Societal Complexity

The classification of societal complexity allows archaeologists to understand and explain, roughly, the size of a society and its form of leadership. Societies are complex in how large they are, how varied their political structures are organized, how they view the members of their groups, and how they use their environment and resources. Social complexity is understood using size, social organization, and political organization. Social Complexity can be demonstrated in an evaluation of a society, such as the society of the Great Zimbabwe site in Africa.

Social complexity is measured using various concepts including size and group political organization (Wilreker). Scale is how large a group is. Scale is important because it shows which form of political organization is likely in use in the group, how widespread the group was, and how well the environment was able to support the group as well as how well the group was able to adapt to the environment. Hierarchy is the stratified social organization of a group. Groups with a clear stratified hierarchy are generally larger and hierarchy helps in the categorization of groups. Heterarchy is a network with all members roughly equal in standing and no centralized leadership (Wilreker). Heterarchy is a more egalitarian form of social organization and is mostly seen in band and tribal structures.

One model for the political organization of human societies divides them into five categories; Bands, Tribes, Simple Chiefdoms, Complex Chiefdoms, and States. A band is a small kinship based group, usually mobile hunter-gatherers with approximately a dozen people to each group, with an egalitarian structure and no single leader (Wilreker; Scarre, 32). Bands do not follow one head person, but have a heterarchical structure with many leaders that take charge under certain situations, when not in the position of head person they have no more power than any other member of the band (Wilreker). The next level of political organization would be Tribes. Tribes contain multiple bands with loose central leadership, can be held together by the idea of having a common ancestor or cultural background, usually settled farmers or pastoralist herders (Wilreker; Scarre, 32). Tribes have no real central hierarchy, exhibiting heterarchy and egalitarianism (Wilreker; Scarre, 32). The definition of tribes is disputed. When looking at actual groups, the tribes in a given area are all interconnected and form more of a network than a real single and defined entity (Wilreker). The next level of political organization in human groups is the Simple Chiefdom. The simple chiefdom consists of 10,000 or more individuals with a stratified hierarchical system with agrarian tendencies and some material wealth (Wilreker; Scarre, 32). Simple chiefdoms have nobles and commoners, a chief is elected from among the nobles to act as head person but has no real power over fellow nobles (Wilreker). All nobles have power over commoners, and power and station are heritable (Wilreker). Complex chiefdoms are much the same as simple chiefdoms, although do tend to be larger and more dependent upon agriculture (Wilreker). The main difference is that in a complex chiefdom, the chieftain has power over all the persons in the society below them, including the nobles (Wilreker). States are the next level of political organization. States are much larger than chiefdoms, and have a monopoly on the justified use of force (Wilreker). States have a centralized and institutionalized control of the population that overrides kinship ties and rank and class are enforced (Wilreker; Scarre, 32).

An example of an early state is the Zimbabwe Plateau area. This area had rich natural resources including metals and granite (Scarre, 385). A good agricultural climate, fertile soil, and the ability to sustain cattle (Scarre, 385). The Zimbabwe Plateau is home to many large sites with significant stone structures and cities that could have supported up to 18,000 people (Scarre, 385-386). One site, Great Zimbabwe, had large granite enclosures that included large granite structures for the rulers of the area, their supporters, and ritual spaces (Scarre, 386-387). The society in Great Zimbabwe and its surrounding area would be an example of a state. The Great Zimbabwe society had agriculture and herding which allowed them to support a larger population. There was obvious specialization as shown by the presence of impressive masonry, ritual spaces, smelting, bureaucrats, and an extensive trading network (Scarre, 386-387). Specialization only comes about once a society has a large enough population, with the means to support it, without every person being included in food production or preparation allowing the excess of population to take up other occupations in society (Wilreker). The sheer size of the population at Great Zimbabwe points to statehood, as well as a central leadership structure with defined classes and evidence for a large difference between classes. The difference between the leadership of Great Zimbabwe, the nobility, and the commoners is great, as evidenced by the structures made for the ruling family, the residential centers for elite, and the clay and wood huts for the not so elite (Scarre, 386-387).

Scale and social organization can be used to determine political organization. Political organization, and the classification of, helps archaeologists to understand how the society organized itself politically and how large the society was. Great Zimbabwe is an example of a state level society in Africa complete with centralized leadership and social stratification. Social complexity is greatly different between cultures and groups and is measured by size and social organization. Social complexity is classified into five main categories; bands, tribes, simple chiefdoms, complex chiefdoms, and states.

Bibliography

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