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Introduction

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Introduction: comparing currency and circulation systems in past societies

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Abstract

In this brief introduction, the editors summarise the main themes of the volume and place them in relation to the wider framework of exchange studies. While the volume makes important points regarding the introduction of new prestige items, the process of monetisation and the way societies reacted to periods of rapid and fundamental change in the availability of certain goods, the next step is to work towards an integrated approach combining both prestige items and bulk commodities.

Zusammenfassung

In dieser kurzen Einleitung erläutern die Herausgeber die Schwerpunkte der verschiedenen Beiträge und ordnen diese in den weiteren Rahmen der Diskussion um Austauschnetzwerke ein. Dieser Band bietet vor allem Ansätze zu Themen wie der Einführung neuartiger Prestigegegenstände, dem Prozess der Monetisierung und der Art und Weise, wie Gesellschaften auf schnelle und tiefgreifende Veränderungen in der Verfügbarkeit bestimmter Güter reagierten. Der nächste Schritt ist eine Integration dieser Überlegungen in weitreichendere Modelle, die sowohl Prestige- als auch Gebrauchsgüter gemeinsam berücksichtigen.

Résumé

Dans cette brève introduction, les éditeurs résument les principaux thèmes du volume et les replacent au sein d'un cadre plus large d'études sur les réseaux d'échanges. Alors que le volume aborde de nombreux aspects concernant l'introduction de nouveaux biens de prestige, le processus de monétisation et la manière dont les sociétés ont réagi aux périodes de changement rapide et fondamental dans la disponibilité de certaines marchandises, la prochaine étape est de travailler vers une approche intégrée considérant à la fois les biens de prestige et les marchandises en vrac.

The present volume brings together the proceedings from two separately held conference sessions: 'Premonetary currency systems in past societies', organised by Dirk Brandherm and Stefan Wirth as session B22 on the occasion of the XVII World Congress of the Union Internationale de Sciences Préhistoriques et Protohistoriques (Burgos, Spain, 1–7 September 2014), and 'A crystal formed of necessity — Gifts, goods and money: the role of exchange in processes of social transformation', organised by Daniela Hofmann and Nicholas Wells as

session T05S011 at the 20th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (Istanbul, Turkey, 10–14 September 2014).

Both sessions fundamentally aimed at exploring the economic and social roles of exchange systems in past societies, but approached these issues from slightly different perspectives. The Burgos UISPP session, from which the first four papers are drawn, focused specifically on questions surrounding the identification of premonetary currencies in the archaeological record, the part played by weight measurement systems in their development, the role of premonetary currencies in the transition from staple to wealth finance systems (and vice versa), the ideological underpinnings of premonetary currencies and prestige economies and the interrelationship between socioeconomic change and premonetary currency systems. The Istanbul EAA session examined the role of exchange networks as agents of social change in a wider setting, trying to answer what happens when new objects of value are introduced into a system, or when existing objects go out of use. This resulted in a focus on the potentially changing role of objects as they shift between different spheres of exchange, for instance from commodity to prestige item. In particular, situations of change and upheaval in general, such as collapses, crises or the emergence of new polities and social constellations formed a main theme.

As a consequence, the different approaches taken by the two sessions in their attempt to attain a better understanding of the economic and social roles played by exchange systems in past societies complement each other rather well. Not all papers presented at Burgos and Istanbul found their way into the present volume, and others were added later, but the contributions assembled here nevertheless offer a broad range of perspectives. Indeed, there are also productive linkages cross-cutting the contributions that emerged from the two sessions.

One theme that unites both sets of papers is the tension between what is introduced from the outside and changes that are driven by social transformations within a given group. As an absolute contrast, this is likely overdrawn, but it remains a main focus of research for instance in the Mediterranean, where various weight systems are used concurrently. Scholars have long worked on the basis of an attenuated kind of core-periphery model, whereby the ultimate inspiration for such metrological systems is thought to lie in the proto-urban societies in the eastern part of the region. In how far the weights attested in other areas correspond to such standards is thus generally one of the first questions addressed, thereby perpetuating an inherent normative assumption. Ialongo and colleagues go furthest in critiquing this basic tenet. They show that a given weight can quite easily match units within several different systems, so

that tracing exact lines of derivation is neither possible, nor perhaps terribly relevant. Instead, using a variety of historical, contemporary and prehistoric examples, they urge us to focus on the pragmatic aspects by which weight divisions could emerge in the practical context of transactions, based for instance on quantities such as 'how much a man can reasonably carry'. This would lead to the establishment of several very similar systems without any direct link of (asymmetric) influence.

Similar arguments are made in several other papers. In Poigt's Spanish Iron Age cemetery, for example, the weight sets buried with two individuals who lived about a generation apart do not match each other, so that even within the same burial community different systems were apparently in operation, either concurrently or in rapid succession. There is no indication of a central authority imposing a coherent standard here. In his contribution, Heymans also argues that the token aspect of trade in hacksilber and other fragmented metal items was present and exploited even in contexts in which no state or equivalent power had ordered it. Similarly, the Scandinavian prehistoric trading sites discussed by Melheim were places in which imported metals were recast into regionally familiar forms using crucibles of relatively standardised sizes. These common standards apparently emerged through practice, creating items of the 'right' size for potential customers. This more heterarchical emergence of weight systems is an aspect that deserves to be more fully explored in the future. On the other hand, in his discussion of metalwork assemblages from the European Bronze Age, Brandherm argues that premonetary currency systems using standardized ingot forms and those based on 'hackbronze' generally appear not to have operated side by side coevally in the same region.

Other papers, most clearly those by Ostapkowicz and Wigg-Wolf, are mainly concerned with how items of foreign origin come to be incorporated into existing value systems, so that their character as straightforwardly 'alien' objects comes to be compromised. In the case of the Caribbean Taíno, Spanish goods were incorporated into locally valued items denoting a chief's authority, for instance by being sown onto cotton belts. Similarly, the adoption of coinage in Gaul, discussed by Wigg-Wolf, initially proceeded through incorporation into existing elite strategies of interaction. In both cases, too, the consequences of such transactions, the developing dependencies between coloniser and colonised, could not have been fully foreseen by the individuals involved. Here, the pursuit of traditional power strategies eventually led to changes on a much wider scale.

The cases discussed in the respective papers challenge us to think about how cultural and geographic distance contribute to the construction of value.

While objects or ideas that are tied in with external relations are internally appropriated for new strategies of value, the distance through which they are obtained appears to form an important aspect of their value. This brings to mind the work of Mary Helms, which explores cultural understandings of geographical distance and how these are related to supernatural, mythical and political power (Helms 1988). She argues that ‘not only exotic materials but also intangible knowledge of distant realms and regions can be politically valuable “goods”’ (Helms 1988: 4), thereby providing a basis for their use and significance in a local context. The political power associated with the objects discussed in this volume — whether representing value themselves, such as an exotic coin, or a system of valuation, such as a weight standard — could have substituted the need for a formal authority to assert their value or enforce their use, partly explaining the heterarchical framework in which they appear.

The intimate association of currency with political status and elite activities, as for instance argued by Wigg-Wolf, thus forms a second key theme, even if measurement systems may not have necessarily been centrally imposed. The role of particular individuals as beneficiaries and brokers in transactions involving new kinds of currency are crucial here. In the case of Iron Age Gaul, the first coinages carried associations of military prowess and commanding a following, but were also considered appropriate for ritualised consumption in hoards. They were objects that had acquired biographies and were intimately connected to the achievements of their owners. As such, they fitted seamlessly with the significance and treatment of other metal items. A major change occurred only with the introduction of Roman-inspired smaller denominations, but Wigg-Wolf argues that the way of seeing money did not substantially alter, as alliance with Rome was now a major source of power and authority. Throughout, then, coinage served mainly the interests of elites. Similarly, in Poigt’s example, sets of weights were found in the richest graves, suggesting that owning and using such items was restricted. Here, elites may have bolstered their renown partly by being able to undertake even relatively complex mathematical operations connected with the use of scales. Perhaps — although this is not the focus of Poigt’s analysis — this even aligned with other kinds of esoteric knowledge possessed by those in power (cf. Helms 1988) and was part of the motivation why the uptake of coinage, potentially more practical in use, was delayed in Iberia.

In contrast, Dupont’s paper shows that such hegemonic relations can be challenged and must be rather laboriously maintained. On Palau, glass beads imported from a variety of sources are used as key items in certain exchange transactions. While the amount of beads in circulation had long been static, relying on stock acquired from Asian and possibly European traders in historical

times, the much more recent import of virtually indistinguishable beads from the Philippines has upset traditional hierarchies. Even relatively low-ranking families can now afford large pieces in desirable colours. To avoid inflation, a time-consuming system of checking and registration has been set up, although the outcome is still uncertain. There are hence situations in which elite control can be challenged and perhaps circumvented, and it would be interesting to see if parallel processes can be identified in prehistoric Europe.

The significance of the various types of objects used within elite discourse also provides an indication of their role in social strategies and dynamics, rather than representing static categories of value. Understanding such objects as serving political interests provides a credible context for their emergence, without reference to a central authority. It is worthwhile noting in that respect that several of the objects discussed can be regarded as serving to adorn the social body, whether as grave goods or as a material extension/reflection of certain activities and, as such, functioned as an expression of prestige. Interestingly, David Graeber observes that the types of objects adopted as currencies were often personal ornaments. Referring to past achievements and transactions, objects of adornment enhance the bearer's prestige, while when hidden or hoarded they reflect the owner's capacity to act in the future, described by Graeber as a characteristic of money (Graeber 1996; 2001: 91–115).

The importance of the visual or aesthetic properties of the exchanged goods themselves is a final theme that is worthwhile drawing attention to. All the papers assembled here deal with items that are hard, lustrous and easily portionable: metals, glass beads, mirrors and so on. Metal is also fundamentally malleable, which means that it could be adapted to culturally acceptable forms (as in Melheim's case), stamped with the names and symbols of authority of the powerful (as in the case of coinage), or indeed easily broken up and transformed from tradeable commodity to elite object and back again (as drawn out in Brandherm's and Heymans' studies). This is a prime example for how the physical properties of materials are crucial to the kinds of social and historical processes that can play out in the first place. As Heymans illustrates, using evidence from Iron Age Israel, rigid distinctions between the 'spheres' of commodities and gifts are inappropriate in these cases.

Material qualities are also discussed in detail by Ostapkowicz, who shows how the Caribbean Taíno very selectively focused on trade in those items which could be integrated into existing value systems. These were generally made from lustrous or reflective materials, such as specific metal alloys, jet or mirror glass. These materials were associated not only with chiefly power, but also with establishing contact with the numinous, just as metalwork hoards in

prehistoric Europe and the Near East may well have been. In addition, further qualities may have been valued which are less apparent to archaeologists today. The Taíno, for example, appreciated some alloys because of their distinctive smell. On Palau, the authentication of glass beads is partly based on the special sheen 'real' money acquires when rubbed against the human skin, as well as on its perceived greater hardness and on details of manufacture. There are hence many gradations of value and desirability, and not any 'foreign' material will become equally prestigious when incorporated into a new context.

This point also draws attention to the selective nature of the objects treated here. Due partly to the initial conception of our conference sessions, most pieces deal with hard and shiny materials, and side-line soft, organic goods perhaps traded in bulk quantities. In this sense, we are only focusing on a subset of items, but we do not wish to create the impression that these are the only ones that had a substantial social impact. Narratives of elite manipulation and interests aside, it is very likely, as Poigt reminds us, that systems for the exchange of bulk quantities existed alongside and in relation to the high-precision transactions associated with metals and other exotica. These may have been less circumscribed in terms of access, and Poigt mentions cattle, salt or textiles as possibilities.

Assessing to what extent such systems of exchange of subsistence/bulk goods and portable prestige items were disparate or integrated is challenging when based on archaeological evidence alone. One question is that of the different weighing or measuring systems involved, and in how far these would have been commensurable. Yet we must avoid the conclusion that larger or bulkier items were necessarily less prestigious, or indeed excluded from functioning as currencies. For instance, cattle hold considerable prestige value in many different societies, from the Nuer of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 16–50) to Homeric Greece (Gallant 1982: 118; Schaps 2004: 69–70; McNerney 2010), medieval Ireland (Grierson 1978: 12) and Neolithic Britain (Parker Pearson 2000). Similarly, various ethnographic studies stress the value of specific kinds of cloth in local value systems. Although not normally circulating in a market context, raffia cloth functioned akin to a coupon system among the Lele of Congo (Douglas 1982a; 1982b) and Tugudu cloth was used as a form of currency in Tiv exchange (Bohannan 1955). In the Late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, the weight standards for wool were commensurable with those for (precious) metals, so arguably textile had some characteristics of a currency (Alberti and Parise 2005: 383–4; Breniquet and Michel 2014; Zaccagnini 1999/2001: 48–54). Among the Baruya of Papua New Guinea, salt was considered a luxury item important for ritual occasions, but as it could be exchanged for virtually any other item, it functioned in some ways like money (Godelier 1969:

26–8). In the case of Neolithic central Europe, Weller (2002) has argued that the concentrations of rare Alpine axes near salt springs implies that salt could have been part of the realm of prestige goods exchange.

These examples challenge easy divisions between currency, prestige good and bulk commodity. In particular, they clearly show that the correlation between bulk trade and lower-prestige transactions is premature. However, it is currently still difficult to estimate the volumes of bulky organic items which were traded, and therefore to characterise the social roles they could fulfil. Using a wider set of methods, as in the isotopic studies tracing cattle movement (Knipper 2011) or even the long-distance transports of (parts of) pigs (Madgwick and Mulville 2015), it may one day be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the extent and reach of such networks of bulky and/or organic items, and to finally establish whether they partly followed a similar logic as the hard, shiny and small objects focused on here. Only then will it be possible to gain a full picture of how exchange relations as a whole contributed to change and transformation in past societies and to disentangle the complexities of these extensive economic systems.

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