

## **Legitimation Crises in Premodern Worlds**

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### **Abstract**

Scholars employing world-system theory have tended to examine how world-system develop and expand, while few have addressed the fragmentation or collapse of world-systems. This paper explores the conditions of world-system collapse using Habermas's concept of legitimation crisis as a starting point. The paper posits that legitimation crises are a recurring problem in world-systems and have led to collapse in a number of cases. Prehistoric North American and Pacific world-systems are used as examples.

### **Introduction**

If the world-system perspective is indeed rooted in the proposition that "everything is process," as Wallerstein stated in his seminal 1974 article, then collapse (which I define following Tainter [1988: 4] as a significant loss of an established level of sociopolitical complexity) should be one of the processes we are interested in. In fact, our work should equally weigh rise and collapse, centralization and decentralization, growth and decline, viewing them as alternate outcomes of a singular process of world-system operation, rather than as polar opposites--one occurring when a world-system is functioning well, the other when it has broken down. Despite this, world-systems analyses have rarely focused on collapse, even though world-systems theory should be particularly useful for investigating collapse because crisis in one part of the system could, due to the interdependency of politics in the world-system, lead to crisis in the system as a whole--a process that seems common (Tainter 1988).

Existing theories of collapse tend to assume environmental crises or failures in the subsistence economy are the basis of collapse, and often this assumption is not clearly articulated. A perusal of Tainter's (1988: 39-90) comprehensive summary of these theories will demonstrate that many discussions of collapse, while not explicitly concerned with the

[Page 1]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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environment or subsistence economy, implicitly describe collapse in terms of environmental degradation, overpopulation, increasingly marginal returns on the energy put into complexity (Tainter's own view--1988: 118-123), or the like. In short, these theories implicitly link collapse to crisis in the subsistence economy; to a crisis in the ability of individuals to maintain life processes (also see the papers in Yoffee and Cowgill 1988). In contrast I suggest collapse is equally likely to stem from a crisis in social reproduction--from an inability of individuals to sustain themselves socially-- and not from individuals' inability to sustain themselves physically.

This paper considers the collapse of world-systems and posits a theory emphasizing social reproduction to explain why repeated patterns of rise and decline appear so common (Anderson 1994; Blanton et al. 1996). The theory is rooted in the work of Jurgen Habermas, a controversial figure whose sociological writings are difficult, uneven, and often flawed (see, for example, Bernstein 1985), but one whose insights into the workings of the Capitalist world-system, and, by extension, other, premodern world-systems, have been overlooked. To be fair, both to Habermas and to world-systems theorists, Habermas has never embraced the world-systems perspective and has never talked about the Capitalist "world-system." However, Habermas's work on the culture of late Capitalism is explicitly cybernetic in approach, and Habermas views Capitalism as an holistic system of interdependent polities much as Wallerstein does. Habermas lacks the specific theories of world-system process, of geographic differentiation and competition, of unequal exchange and uneven development, but his ideas are, I suggest, amenable to the world-system perspective, and can easily be incorporated into it.

The primary distinction between Habermas's perspective and a strictly world-systems one is that Habermas views the economic, political, and social subsystems of Capitalism as having equal importance. In other words, the economy is not seen to be the only, or even the most important, force in the system's operation. Indeed Habermas (1973) argues that these three subsystems are so intertwined that they cannot be reasonably separated. His insistence that the political and social be given equal weight to the economic is a product both of his philosophy of "communicative action," which envisions all social forms as created through communication between "rational" individuals, and his understanding of how the Capitalist system operates (see Habermas 1976).

Figure 1 is a diagram of Habermas's (1973) conception of the Capitalist system. On the far left is the economic system, the privately-owned enterprises which produce goods and

[Page 2]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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services for profit. The arrows going to and from it show how it is aided by the political system, which develops laws and policies beneficial to economic interests, and which works with other polities to maintain favorable conditions for growth. In this way, the political system helps to steer the economic system to maximum performance for private,

profit-driven interests. In return, the economic system financially supports the political system, which cannot maintain itself otherwise since it produces nothing beyond steering the economic system and providing social welfare, which leads to the other side of the diagram.

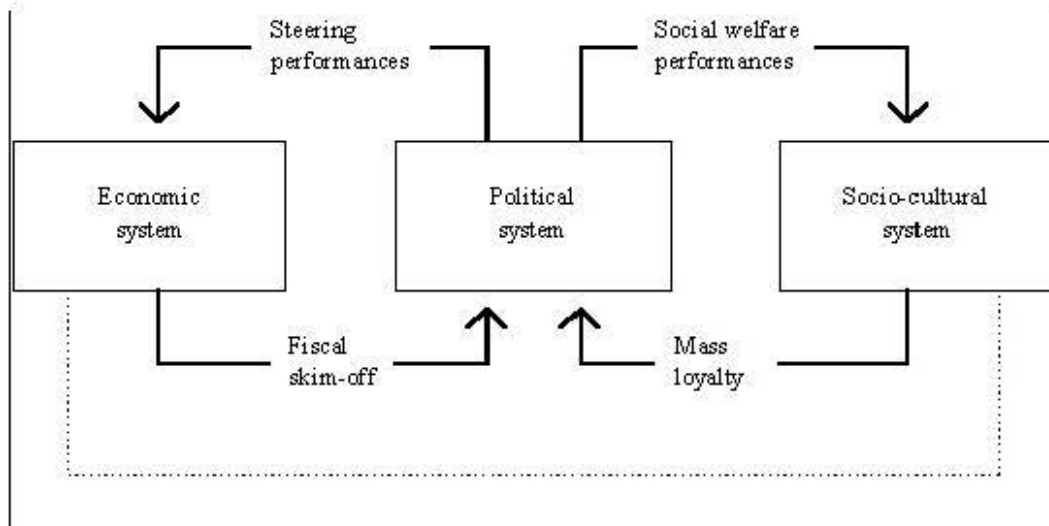


Figure 1. Habermas's conception of Capitalist socio-political organization.

The right side of Figure 1 shows the socio-cultural system, basically the traditions, beliefs, norms, values, expectations, and the like, which are shared by members of the polity. As the figure shows, these traditions are aided by the polity through social welfare programs which support them, leading, in turn, to mass popular support for the polity. The political system uses financial resources generated through the economic system to support the socio-cultural system, which, in turn, legitimates the polity's existence and right to govern, i.e., its right to create and implement laws and policies beneficial to the maximum operation of the economic system. This interdependency is the basis of Habermas's view of Capitalist societies and the basis of his conception of legitimation crises.

Because the three systems are tightly interdependent, a crisis in any one of them may lead to a systemic crisis of the whole. However, Habermas (1973) suggests that the weak point in the system is in the "mass loyalty" arrow leading from the socio-cultural system to the political system. His reason for this is complicated, but is basically that the political system can control everything except people's "rational" minds, and crises in any part of the system are going to tend to produce crises in legitimation, precisely because it cannot be readily controlled. Habermas's insight is crucial for the discussion of collapse in world-systems. What Habermas argues is that an environmental calamity or crisis in the subsistence economy is not a necessary, or even common, precondition for collapse; rather, a crisis in the socio-cultural system, a legitimation crisis, is a more likely source of political collapse.

Clearly there are some unique features of Capitalism that both illuminate and confuse Habermas's perspective as applied to non-Capitalist societies, particularly the intimate

link between knowledge, power, and capital (Lyotard 1984), but it is my assertion that the interrelated system Habermas proposes for Capitalist societies exists in all politically centralized societies, albeit not in the same manner as it does in Capitalist ones. One clear problem with Habermas's model is that he fails to emphasize the importance of social reproduction. Habermas focuses solely on what I call the subsistence economy, and not on

[Page 3]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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what I call the prestige economy, the system through which individuals create and maintain social standing, prestige, power, and the like. I argue that maintaining these are vitally important (sometimes even more important than maintaining life) in all societies, even Capitalist ones.

I suggest we can revise Habermas's diagram to give emphasis to social reproduction by replacing the "economic system" with "prestige-system", the "political system" with "elites", and the "socio-cultural system" with "non-elites". The revised diagram is shown in Figure 2.

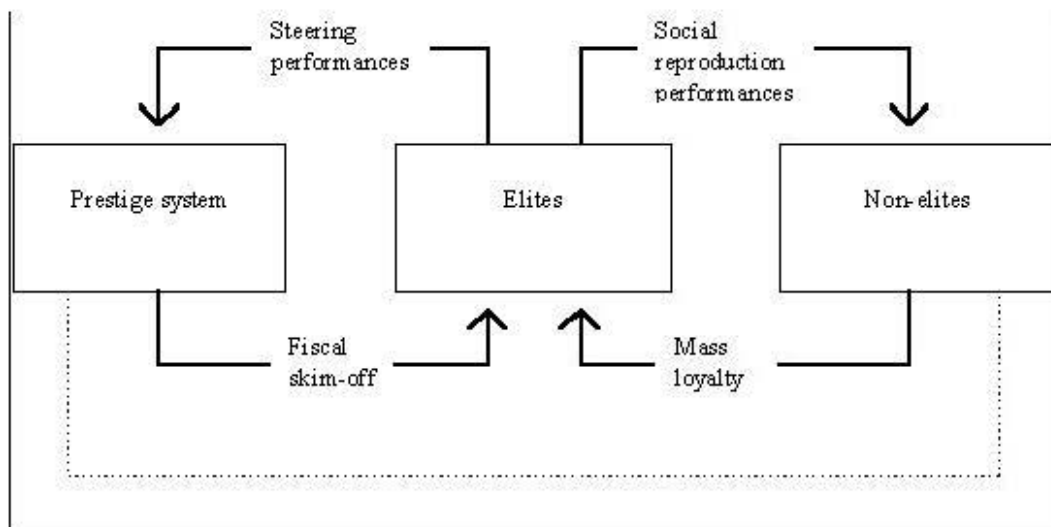


Figure 2. Habermas's conception of socio-political organization revised to focus on social reproduction.

In Figure 2 "prestige-system" represents the myriad of ways in which prestige is accrued and maintained in the society. It includes knowledge, rituals, and symbols which convey and display status. Elites help to "steer" the prestige-system through sumptuary laws, policies, and regulations. By guiding this system the elites effectively ensure their own status, but they also provide opportunities for status enhancement to their followers, the "non-elites" in the system. The non-elites, in return, provide loyalty to the elites.



The system works similar to the way Habermas sees Capitalism operating, except that profit here is in terms of prestige rather than of capital. Also, there are either no individuals who uniquely control the economic sector (i.e., who own the "means of production"), or if there are, they are the same individuals as the elites who run the political sector. In other words, elite manipulation is not focused on production to sustain life, but rather on sustaining systems of social reproduction. An example may help illustrate this idea.

### The Tongan Polity

The Tongan archipelago is located in the Pacific Ocean some 2000 miles east of Australia and 600 miles southeast of Fiji. It consists of about 160 islands strung out over 200 miles on a roughly northeast-southwest axis (Kirch 1984: 217). The population in the 1920s was about 25,000, most of whom lived on the three large islands of the archipelago (Gifford 1929: 4): Tongatabu (100 square miles); Haapai (20 square miles); and Vavau (46 square

[Page 4]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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miles), and most of the land area was given over to fields and stands of yam, taro, sweet potato, breadfruit, plantains, and coconuts (Goldman 1970: 281).

At the time of first contact with Europeans (ca. 1643), Tonga had a dual political structure, with two major leaders: the *Tu'i Tonga*, who was considered divine, and was the link between humans and deities; and the *Tu'i Kanokupolu*, who answered only to the *Tu'i Tonga*, and was responsible for secular concerns in the chiefdom (Kirch 1984: 224-25). As described by Basil Thompson (quoted in Kirch 1984: 225):

*[the spiritual king]--the Tu'i Tonga--was lord of the soil, and enjoyed divine honours in virtue of his immortal origin...The temporal king--the Tu'i Kanokubolu--was the irresponsible sovereign of the people, wielding absolute power of life and death over his subjects, and was charged with the burden of the civil government and the ordering of the tribute due to the gods and their earthly representative, the Tu'i Tonga.*

Both the *Tu'i Tonga* and the *Tu'i Kanokupolu* had a group of four chiefs and attendants who were known as *falefa*, and served as the *Tu'i*'s courtiers (Kirch 1984: 230-31). Subservient to the *Tu'i Kanokupolu*'s *falefa* were a number of local, landholding chiefs, or *eiki*, their attendants, or *matapule*. Subservient to the landholding chiefs were lesser chiefs, also called *matapule*, hereditary titled craftsmen, or *tohunga*, and finally commoners, or *tua* (Kirch 1984: 231-32).

Irving Goldman (1970: 314-15) offers an interesting outline of the Tongan political structure through what he describes as four segments of political hierarchy. The first

segment refers to the Tu'i Tonga and Tu'i Kanokupolu, who maintain ultimate power in Tonga. The second segment refers to the chiefs of landholding lineages, who "were in virtually all respects sovereign in their own jurisdiction. Each major lineage was a replica of the entire administration" (Goldman 1970: 315). The third segment refers to sub-chiefs of the major landholding lineages, "and for its most part a replica in most respects of the major branch, dependent on the major as the major was on the Tu'i Tonga or his representatives" (Goldman 1970: 315). Finally, the fourth segment refers to the patrilocal household. Goldman (1970: 315) tells us that "A hierarchy of successive dependencies was the ancient Tongan scheme," and at the base was the patrilocal household.

The organization of these patrilocal households was reproduced in the political hierarchy of Tonga. Generation and sex were the basis of rank within the family, and rank was the basis of political power: "The first-born son took the title, the social position, and

[Page 5]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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the leadership in the family" (Goldman 1970: 289). Although sisters outranked brothers in formal honor, females did not hold political office or power in Tonga, and the head of the family was the eldest male, and was succeeded by his younger brother or eldest child (Gifford 1929: 20, 290).

This patrilineal ranking between fathers and sons, older brothers and younger brothers, was reproduced in the political hierarchy of Tonga, and formed a base for legitimating power. As Gifford (1929: 19) explains:

*Ranking of individuals within the Tongan family...is the key to the organization of Tongan society in every stratum. From the bottom to top and from top to bottom of the social ladder one general scheme of family organization prevails. As the Tu'i Tonga is eiki (chief) to his younger brothers, so in every Tongan family the older brother is chief to his younger brothers...Relatively speaking, in every household there are chiefs and commoners.*

The reproduction of this system of generational ranking throughout the Tongan political hierarchy is obvious in the nature of political relationships:

*Titled chiefs stand in certain fixed relationship to one another. Thus Ata, the "dean" of the Tongan chiefs is "grandfather" (kui) to all of the chiefs in the kingdom, except the Haa Ngata Motua chiefs, to whom he is "older brother" (taokete)...These are not true relationships, even though considered as extensions of terms for lineal relatives to collateral relatives. They are, if anything, mirrors of the relationships in which the first title bearers stood to one another (Gifford 1929: 128).*

### **Primogeniture, Marriage, and Power in Tonga**

Power in Tonga was held, at all levels, by social elders. In the family, the eldest member served as head. Lineage chiefs were considered the socially eldest in the lineage. Higher chiefs were "grandfather" or "older brother" to lesser chiefs, and all the chiefs were descended from the Tu'i Tonga. The power elders had over subordinates was derived, in part, from their control of prestige-goods.

[Page 6]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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Prestige-goods were a vital part of Tongan marriage alliances, and hence, were vital to an individual's ability to marry well. Prestige-goods in Tonga were controlled at the highest level, by the Tu'i Tonga and the Tu'i Kanokupolu. They flowed down the levels of hierarchy, and were a central force in maintaining hierarchical relationships. Kirch (1984: 238) makes this point very clear:

*Tonga stands unique among the indigenous Polynesian chiefdoms for its extensive and regular long-distance exchange relations with societies beyond its own geographic and political borders. This long-distance exchange had political consequences which were far greater than any immediate, utilitarian gain due to the importation of exotic material items. Long-distance exchange of chiefly spouses as well as of material items was fundamentally a political strategy, and played a vital role in binding the core islands and outliers to the central polity.*

Marriage payments, and the social prestige that went along with them, were described in detail by Gifford (1929: 192-93):

*Preceding the day of the beginning of the [wedding] ceremony, the fathers of the bride and groom each assembled a large gift, including tapa, mats, and oil. The particular father notified all his relatives and all his wife's relatives of the coming ceremony and asked for contributions...In distributing the presents, the bridegroom's father or other official representative of his people...had in mind what each person had donated toward the present that had been given to the bride's people, and each got his original gift returned in double quantity. In accomplishing this return, the distributor often stripped his own house of all its material property. If he should fail to complete the traditional remuneration to all concerned, his unmarried sons and daughters and the progeny of his married children lost face and might consequently fail to contract desirable marriages...A similar distribution was made of the presents of the bridegroom's people to the bride's people.*

If there was great inequality in the size of the wedding gifts, the group making the smaller donation was shamed and lost social prestige to the other group.

In Tongan society marriage with an eldest son or daughter virtually determined the status of one's children, grandchildren, and lineage. As Gifford (1929: 20, 112) explains:



*a commoner is an individual who by virtue of descent through a series of younger brothers has in the course of generations become further and further removed from the patriarchal head*

[Page 7]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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*of the family, as represented by a continuous line of successive eldest sons...The commoner is the man in a line of descent that gets further and further from the head of the lineage with each succeeding generation.*

A Tongan's social position was relatively fixed. Although there was some room for movement, the status of his lineage, his parents, and his birth-order, all more-or-less determined his status. The potential status of his children, his grandchildren, and, in the long run his lineage, were, however, dependent upon marriages. By continuously "marrying up" in the Tongan hierarchy, an individual's children, grandchildren, and lineage could slowly increase their status. Just as a commoner was the product of a long line of younger brothers, so a chief was the product of a long line of elder siblings. The goal of Tongan marriage was to keep one's relatives marrying elders.

There was tremendous pressure to meet marriage payments and to make them extravagant, so that one's descendants would not lose rank through a poor marriage. Since prestige-goods were needed for these payments, and the payments made possible marriage with a socially elder individual, those who controlled prestige-goods controlled individuals' abilities to socially reproduce themselves, as Kirch (1984: 241) makes clear:

*Kinship alliances linked the paramount lines with those of the local ruling chiefs in the core islands and outliers. Such alliances were confirmed by marriage relations, for which exotic prestige goods were vital. In turn, the outlying islands affirmed their inferior status and loyalty to the hau [Tu'i Kanokupolu] and the Tu'i Tonga through the tribute of the 'inasi. Thus within the chiefdom there was a circular flow of goods, tribute inwards towards the paramounts, prestige goods outwards to the local chiefs. Monopolization of the sources of prestige goods by the paramounts helped to secure their power over the system as a whole.*

Tongan social elites controlled prestige-goods needed by their subordinates to socially reproduce themselves. A dependency relationship thereby existed between elders and subordinates, that served to keep the elders in power and able to control younger members of society. This relationship is diagrammed in Figure 3.



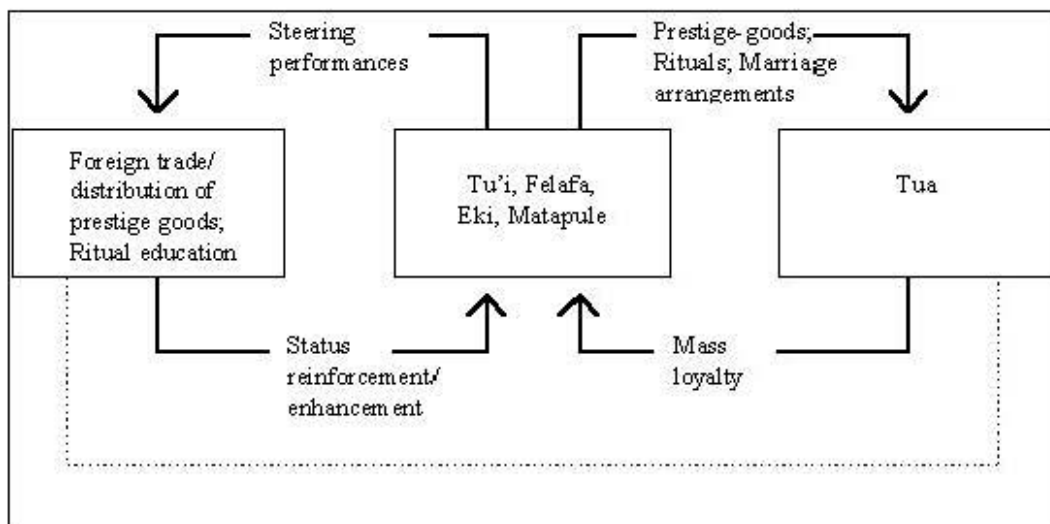


Figure 3. Revised conception of socio-political organization applied to Tonga.

At the center of Figure 3 are the Tongan elites, the Tu'is and the other nobility. Through them prestige-goods, rituals, and advantageous marriage arrangements (which are, as

[Page 8]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

discussed earlier, dependent in part on access to prestige-goods) flow to the non-elites, or Tua, on the right side of the diagram. The Tua, in return, support the nobility. The left side of Figure 3 shows the external trade in prestige-goods and, to some extent, marriage partners conducted by the Tu'is and their representatives. The Tu'is and other nobles conduct and manage this trade, as well as the local distribution of traded goods, and by doing so enhance their own noble status. In addition, the nobles control ritual knowledge and its dissemination--another arena for status enhancement and reinforcement.

Clearly a weak point in this system is the foreign trade in prestige-goods. If broken this weak point could easily lead to a legitimation crisis. If trade were cut off, an important avenue for both status enhancement and, more importantly, the maintenance of mass loyalty would be severed. If the nobility could not find another avenue to reinforce mass loyalty, perhaps through new, locally-manufactured prestige-goods, fulfilling ritual or supernatural needs, or some other mechanism, a legitimation crisis could ensue, perhaps causing a collapse of the political structure. In the Tongan case this did not occur; however, during a period of civil war among rival Tu'is and their followers, ties with Europeans that provided status-enhancing trade objects and supernatural knowledge (or Christianity) were actively sought by the contending elites (see, for example, Thompson 1894: 314-318; Vason 1810: 75-83). Indeed, Latukefa (1974: 66-67) suggests that the ultimate reunification of the Tongan Islands under Taufa'ahau (commonly known as King George, in power from 1833-1893) was achieved through a political strategy which

included his open acceptance of Christianity and support for new sources of status and power afforded by Christian missionaries (also see Thompson 1894: 346-352).

There are many cases which end differently; that is, in legitimation crisis and collapse. One such case, I suggest, is the prehistoric Moundville polity of west-central Alabama.

### **The Moundville Polity**

The Moundville polity represents one of the pinnacles of cultural evolution in eastern North America. Moundville is part of the larger Mississippian cultural system, which evolved beginning about A.D. 900 in the Mississippi River valley and its major tributaries. The Mississippians developed large population centers, traded with peoples as distant as the Florida Gulf coast and the Great Plains, and constructed the largest pre-Columbian structures north of Mexico. Mississippian influence spread across eastern North America in the following century, and by A.D. 1100 it was the predominant culture across the Southeast and

[Page 9]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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had fundamentally influenced peoples in the Ohio River region, in the northern Mississippi valley, and west into Iowa, Kansas, and Oklahoma. This influence continued even as some of the earliest Mississippian polities, including Moundville, declined beginning about A.D. 1200. Although altered by time and restricted in their geographical range, Mississippian-like ways of life still existed in parts of the Southeast and the lower Mississippi River valley when Europeans first entered the North American continent.

The Moundville polity was located on the Black Warrior River in west-central Alabama, and was inhabited from ca. A.D. 1000 to ca. A.D. 1450. The site itself consists of 20 mounds covering an area of more than 40 hectares. The mounds surrounded a large plaza that formed the political or religious center for the surrounding region. Residential areas surrounded this plaza-mound complex, and the entire site was surrounded by a defensive palisade. At its peak, 3,000 or more people may have lived within the palisade at Moundville. Surrounding Moundville are a series of smaller villages and hamlets linked to the larger polity, and likely provided both material goods and labor to it (Welch 1991).

Socio-political organization in the Moundville polity was hierarchical, elites having clearly differential access to food resources and exotic goods (Welch 1991; Powell 1988), and is most readily classified as a chiefdom (Peebles and Kus 1977). Welch (1991) tested four models of chiefdom political economy (redistribution, mobilization, tributary, and prestige goods) against the archaeological record of the Moundville polity. He found that the prestige goods model best fits the archaeological data. This type of political economy is quite similar to that described for Tonga, with lineage-based chiefs maintaining control over status-displaying or enhancing goods obtained through foreign trade. They provide

some of these goods to followers in return for their support, both political and material. Hence Moundville's elites would have been deeply involved in foreign trade and the production of goods for foreign trade, and in the creation and maintenance of symbol systems and ritual behaviors that required prestige goods (also see Peregrine 1992, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

Pauketat (1994) recently examined the Cahokia polity, a contemporary of the Moundville polity located in East St. Louis, Illinois, to explore the ideology which sustained political hierarchy. He argued that Cahokian ideology initially was based on a patron-client relationship which developed through time into a divine-secular relationship. Cahokian chiefs initially legitimated their authority through their generosity with material goods and by supporting craft specialists, but reinforced it through external alliances and claims to esoteric knowledge of distant peoples, places, technologies, and behaviors, and, ultimately, of the supernatural. A similar situation was likely present in the Moundville polity.

[Page 10]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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Political power in the Moundville polity, then, appears to have been based upon the ability to control prestige-goods, legitimated in part through a lineage structure (Anderson 1994; Knight 1990; Peregrine 1992, 1995; Welch 1991), but also through differential access to both external allies and supernatural power (Pauketat 1994). In this way, the Moundville polity is quite similar to Tonga. Like Tonga, the organization of settlement suggests that a hierarchy of chiefs was present in the Moundville polity, with the pre-eminent chief located at the major center of Moundville itself, and lower level chiefs located at minor centers and in outlying hamlets (Peebles and Kus 1977; Steponaitis 1978). The political hierarchy itself was probably organized like a lineage (Knight 1990), with individuals in each level both superior and socially "elder" to individuals in levels below them (DePratter 1983: 100-10). At the lowest level in the political hierarchy were localized lineages, with elder males as their heads.

In this way, the schematic diagram of the Moundville polity in terms of Habermas's model presented in Figure 4 is very similar to that for Tonga. Chiefs, in the center, distributed prestige-goods (and likely ritual knowledge) to their followers, who in return supported the chiefs through their loyalty. Chiefs also engaged in long-distance trade for prestige-goods, which they distributed internally, both reinforcing their status and allowing them the opportunity to enhance the status of followers.

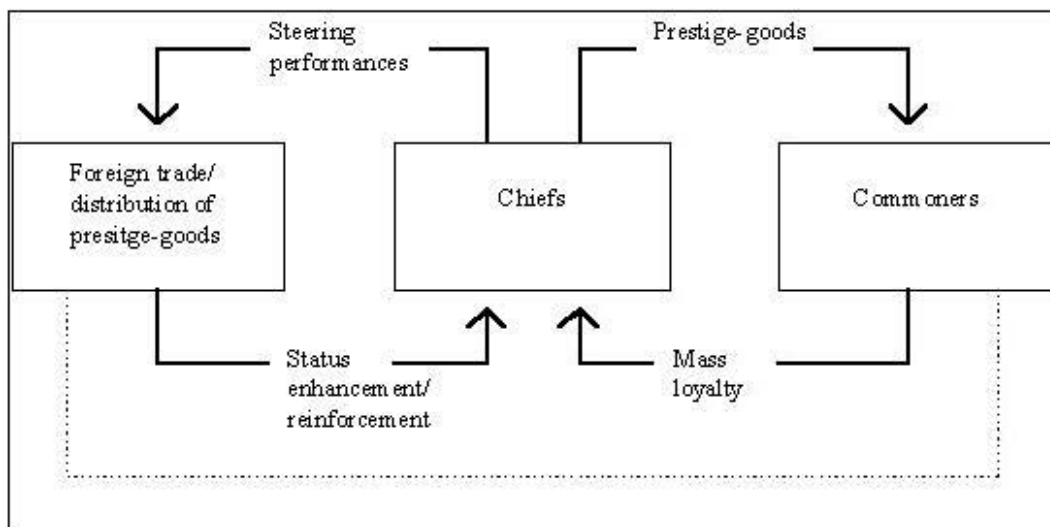


Figure 4. Revised conception of socio-political organization applied to Moundville.

### **Collapse of the Moundville Polity**

By A.D. 1500 Moundville had collapsed as a political entity. Moundville itself was abandoned and the socio-political hierarchy which it supported had disappeared. Christopher Peebles (1987a, 1987b) argues that Moundville's collapse was induced, in part, by a constriction of trade in prestige-goods. Data from the Moundville site and the Lubbar Creek locality demonstrate a marked decline in imported prestige-goods beginning about A.D. 1400 (Peebles 1987a; 1987b). Figure 5 presents the data this argument is based on. The roman numerals on the X-axis refer to the archaeological phases at Moundville. The numbers on the Y-axis are figures for the abundance of these goods in dated burials, standardized by dividing the number of goods by the number of dated burials per phase (see Steponaitis 1991).

[Page 11]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

Clearly these imported preciosities are most abundant in the late Moundville I (A.D. 1050-1250) phase and the Moundville II (A.D. 1250-1400) phase. A rapid decline in abundance occurs beginning in the Moundville III (A.D. 1400-1550) phase, and Moundville has collapsed by the Moundville IV (ca. A.D. 1550) phase.



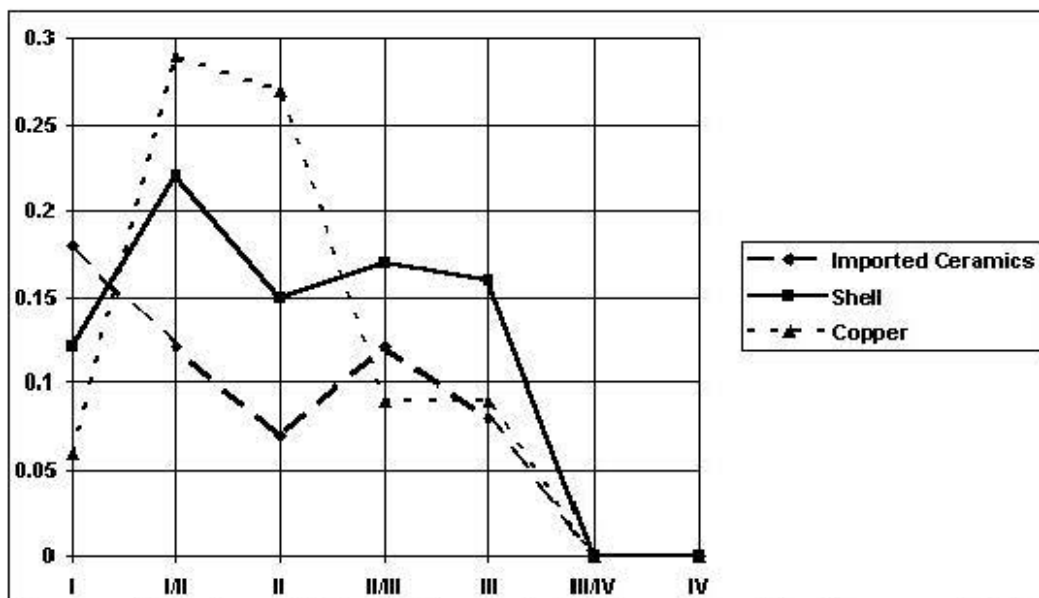


Figure 5. Abundance of Selected Imported Goods per Dated Burial at Moundville.

Paul Welch (1991: 194) explains the effect this decline in access to prestige-goods might have had on the Moundville polity: "if a large number of legitimizing symbols are persistently or chronically unavailable, the system of statuses is likely to break down." Linking Welch's statement to the diagram presented in Figure 4 gives us a clear picture of an ensuing collapse. On the left side of the diagram, the chief's steering of trade in prestige-goods apparently faltered. Their ability to enhance and/or reinforce their own status is thereby adversely affected. More significantly, their ability to distribute prestige-goods to followers on the right side of the diagram is affected. This, in turn, affects the commoner's loyalty to the chiefs, leading, ultimately, to a legitimization crisis and political collapse.

What would this collapse look like? I suggest it would look as if the top level of the political hierarchy was simply cut off--as if the commoners simply "voted with their feet" and organized themselves at a lower level of political integration. One would not expect to see evidence of conquest, one would not expect to see evidence of environmental or economic calamity, and one would not expect to see a population decline.

The collapse of the Moundville polity was not preceded by a population decline (Peebles 1987a: 9). There is no evidence of conquest or of environmental catastrophe. What does seem to happen is that small, low-level political centers of the Moundville polity become independent political entities (Steponaitis 1991). Settlement becomes more dispersed and there is a tendency for new settlements to be established in locations which had not been settled during the height of the Moundville polity (Peebles 1986, 1987a, 1987b; cf. Steponaitis 1991: 202). In short, the picture that emerges fits exactly with what one would expect from a collapse due to a legitimization crisis.

## Conclusions

Collapse is a fact of life for complex society, and while collapse may stem from environmental and economic problems, the point I hope I have made here is that an equally

[Page 12]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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compelling source of crisis is the system of prestige which legitimates and supports the elite groups in the society. The prestige system is not epiphenomenal to the economic system, but a separate and essential element of socio-political organization in all complex societies. Unfortunately scholars have tended to downplay this part of society and to emphasize the subsistence economy.

In this paper I have presented one case of collapse in which subsistence, population, and the environment seem to have had little influence. I suggest the Moundville polity collapsed through a legitimation crisis stemming from a constriction of the inter-regional trade in prestige-goods. The Moundville polity functioned as a prestige-good system, in which political authority in part rested on controlling access to objects required for social reproduction and status display. When those in positions of authority found it impossible to maintain regular access to these goods, a crisis ensued which had systemic consequences. While this paper offers no explanation of why trade in these goods became constricted (but see Peebles 1987a, 1987b for some ideas), this does not discount the important conclusion that collapse, in this case, was apparently *not* related to the subsistence economy or the environment; rather, it was a consequence of a failure in the prestige-economy and a transformation of longstanding patterns of inter-regional interaction. It is the concept of legitimation crises as a potent force in social change which I hope I have successfully conveyed in this paper, but another, perhaps more subtle point I hope I have made is that crisis and collapse have many sources, and we must be willing to look beyond the subsistence economy if we hope to understand them.

Legitimation crises, too, have potentially many sources, and it would be myopic to focus on transformations of inter-regional interactions as the sole one. Some areas that might prove valuable to investigate include the effect of new ideologies, the decay of existing ideologies, and conflicts stemming from succession to office. The effect of new ideologies on the legitimation of an existing political order has already been seen in the case of Tonga, where King George purposely used Christianity as an alternative ideology to separate himself from rival political figures--a strategy that has been repeated in many parts of the world (see, for example, Ekholm (1972) on the Kongo Kingdom of west Africa and Axtell (1985) on various Indian polities of eastern North America).

The decay of existing ideologies as a potent force of cultural change is an idea that has been put forward most lucidly by the literary critic Fredric Jameson (1981; also see Dowling 1984). Jameson argues that in every society there are contradictions and conflicts

which are necessary for the society to continue but which would drive the society apart if they were universally recognized. For this reason, societies develop what Jameson calls "strategies of containment" to mask these underlying conflicts (Jameson 1981: 10, 193, 269-271). These "strategies of containment" are constantly decaying and must be either actively reinforced or, if the decay has spread too far, transformed (Jameson 1981: 97). It seems reasonable to assume that a failure to successfully transform a decaying "strategy of containment" could be a source of legitimation crisis.

Finally, crises stemming from succession to office have been the stuff of European history for centuries, but they have only recently been explored in non-Western and pre-Modern societies. One of the best pieces of work carrying the problems of succession to office into the ethnographic and archaeological literature comes from the archaeologist David G. Anderson (1994) who explores chiefdom "cycling," that is, the cyclical consolidation and collapse of polities, in the Savannah River valley of Georgia. Anderson argues that the kin-based political structure of chiefdoms contains an inherent contradiction: a chief's closest relatives are generally his strongest supporters and best allies, but they are also his greatest potential rivals and successors. Given this contradiction, rivalry, particularly over succession to office, repeatedly builds to crisis and collapse (Anderson 1994: 330).

These, and other, potential sources of legitimation crisis help to explain the apparent instability of centralized political systems, regardless of their environment, their subsistence, their size. As Tainter (1988: 1) put it: "civilizations are fragile, impermanent things." I suggest, and it is yet another point I hope I have made in this paper, that centralized polities are fragile and impermanent *precisely because* there are so many potential sources of crisis. Looking only at the environment or subsistence economy unnecessarily limits our understanding of these varied sources and we must, I argue, look beyond them if we hope to understand collapse.

## Notes

(1) This paper was originally presented at the 1995 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, and I want to thank Nick Kardulias for inviting me to participate in those meetings. I also want to thank Richard Blanton, Christopher Chase-Dunn, John Clark, Gary Feinman, Stephen Kowalewski, and an anonymous reviewer for their substantive comments on this paper. Not all of their ideas were incorporated, but their interest is deeply



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appreciated.

(2) As defined in two seminal papers by Friedman and Rowlands (1977) and Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978), prestige-good systems exist when important aspects of political alliance or social reproduction are tied to the consumption or exchange of specific exotic preciosities that can only be obtained through foreign trade. Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978: 76) lucidly explain the economic logic of prestige-good systems:

*The specific economic characteristics of a prestige-goods system are dominated by the political advantage gained through exercising control over access to resources that can only be obtained through external trade. However, these are not the resources required for general material well-being or for the manufacture of tools and other utilitarian items. Instead, emphasis is placed on controlling the acquisition of wealth objects needed in social transactions, and the payment of social debts. Groups are linked to each other through the competitive exchange of wealth objects as gifts and feasting in continuous cycles of status rivalry. Descent groups reproduce themselves in opposition to each other as their leaders compete for dominance through differential access to resources and labour power.*

In prestige-good systems political power is based on the control and manipulation of exotic, imported preciosities. While elites in all social systems display and maintain their status in part through the control of exotic goods and esoteric knowledge (Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978: 75; Helms 1979), in prestige-good systems these elite symbols are needed by all members of the society for social reproduction (Ekholm 1972; Friedman and Rowlands 1977). Prestige-goods are used in these societies to fund social debts, such as bridewealth payments, initiation and funerary fees, and punitive damages, and elites able to control access to these fungible exotic goods gain political power in direct proportion to the demand for them (Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978: 76).

Because of competition between elites for access to prestige-goods, these systems tend to be highly unstable (Friedman and Rowlands 1977: 228). It seems common for prestige-good systems to repeatedly centralize and collapse, and hence, they provide a uniquely valuable social form for examining these processes (Peregrine 1992). In addition, I have argued that prestige-good systems can be taken as a special-case world-system, and are particularly valuable social forms for examining the rise and demise of world-systems (Peregrine 1991, 1995, 1996).

[Page 15]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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[Page 16]

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[Page 17]

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[Page 18]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*

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[Page 19]

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[Page 20]

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[Page 21]

*Journal of World-Systems Research*