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Economic dominance, conquest, or interaction among equals?

Theoretical models for understanding culture contact in
early Near Eastern complex societies

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Economic Dominance, Conquest, or Interaction among Equals? Theoretical Models for Understanding Culture Contact in Early Near Eastern Complex Societies”

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Interregional interaction or culture contact is a major factor in explaining the origins of many complex societies in the ancient Middle East and in other parts of the world. Culture contact can take a variety of different forms such as trade, emulation, colonization, and conquest. The most common models used to interpret culture contact are hierarchical or unequal in nature, so that core or colonizing societies are assumed to have dominated the local societies with whom they interacted. I think that this is a mistake. Although there are many examples when one society has dominated another, we cannot assume that this was always the case. We need to broaden our perspective to include non-hierarchical models that allow for a wide range of power relations among the different interacting polities. This paper has three parts. I start by giving a brief overview and critique of world systems theory and colonialism as the two most commonly used hierarchical models for the analysis of culture contact. I will then discuss culture contact in two early stages of the development of social complexity in the ancient Middle East— the 'Ubaid period, which saw the first emergence of chiefdom, and the Uruk period, when the first urbanized state societies developed. I suggest that the 'Ubaid and Uruk periods had different kinds of interaction systems, but we can understand both of these systems better by using non-hierarchical models that do not automatically assume unequal forms of culture contact where one society dominated the other.

Hierarchical models of Interregional Interaction

The two theoretical frameworks that archaeologists use most commonly to understand the political economy of inter-regional interaction are the World-system model and the idea of colonialism (Dietler 2010; Kardulias 1999; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Sanderson 1995; Stein 2005). These models rely on assumptions of hierarchy or power inequalities between core areas and local societies, and they assume a one-way flow of economic, military, and cultural influences from the colonizers to local societies. Both are grounded in the European expansion of the 16th-19th centuries.

The world systems model suggests that growth of complex societies can best be understood by looking at large scale interregional exchange networks composed of multiple competing polities (Wallerstein 1974). As a world system expands, it differentiates into two distinct zones—the “core” and the “periphery.” The core is highly developed, with economies that specialize in manufacturing high value finished products for home use and export to the periphery. The periphery provides raw materials and is either directly or indirectly controlled by the core. In its classic and still most widely used form, the world systems model relies on three main assumptions: 1) cores exercise economic dominance over peripheries, 2) cores control an asymmetric or unequal exchange system, and 3) long-distance trade plays the key role in structuring the political economy of the periphery. These highly questionable assumptions eliminate or minimize the roles of polities or groups in the periphery, local production and exchange, local agency, and internal dynamics of developmental change (Stein 1999, 2002b).

The second very common model is that of colonialism. Michael Dietler (2005) defines colonialism as “the projects and practices of control marshaled in interactions between societies linked in asymmetrical relations of power and the processes of social and cultural transformation resulting from those practices”. Colonialism is thus a form of unequal social relations and dominance by

intrusive foreign groups over local populations. The central defining case of colonialism is the expansion of early capitalist Europe to extend its control over the Americas, Africa, south Asia, and Southeast Asia from the sixteenth through the mid-twentieth century. We cannot simply assume that colonialism was characteristic of relations among pre-capitalist, non-western societies. We need to emphasize that “colonialism” and “colonies” are NOT the same thing. Instead, I suggest that it is useful to define colonies in a more flexible and non-hierarchical way as:

“an implanted settlement established by one society in either uninhabited territory or the territory of another society. The implanted settlement is established for long term residence by all or part of the homeland or metropole’s population and is both spatially and socially distinguishable from the communities of the indigenous polity or peoples among whom it is established. The settlement at least starts off with a distinct formal corporate identity as a community with cultural, ritual, economic, military, or political ties to its homeland, but the homeland need not politically dominate the implanted settlement.

This definition means that power relations among colonies and host communities can vary widely depending on local conditions. We cannot simply assume that the colony always dominates the host community. In fact, there can be colonies without colonialism.

Overall, hierarchical models of culture contact share three problems that severely limit their usefulness. First, they assume that the domination of the core states is absolute across all areas of a society - economic, political, military, and ideological. Second, they assume a one-way flow of influences from core states to peripheral cultures. Finally, both models view local cultures as passive groups that do not have “agency” or the ability to act independently in pursuit of their own goals or interests (Stein 2002b). Ancient culture contact was much more complex than these hierarchical interaction models would have us believe. Instead of core dominance, we have to recognize that there is a wide range of variation in the power relations of the societies in an interaction network. Under some conditions, more developed “cores” can certainly control less developed “peripheries” on the lines of world-systems or colonialism models. In many other cases, however, interaction can take place on a more equal basis. Some of the major factors that can affect the interregional balance of power are:

(1) distance and transportation economics; (2) technology (especially military and transportation technologies); (3) population size and composition (especially in the primary zone of culture contact); (4) disease; (5) military organization; and (6) the degree of social complexity in each polity. For that reason, it is important to broaden the range of our models of culture contact to include ways of thinking that allow for the possibility of hierarchy, but do not assume it in advance as the natural state of the world. The ‘Ubaid and Uruk periods in ancient Mesopotamia are two case studies that illustrate the utility of non-hierarchical models to understand inter-regional interaction in societies at two different levels of social complexity.

The ‘Ubaid Period

The ‘Ubaid culture first developed in the 6th millennium BC (figure 1) and marks the beginnings of social complexity in Mesopotamia (Carter and Philip 2010; Henrickson and Thuesen 1989; Oates 2004). ‘Ubaid material culture includes brown-painted and greenish ware ceramics, baked clay “mullers”, clay sickles, and distinctive cone-headed “ophidian” figurines (Breniquet 2001; Daems 2010). ‘Ubaid houses have a characteristic tripartite form. The ‘Ubaid sees the first development of towns as ritual centers controlling clusters of surrounding smaller villages. It also marks the first appearance in southern Mesopotamia of ritual public architecture in the form of temples with a standardized form (Safar et al 1981). We have some artistic evidence for possible political leaders or chiefs, while the range of house sizes and goods in ‘Ubaid sites shows the beginnings of socio-economic stratification (Stein 1994).

In the late sixth millennium BC, 'Ubaid material culture spread widely beyond southern Mesopotamia, forming a horizon style that extended over a distance of 1800 km, from the Mediterranean to the straits of Hormuz (Breniquet 1989; Carter 2006). In northern Mesopotamia, 'Ubaid styles replaced the earlier local Halaf culture. In almost all cases 'Ubaid material culture spread peacefully through some combination of trade and the local appropriation of 'Ubaid social identity and ceremonial ideology, rather than actual colonization (Stein and Ozbal 2007). We have evidence for very elaborate trade networks for luxury and other goods, crisscrossing and connecting the sites with 'Ubaid material culture.

The widespread distribution of 'Ubaid material culture formed a "horizon style" that connected all of Mesopotamia and neighboring areas (Stein 2010a). The Northern sites show that the 'Ubaid horizon was composed of many local groups that continued to keep their own local traditions even though they were also linked by being part of a larger system. There is no evidence that the 'Ubaid horizon was a single unified political structure. Despite the linkages of shared 'Ubaid pottery styles, we can see important political and economic differences between the different local regions. 'Ubaid and other sites in North Mesopotamia and western Iran had developed copper metallurgy (Stein 2010a) and the use of stamp seals for record keeping (Alizadeh 1988; 2006; Hole 1983), but the 'Ubaid sites in the south do not seem to have adopted either one of these important technologies. Similarly, the north Mesopotamian local 'Ubaid cultures were not exact copies of the southern 'Ubaid.

Instead, they show many significant continuities with the pre-existing Halaf culture, such as the widespread use of seals and sealings, smaller nuclear family sized houses, and the continuing use of Halaf style figurines and house forms in 'Ubaid levels (Breniquet 1989). Excavations at Tell Zeidan in north central Syria provide good evidence for the co-existence of these co-existing local and global identities in the incipient complex societies of the 'Ubaid period (Stein 2009, 2010b, 2011). Zeidan is a 12.5 ha 'Ubaid regional center the confluence of the Balikh and Euphrates rivers. The earlier indigenous Halaf levels show a peaceful transition to an 'Ubaid occupation at Zeidan. Monumental public architecture and exotic prestige goods attest to the emergence of socio-economic differentiation and ranking (figure 2). Long distance trade networks for obsidian extended north into the mountains of Eastern Turkey and into Armenia.

Close similarities in ceramic forms and the use of baked clay mullers show clearly that Zeidan was part of the broader 'Ubaid horizon. However, it is equally clear that the people of Zeidan had developed a distinctive social identity whose material culture was a hybrid style that combined both south Mesopotamian motifs and north Syrian elements (figure 3). The ceramics combine southern 'Ubaid styles with locally derived images of animals and humans – something very rarely if ever seen in southern Mesopotamia. At the same time, the figurines from Zeidan are of a distinctively local Halaf-derived style very different from the typical figurines of the south Mesopotamian 'Ubaid (figure 4).

The example of Zeidan shows that local regional identities persisted in northern regions even within the framework of broad linkages as expressed through the shared use of selected styles of 'Ubaid material culture. I suggest that that the 'Ubaid Horizon may be most usefully understood as a form of interaction sphere (Stein 2010a). The term indicates that there were social, ideological, and trade connections among groups that shared a limited range of distinct material culture items (Caldwell 1964; Carr 2005; Yoffee 1993; Wright 2002). Interaction spheres link politically and culturally distinct regions or polities within a broader system. The shared items of material culture form a symbolic vocabulary that expresses and reproduces a common set of values and beliefs throughout the system. The shared symbolic elements can be related to either religious ideologies, or community identities, or emerging elite status in a prestige goods system. The concept of an interaction sphere makes no assumption of political or cultural unity within its boundaries, nor does



it specify what social, economic, or power relations link the constituent groups. The differences between the different local parts of an interaction sphere are as important as the small number of overarching similarities that link them. In fact, local variation in resources is probably the factor that actually generates the interaction sphere in the first place.

We can understand Greater Mesopotamia in the 5th millennium as an interaction sphere composed of distinct regions having different economic systems, and varying degrees of emergent social complexity. Some areas such as southern Mesopotamia, the North Mesopotamian Jezira, and the Ubaid-related cultures of the Susiana plain in southwestern Iran appear to have been incipient complex societies, or what we can call “chiefdoms” (e.g. Hole 1983; Flannery 1999; Stein 1994). However other regions within the Ubaid interaction sphere— such as the western shore of the Persian Gulf— seem to have been less socially complex (Carter and Crawford 2010).

There is no evidence for south Mesopotamian colonization or any kind of domination over neighboring areas within the Ubaid interaction sphere. This loosely defined general ‘Ubaid identity created enough of a connection between distant communities to allow them to build long-term, stable trade connections with each-other. The crucial connections in the ‘Ubaid interaction sphere were related to a very broad idea of identity at both the personal and the community level, so that individuals and groups were defining themselves as part of a larger inclusive ‘Ubaid system. At the same time, the persistence of local characteristics suggests that regional identities and the broader ‘Ubaid identity co-existed, so that one or the other came into play depending on the specific social context.

The Uruk Period

The following Uruk period saw the development of very different forms of political economy with the emergence of the earliest urbanized state societies in southern Mesopotamia (Algaze 1993, 2001; Pollock 1992; Rothman 2001; Surenhagen 1986; Wright 2001). This complex system of culture contact in early state societies can be usefully studied through the second non-hierarchical model to be discussed here— the trade diaspora (Cohen 1971; Curtin 1984, Stein 2002a). Trade across cultural boundaries is risky business, requiring highly specialized skills, and the ability to function within the value systems of two distinct societies.

As a network of interacting societies grows in scale and complexity, exchange increasingly becomes the domain of specialized merchants who travel between regions or settle in the foreign community with whom they trade. One of the most useful ways to recognize variation in the organization of inter-regional exchange is the concept of the ‘trade diaspora’. Trade diasporas are *inter-regional exchange networks composed of spatially dispersed specialized merchant groups that are culturally distinct, organizationally cohesive, and socially independent from their host communities while maintaining a high level of economic and social ties with related communities who share the same cultural identity* (Cohen 1971).

Trade diasporas arise when culturally distinct groups are engaged in exchange under conditions where communication and transportation are difficult, and where state institutions are not effective in providing security for long distance exchanges. One way to overcome these difficulties is for traders from one ethnic group to control all or most of the stages of trade in specific commodities. To do this effectively, the merchants organize themselves as a cohesive group to deal with their host community. Members of the trading group move into new areas, settle in centers along trade routes, and specialize in exchange while keeping a separate cultural identity from their host community. A trade diaspora can have a wide range of possible relationships with its host community.

1) Diaspora Marginality: In some cases, the rulers of the host community treat the trade diaspora as a marginal or outcast group to be exploited at will. The foreign enclave's presence is only tolerated because it is useful to the host community (Curtin 1984).

2) Diaspora Autonomy: The second form of diaspora status is that of protected autonomy within the host community. For example, the Chinese trade diaspora in Southeast Asia was able to gain a high degree of autonomy in its host communities by being economically useful to local ruling elites (Yambert 1981). The Chinese merchants' monopoly on access to Chinese ports and goods were powerful incentives to local elites in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines to extend them trading monopolies and tax concessions. The Chinese occupied special neighborhoods given to them by the local rulers. The Armenian trade diaspora of New Julfa in 17th century Safavid Isfahan seems to have enjoyed a similar level of political and cultural autonomy (Aslanian 2011).

3) Diaspora Dominance: At the extreme end of the range of variation in the organization of inter-regional exchange is the fairly unusual situation where the trade diaspora actually controls its host community. The classic examples of this are the European trading post empires in Africa and Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This third possibility represents the form of trade diaspora implicit in world-system models (Scammell 1989; Wolf 1982).

The trade diaspora concept provides a framework that allows for a tremendous range of variation in the organization of inter-regional interaction. This approach is particularly valuable as a way to understand the colonial network established by Mesopotamia in the Uruk period. In the fourth millennium BC, urbanized state societies emerged in southern Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran. The Uruk period has evidence for the earliest development of urbanism, kingship, and writing. Uruk state societies quickly expanded to form an extensive interaction network connecting the southern Mesopotamia with the neighboring highlands to the north and east. A number of sites in southeast Turkey, north Syria, North Mesopotamia, and western Iran have been identified as Uruk trading colonies, established to gain access to raw materials such as metals, lumber, and semiprecious stones from the resource-rich highlands (figure 5).

The colonies have the full range of Uruk material culture, including ceramics, architecture, and administrative technology such as cylinder seals, bullae, tokens, and clay tablets with numerical inscriptions to monitor the circulation of goods.

In some cases, the colonies were founded as new sites on uninhabited land. However, at the outer reaches of the exchange network in the highland resource zones, Uruk colonies took the form of small trading enclaves within pre-existing indigenous settlements such as Hacinebi (Stein 1999). At Hacinebi, a full range of Uruk styles of material culture is present (figure 6) in parallel with other parts of the site where the earlier, local Anatolian styles continue to be present (figure 7).

Cylinder seals were used in the Uruk parts of Hacinebi, while in the local parts of the site, people used the local tradition of stamp seal administrative technology. Comparisons of animal bones between the Uruk and Anatolian parts of the site show differences between the two groups in food preferences, so that sheep and goats were 49 % of the local meat consumption in the local neighborhoods, but provided 80-90 % of the Uruk diet. This matches known food preferences in the south Mesopotamian heartland. Butchery practices show clear differences between Uruk and local contexts both in the location and width of the cut marks, suggesting that the two groups used different butchering tools. Spindle whorls, flint cores, sickle blades, and kiln wasters show that the colonists farmed their own land and produced their own craft goods.

The Uruk enclave at Hacinebi was an autonomous community both economically and culturally (Stein 2002a). They used Uruk styles of material culture in virtually every sphere. They maintained



culturally distinctive food preparation practices and food preferences. They maintained their Uruk identity for at least three centuries of peaceful coexistence with their local Anatolian neighbors. At the same time, the evidence suggests that they stayed in close contact with other Uruk communities and with their homeland, while conducting an active trade for copper and other commodities. The evidence suggests that exchange with the local community was on equal terms, with no signs of force or one-way flows of goods from the local community into the Uruk enclave. The political economy of interaction at Hacinebi is the complete opposite of world systems or colonialist models, but fits perfectly with the organization of an autonomous trade diaspora.

The power of the Uruk states over other parts of the interaction network appears to have declined with increasing distance from the alluvium (Stein 1998). In the south Mesopotamian heartland, cities such as Uruk controlled their rural hinterlands, exacting taxes and administering the most basic subsistence activities. In the sparsely populated areas of Syria closest to southern Mesopotamia proper—colonies such as Habuba Kabira were large fortified settlements that apparently used coercion to control the local Syrian communities around them. In more distant regions, Uruk enclaves such as Hacinebi took the form of small 'outposts' located inside the pre-existing local towns. The small numbers and vulnerable position of the Uruk colonists at Hacinebi meant that the people of this distant trade diaspora could only survive by remaining on good terms with their more powerful indigenous neighbors.

This comparison the 'Ubaid and Uruk periods shows the value of non-hierarchical interaction models for understanding the interaction systems of both pre-state and state societies. The 'Ubaid expansion reflects the gradual, peaceful spread of an ideological system and the formation of an interaction sphere that linked a variety of different local cultures, forming new, hybrid social identities in these areas. By contrast, The Uruk expansion represents the establishment of actual colonies in the regions surrounding Mesopotamia. These colonies are best understood as autonomous trade diasporas that, at the distant outer reaches of the colonial network, often interacted with the local communities as equals in a system of symmetric trade.

Overall, interregional interaction can be characterized by either hierarchy or by equality in power relations, depending on local conditions and cultural histories. Non-hierarchical models such as interaction spheres and trade diasporas provide a useful way to understand the tremendous range of variation in the organization of culture contact among early complex societies.

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Figures



Map of 'Ubaid and 'Ubaid-related sites in 6th-5th millennium BC Mesopotamia and neighboring regions.

Ubaid prestige goods in Upper Mesopotamia: Zeidan and Gawra (from Tobler 1950): copper axes, mace heads, ground stone palettes, carved obsidian bowl, chlorite polished rod



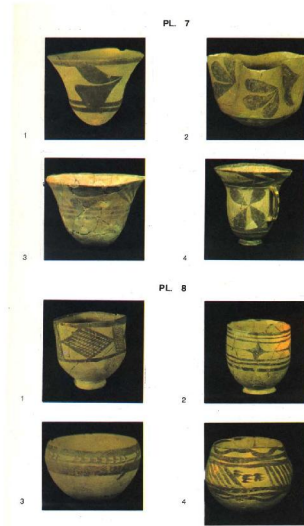
'Ubaid period prestige goods from Tell Zeidan and Tepe Gawra.

“Ubaid” painted ceramics

North Mesopotamia: Tell Zeidan



South Mesopotamia: Eridu



‘Ubaid period ceramics from Tell Zeidan, showing “hybrid” style of Zeidan ceramics as compared to Ubaid ceramics from the site of Eridu in southern Mesopotamia.



Zeidan Ubaid phase
Figurines-
Local
North Mesopotamian
(Halaf-derived) style



South
Mesopotamian
“classic” Ubaid
Style ophidian
figurine

Hybrid style Ubaid figurines from Tell Zeidan compared with Ubaid “ophidian” figurines from southern Mesopotamia.



The Uruk Expansion – selected Uruk sites in Mesopotamia and neighboring regions.



Southern Uruk style material culture at Hacinebi.

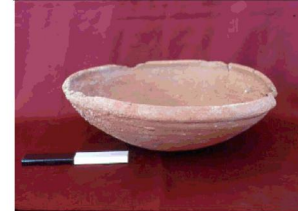
Uruk
BRBs & wheel made
sand tempered wares



LC-4
("Late Middle Uruk")
Uruk-Local
Interaction in
Hacinebi
Phase B2a-b



Local LC4
Hand-built
chaff tempered wares



Uruk and Local Late Chalcolithic contemporaneous ceramic styles at Hacinebi.