). The histories reveal “the culturally specific ways in which Hawaiian elites interacted and the strategies that they pursued in their quest for power and fame” (p. 121). These strategies included status rivalry, royal endogamy (sister marriage), elaboration of ritual, and conquest warfare. I will suggest below that our understanding of ancient Hawaii would be improved by greater attention to the implications of the histories, and less attention to the chronicle of heroic events.

Chapter four presents the basic archaeological data for the rise of the Hawaiian states. After briefly reviewing the archaeological chronology, Kirch covers population and demography, environmental variation, agricultural intensification, monumental temples, and urbanism. The sections on population and intensification are particularly noteworthy for their sophisticated data presentation and analysis. Kirch has published widely on these themes, and here he brings together a wealth of archaeological data to support his basic argument. The chapter ends with a synthetic section titled, *When did the Hawaiian Archaic States Emerge?*

Chapter five, *The Challenge of Explanation*, presents an explanatory model for the rise of states in Hawaii. Kirch starts with an illuminating discussion of past models for Hawaiian social change by Irving Goldman, Marshall Sahlins, and Timothy Earle. He takes some insights from the works of each author, but finds them all inadequate as comprehensive models of change in ancient Hawaii. Kirch then examines in turn ultimate and proximate causes for the development of states in Hawaii. This conceptual device, borrowed from biology (Mayr 1961), has much to offer the comparative study of history. For Kirch, the ultimate causes for the rise of states in Hawaii were population growth, agricultural intensification, and the generation of a surplus. The data for these processes are archaeological, and Kirch uses a graphical analysis of production functions to illustrate his argument. The proximate causes, taken from the oral histories, were status rivalry, political alliance, and conquest. Kirch wisely focuses on the general characteristics of how these processes played out over time rather than on the specific details of individual cases. This is a sophisticated model, clearly stated and well supported empirically.

The book closes with some reflections about how the Hawaiian case relates to comparative models of early state emergence. He notes that “there is no single ‘smoking gun,’ no universal ‘prime mover,’ or causal agent” (p.218). “Yet to assert that the emergence of divine kingship and archaic states was a multicausal and complex phenomenon is not to deny the role of common and recurrent themes in the specific histories of state formation in different times and places” (p.218). He singles out five such themes: circumscription, military expansion, peer-polity interaction, intensification, and the materialization of ideology. This chapter is a tour de force of synthesis, doing an excellent job of relating the specifics of the Hawaiian case to general models of cultural evolution and state formation.

The biggest drawback of *How Chiefs Became Kings*, to my mind, is Kirch's reliance on the narrow conceptual approach of anthropological archaeology. If one steps outside this tradition, new avenues of analysis and comparison open up. I will discuss three examples: (1) oral history; (2) urbanism; and (3) taxation.

Oral History. There is a literature on the comparative historiography of political oral tradition that casts doubt on the veracity of much of the Hawaiian oral histories. The situation in Hawaii resembles other areas of the world where oral histories were not written down until after European conquest. These accounts were elaborated in part to legitimize the native elite in the eyes of the Europeans, and having a long and distinguished genealogy was one way to do this, whether in Africa, Mesoamerica, or Hawaii.

Historian David Henige (1974, 1982; 2005:777–90) analyzes oral political history and the processes that render it suspect as a description of actual events in the distant past. Traditions were often lengthened to give them additional time depth. Euhemerism (interpreting myths as historically accurate accounts) and outright fabrication are common in oral history, as is genealogical parasitism—the attachment of recent dynasties to ancient dynasties to increase their prestige. Henige (1974:190–91) concludes that oral political history rarely preserves reliable chronological information for more than a century prior to the time when the tradition was first transcribed. In a discussion of memory and historiography, James Fentress and Chris Wickham (1992) point out that oral history:

Reveals what the group's feelings and beliefs are, rather than what the past itself was. Ignoring this distinction can lead to disastrous results (p. 78)... As a rule, oral tradition combines mythology, genealogy, and narrative history rather than holding them apart. This means that king lists are often spliced onto stories of mythological ancestors, and clan origin myths are embedded in stories of tribal movements (p. 82).

These are not the only historians or anthropologists to write about this topic (e.g., Miller 1980; Friedman 1992; Hemmingsen 1995; Rasmussen 2009). Kirch and other scholars of Hawaii could perhaps get some insights from works by archaeologists who have tried to wring historical information from oral historical accounts in order to compare them rigorously to the archaeological record (e.g., Evans 1974; Covey 2003; Liu 2007; Smith 2007). Given the likely unreliability of the Hawaiian accounts, it seems hard to justify the forty pages given to their telling in *How Chiefs Became Kings*. The amount of space is even more puzzling because these lengthy accounts contribute little to Kirch's basic argument. His discussion of the socio-political implications of the oral history, on the other hand, is quite reasonable.

Urbanism. My reading of the Hawaiian data differs from Kirch's on the topic of urbanism. His opinion is that:

These were not urban centers, because Hawaiian subsistence with its tuber crops defied concentrated storage, and the population was dispersed among the extensive agricultural systems. Indeed, the kings and chiefs were famously peripatetic, moving about regularly to assure administrative control over their territories (p. 167)

If one takes a functional perspective on urbanism, however, a number of the Hawaiian 'royal centers' can indeed be called cities. A functional definition focuses on 'urban functions:' activities and institutions within a settlement that affect a larger hinterland (not to be confused with 'functionalist' social theory, which is something entirely different). A settlement with numerous, or strong, urban functions, can be classified as a city, regardless of the size of its population (Trigger 1972; Fox 1977; Marcus 1983; Smith 2008).

Kirch's list of features that supposedly rule out urban status (root crops; dispersed settlement; and multiple capitals) are all found in urban centers in other parts of the ancient world. Many African cities were based on root crop production (Shaw et al. 1993; Connah 2001), and dispersed population is a common attribute of premodern tropical cities (Fletcher 2009; Isendahl and Smith 2013). Cases of kings moving among multiple capitals are perhaps less common, but dual capital cities are not unknown in the ancient world (Farmer 1976; Farazmand 1998). These traits can only be considered non-urban if one is using a limited, western concept of cities, such as the definition of urbanism offered decades ago by sociologist Louis Wirth (1938). For Wirth, cities are permanent settlements with large populations, high population density, and social heterogeneity. The fact that this definition would rule out urban status for many of the great cities of the ancient world should caution against its use for comparative research prior to the modern era and outside of western nations.

When I started looking into one of the Hawaiian cities discussed by Kirch, Honaunau, I was unable to find a map of the entire settlement. Partial maps of parts of the site have been published, but none cover the entire settlement. Since I am not an expert in Hawaiian archaeology, it is possible that I missed something, but I did examine the major excavation reports and synthetic accounts cited by Kirch and other writers (e.g., Ladd 1987; Cordy 2000).

Perhaps scholars have reasoned that because Honaunau was not an urban settlement, a full map is not needed. Just to satisfy my curiosity, I produced such a plan (Figure 1), based on partial maps published in Cordy (2000), Ladd (1987) and Apple (1965). I make no claim that this is a precise or accurate plan; I merely stitched the three maps together at a common scale in Photoshop to see whether this site looks like an urban settlement or not. At an

area of nearly 100 ha (1 sq km), the settlement is clearly within the size range of ancient cities in many areas; for example, the median size of Aztec city-state capitals is slightly over 100 ha (Smith 2008:152). Honaunau likely reached its maximum extent during the reign of king Keawe, between 1720 and 1740. There is a palace compound and at least six large temples, all constructed of stone. One temple, the “Hale o Keawe,” greatly impressed European visitors a century later (Figure 2), and there is a restoration at the site today (which is a National Park). The city also has other ceremonial features (e.g., sled ramps for ritual/athletic events), likely elite housing, areas of commoner habitation, and burials (Cordy 2000: Chapter 9). The palace constitutes evidence for administrative urban functions, and the temples were sites of activities that were religious urban functions. When considered in a comparative perspective, using a functional definition of urbanism, Honaunau was clearly an urban center, and Hawaii can be added not just to the roster of archaic states but also to the list of early urban traditions.

Taxation. Kirch follows a trend in anthropological archaeology in discussing ancient fiscal systems using the notion of tribute instead of the more appropriate concept, which is taxation. Tribute refers to one-time lump-sum payments, often made under direct military threat; in short, “variable levies exacted at irregular intervals” (Tarschys 1988:1). As for taxation, “When compared to tributes and tariffs, taxes stand out as steady and regular disbursements. Their payment is based on the calendar, not on particular events or on the arrival of certain commodities. In contrast to tributes, taxes

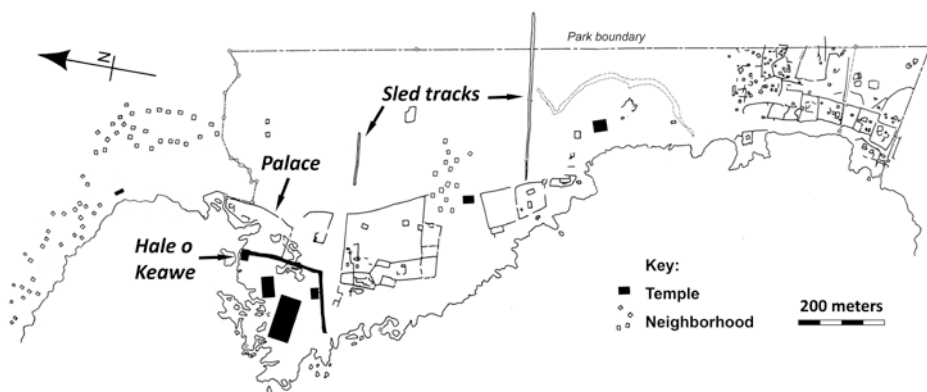


Figure 1. Composite map of the Honaunau royal center, assembled by Michael E. Smith based on Cordy (2000:261), Ladd (1987:3) and Apple (1965:13). The features labeled ‘neighborhoods’ are areas designated ‘villagers’ in Apple’s map of the settlement in 1750.

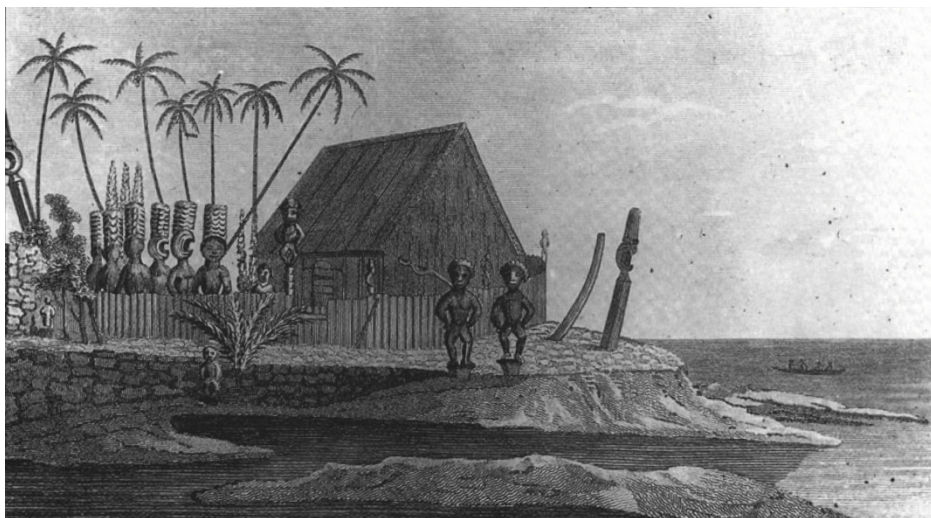


Figure 2. The “Hale o Keawe” temple at Honaunau, as depicted by William Ellis in 1823. Source: *The Depository of the Kings of Hawaii, adjoining the Place of Refuge at Honaunau* (public domain illustration, downloaded from Wikipedia commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hale_O_Keawe_by_William_Ellis.jpg).

are normally recurrent, predictable, routinized, and based on statutory obligations” (Tarschys 1988:7).

This distinction is crucial for understanding the incomes and expenses of states. The Hawaiian fiscal payments resembled taxes in that they were collected on a regular schedule based on the calendar, they were organized by specialized officials, and payment was a kind of statutory obligation of the king’s subjects. The major difference from other premodern tax systems seems to be the lack of written records of payments or obligations. As in the case of chiefdom vs. state, this is not just a terminological issue. The fiscal practices of polities—today and in the past—strongly influence political, military, and economic dynamics. I have suggested that in Mesoamerica the erroneous use of the term ‘tribute’ to refer to taxes is a subtle way of ‘primitivizing’ the Aztecs and other indigenous states, a refusal to acknowledge their advanced level of economic and political organization (Smith n.d.). The literature on comparative fiscal organization contains models and concepts that can illuminate the operation of Hawaiian states, but only if their payments are conceptualized as taxes, not tribute (Levi 1988; Tarschys 1988; Kiser and Kane 2007; Blanton and Fargher 2008; Cosgel and Miceli 2009; Jursa and Waerzeggers 2009; Monson and Scheidel n.d.).

The tradition of anthropological archaeology is weak in a number of areas, including oral historiography, urbanism, and fiscal organization. As someone who has published on these topics, I was both excited to see new evidence from a distinctive setting, and disappointed that it was not analyzed more effectively. Comparative analysis requires careful attention to the concepts used to describe and explain particular cases. I make these criticisms not to denigrate *How Chiefs Become Kings*. Instead, they show that I am fully convinced by Kirch's main argument and want to see it elaborated and refined. If we are now going to call Hawaii a state, then we should analyze it like a state, and this requires moving beyond anthropological archaeology into comparative political economy, urban studies, historiography, and other fields.

How Chiefs Became Kings is a well written, informative, and exciting book, and I recommend it to anyone interested in state formation or the comparative analysis of social change in chiefdoms and states.

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