The North American Continental System: A Perspective from the Western Periphery

Mikael Fauvelle, Erin Smith

Prior to the Spanish conquest, trade connected vast regions of North America. Goods and concepts from Mesoamerica spread as far north as Utah and Illinois, while shell beads from the Pacific Coast circulated along east/west trade routes ranging from California to Oklahoma. These long-distance interactions had important repercussions for social histories throughout North America. Periods of integration in the American Southwest, for example, have long been seen as paralleling political developments in the wider Mesoamerican world. In the absence of political integration, however, it is difficult to define the boundaries of these various overlapping trade networks. This paper examines the North American continental system from the perspective of trade between the pacific coast and the American Southwest. We argue that networks of prestige exchange connected the political histories of both regions, with important developments for social evolution, especially in coastal California.

The working paper circulated for this meeting suggested that we find rules for examining the boundaries of human systems, ranging from nomadic foraging groups to the modern economic empires. This type of broad comparativeness is important, as the tendency to form connections across group boundaries can be seen in even the earliest human societies. Archaeological evidence from Upper Paleolithic Europe indicates that worked shells and lithics were traded across the continent, while recent headlines regarding evidence for intermixture in Siberian Neanderthal DNA show that modern humans were traveling beyond Africa tens of thousands of years earlier than previously thought. Clearly, the urge to travel beyond boundaries and forge long-distance ties have been with our species from the start. But to what degree have such long-distance adventures and connections actually produced meaningful systems? And how have such systems of interaction actually changed the course of human history? This paper will examine these questions from the perspective of North America. We will argue that North America can be treated as a meaningfully interacting system by at least the second millennium of the Common Era. After overviewing general evidence for interconnectedness across North America, we will focus on the relationship between coastal California and the American southwest; two areas where we argue that external trade was a critical factor in the development of complex societies.

North America is something of an unusual case study for this meeting. Prior to European contact, the area north of Mexico only contained one city with a population approaching twenty thousand, and most of the region was characterized by non-state societies. This in no way means that parts of the region were not integrated into wide systems. On the contrary, elements of Mesoamerican culture seem to have proliferated throughout North America, indicating the degree to which different regions of the continent were connected. At contact, for example, Nahuatl, the trading language of the Aztec, was spoken as far north as modern Kansas, 2,000 kilometers north of Tenochtitlan. Ballcourt iconography proliferated throughout the American

west, with actual ballcourts at Puebloan sites in the southwest, and I-shaped ballcourt signs pecked into rock surfaces throughout the desert regions of California – areas that likely never played the ballgame themselves. The far-reach of Mesoamerican ballgame culture can also been seen in the extraordinary discovery of a rubber ball, presumably from Mexico, in the High Sierras of California. How this ball reached the sierras, and what it meant for the people who brought it there, remains a mystery. The use of other Mesoamerican-like artifacts is more clear, such as this macaw feather sash found in a cave in southern Utah, which likely functioned as an elite prestige item. The feathers for this sash probably came from southwest centers such as Paquimé, where macaws from southern Mexico were imported and raised on a massive scale. Other Mesoamerican imports common in southwest sites include chocolate, copper bells, and of course the ballcorts themselves.

Ethnohistoric evidence also points to wide-spread interaction across the North American continent. Mississippian cultures, for example, told their own version of the Mesoamerican hero twin saga, with two twin brothers playing the disc game Chunkey against a race of giants to save their father from the afterlife. Additional support for Mesoamerican connections in the Mississippian world can be found at the great city center of Cahokia, were mound 72 contains 52 sacrificial female burials surrounding principal individual. 52, of course, being the number of years in the Mesoamerican calendar round. Unsurprisingly, long distance interaction in the Mississippian world was likely facilitated by the Mississippi river itself. Such continent spanning journeys are corroborated by accounts from French explorers in Wisconsin, who encountered individuals who had traveled the entire length of the Mississippi and were familiar with French settlements in Louisiana. Long distance travel was also well documented by Spanish explorers in coastal California. Nearly everywhere Cabrillo made landfall he was greeted by stories of similarly bearded and armored men in the interior –almost certainly indicating knowledge of the contemporaneous Coronado expedition. On at least two occasions, Cabrillo handed letters to local couriers who indicated they could carry them to the Spaniards traveling through eastern Arizona, a distance of over 500 miles.

Hopefully this brief introduction has convinced you that even the non-state societies of North America maintained strong connections across continent spanning distances. The question, of course, is if any of these interactions were meaningful or systemic. Working from the holistic assumption that areas in systemic interaction cannot be understood in isolation, we argue that two areas can be described as forming an interaction system when the hypothetical removal of connections between the two would produce discernable changes in the social trajectory of each area. In other words, are the mechanisms driving social change dependent on social change in any large or significant fashion? In the remainder of this paper we will examine a subset of the North American continental system, focusing on trade between coastal California and the America southwest. We argue that external trade was critical to the development of complex polities in both areas; and especially for the coastal chiefdoms located along the Santa Barbara channel of southern California.

Interaction between California and the Southwest

The period from around 900 to 1200 CE saw drastic changes in both coastal California and the American Southwest. In both areas, population sizes increased, sedentary villages expanded, and social hierarchies became increasingly reified. The southwest, including areas occupied by Ancestral Puebloan, Mogollon, and Hohokam peoples, was characterized by large sedentary towns, maize agriculture, and complex irrigation works. In coastal California, groups such as the Chumash and Tongva peoples were characterized by sedentary coastal villages, craft specialization, and hierarchical leadership, subsiding largely on bountiful marine resources and storable nuts and seeds. The desert regions between these two areas were characterized by nomadic hunter gatherers such as the Mojave, who profited as middlemen in the flow of resources across well-worn trade routes.

The primary trade goods exchanged from coastal California to the Southwest were shell beads. Strings of shell beads acted as a form of trade currency throughout the American west and were regularly used as a medium of exchange. In California, strings of shell beads would be wrapped around the palm of ones hand to count units of measurement. In the historic period, for example, two palms' widths of a shell bead string could be exchanged for a Spanish silver coin. In the southwest, 19th century accounts are full of descriptions of shell bead currency, often given the Zuni name "hishi." Frank Cushing, for example, wrote in 1880 that "ocean shells were once the staple currency of the Pueblo race, with fixed values." As in California, strings of beads could be measured into regular units and exchanged for buckskins, cotton blankets and other standard trade goods.

The source for southwestern shell was undoubtedly coastal California, specifically by the Chumash people on the islands off the coast of modern Santa Barbara. Between the period from 900 CE to contact shell specialists on Santa Cruz island produced literally millions of olivella beads, the vast majority of which were exported across the Santa Barbara channel to the mainland coast, the San Juaquin valley, the Mojave desert, and the wider regions of the American Southwest. The production and export of olivella beads was conducted through the control of commoner labor by island Chumash elites, who sponsored craft specialists and maintained a monopoly on the ownership of trade canoes. The production of shell beads was highly intensive, and dominated much of the islands economy. It also spurred the development of other industries, such as the specialized production of tiny microdrills used to produce holes in the olivella shells. It is generally agreed that the intensification of bead production and exchange, and the ability of emerging elites to control this process, was one of the primary factors leading to the development of chiefdom-like societies by the 12 century CE in the Channel region.

Why did this intensive system of craft specialization develop? The traditional explanation, that islanders depended on trade to import foodstuffs during times of resource stress, has largely been discredited over the last several years. In the past, I've argued that there must have been both internal and external factors involved in the origins of the island bead industry. Most likely, the lack of canoe related material –especially asphaltum- on the islands was a major factor driving islanders to search for a value-added

product that could be traded for non-local items. Without external demand, however, the islands could never have intensified shell bead production on such a massive scale. The markets for shell beads in the American southwest, therefore, should be seen as a central factor in the development of Chumash complexity.

In the southwest itself, archaeological evidence abounds for the importation of California shell artifacts. A comprehensive survey by William Smith (2002), identified a total of 26,317 shell artifacts originating from the pacific coast as having been excavated from sites across the Southwest – a tally that excludes the massive catch of shell at Paquimé. As discussed by Smith, the actual number of shell artifacts imported to the Southwest certain to have been far higher, as many southwest archaeologists do no identify shell to the species level, and because many early excavations did not record shell artifacts at all. In addition to their use as a medium of exchange, shell beads were used as decorations in many prestige items, and were also used in many rituals associated with water and riverine resources.

In exchange for shell beads heading east, textiles and ceramics were the primary items traded west to the California coast. Ceramics were not produced in prehistory north of modern-day Long Beach, and finely made southwestern pots would have been important prestige items in any California elite's repertoire. Currently, there are a total of seven known coastal sites and 43 interior sites where ceramics attributed to the Southwest have been recovered. These include sherds from the Ancestral Puebloan types of Verde Black-on-grey, Cibola White Ware, and Colorado Red-on-Beige, as well as the Hohokam types of Sacaton Red-on-Buff and Trincheras Purple-on-red. The majority of these finds come from Tongva territory, but several have also been recovered from Chumash territory in the Ventura Valley. One spectacular find consists of an intact Hohokam Sacton Red-on-buff bowl which was excavated from the Big Tujunga Wash site in the San Fernando Valley. All of these ceramic types date to the period spanning roughly C.E. 900 to 1100, exactly the time when shell bead production was being intensified along the Santa Barbara coast.

Textiles were almost certainly an equally if not even more important trade item than ceramics. Unfortunately, we have very little direct archaeological evidence for textile exchange due to poor preservation. Only one prehistoric cotton trade blanket has ever been excavated in Southern California, recovered from a burial in Yokuts territory in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Analysis of the blanket indicated that it was likely traded from New Mexico prior to the 18th century. Notably, you can see two coastal shell beads embroidered into the cloth. Ethnohistoric accounts, on the other hand, abound with descriptions of a robust textile trade between Southern California and the Southwest. Pedro Font, for example, wrote in 1792 that among the Chumash he "saw some indians wearing blankets of cotton, and black ones of wool which come from the Hopi, which they have been able to acquire through the Cocomaricopas and Jalchedunes (Mojave groups)" he continued to write that "I saw one who wore a cotton blanket like those made by the Gila Pimas, and I inferred that he must have acquired it from that great distance by the means of the commerce they have with others."

Discussion

This paper has focused on shell beads, textiles, and pots, not because they were the only goods traded, but because they were likely traded in the greatest intensity. Considerable evidence also exists for the exchange of asphaltum, steatite, obsidian, shell bracelets, ceramic figurines and other items. Clearly, considerable trade was occurring between California and the Southwest. The question, however, is whether such trade had sufficient impact to warrant being labeled as systemic. As we emphasized at the beginning of this paper, we see regions as being systemically connected when the hypothetical removal of ties between the two would produce a discernable shift in the material culture of any given area. One way to test for such connectedness, proposed by Andre Gunder-Frank, is to look for parallels in the social histories of interacting regions. According to his logic, systemically connected regions should be expected to expand and contract in conjunction with each other.

This is indeed what we see for the American southwest. The first stages of specialized shell-bed production on the Channel Islands started around 900 CE, which corresponds to the transition from Pueblo I to Pueblo II in the northern Southwest and from the Colonial to Sedentary periods among the Hohokam. In the southwest, this period saw considerable population increases, the expansion of sedentary villages, and increases in social stratification. In response to these changes, one could imagine how expanding southwest prestige economies would have demanded greater quantities of California shell, fueling a positive feedback cycle. The largest expansion of the Chumash bead industry began with the start of the Transitional period around 1150 CE, which fits closely with the transition to Pueblo III and the Hohokam Classic period. Once again, cycles of intensification in both areas coincided with each other, and it is likely that increasing demands for prestige goods in each area provided a degree of positive feedback that fueled further developments in the other.

Extrapolating more broadly, historical trends across North America, ranging from California, to Mississippi, to Mexico, were likely connected due to interlocked systems of exchange which spanned the continent. The flow of California shell did not stop in the Southwest; almost 14,000 olivella dama shells from the Gulf of California were recently discovered at Spiro mounds in Oklahoma, a distance of 1800 kilometers. Likewise, Mesoamerican traders at southwest sites such as Paquimé would have access to numerous trade goods originating in California. Hopefully the examination of the relationship between California and the Southwest has shown how these neighboring connections had meaningful impacts for local social trajectories. Even in the absence of written records or state-like organization, we suggest that an analysis of the results of interaction is a powerful tool for identifying systemic relationships between regions in the past.