

COLIN RENFREW'S STATE-FORMATION CONCEPTS AND THE POLITICAL FORMATIONS OF THE ARMENIAN HIGHLAND IN THE 2nd MILLENNIUM BCE

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Abstract

The British archaeologist and historian Colin Renfrew, in the late 20th century, proposed the concepts of “multiplier effect” and “peer polity interaction” to understand the mechanisms of early state formation. He believed that close interaction among peer polities could act as a catalyst for the establishment of states, citing the formation of Greek poleis as an example. We propose applying this theory as a working hypothesis to the political formations of the Armenian Highland in the 2nd millennium BCE, specifically concerning the western and northeastern parts of the Armenian Highland. These areas were divided among numerous small polities of almost equal influence, whose competition and interaction could have had a positive impact on the subsequent emergence of more organized polities in those regions, such as Išua and the Etiuni confederation.

Keywords: early state, Colin Renfrew, concept of peer polity interaction, Armenian Highland, formation of states.

Colin Renfrew, Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn, a titan of global archaeology who passed away in 2024 at the age of 87¹, delved into the questions of state formation within his rich historical legacy, proposing two state-building concepts: the multiplier effect and the concept of peer polity interaction.

Colin Renfrew's “Multiplier Effect”

The first concept is presented in his 1972 work, *“The Emergence of Civilisation: The Cyclades and the Aegean in The Third Millennium BC.”*

Renfrew proposed two models for the emergence of Aegean civilization. He called the first the **“subsistence/redistribution model.”** Among three types of adaptational transformations (1. a change in the spectrum of exploited environmental resources; 2. a significant increase in the efficiency of exploiting certain resources; 3. the effective expansion of the range of successfully exploited resources), he suggested the third one for the Aegean world. The mechanism, according to Colin Renfrew, is as follows: production of goods not competing for land with already existing cultures (referring to

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¹ Pitts 2024.

olive and grape cultivation) – increase in production – population growth – higher degree of food security – certain specialization of production – emergence of a specialized goods exchange system – formation of a redistribution system – centralized exchange of goods – formation of a hierarchy of power and wealth.² Renfrew emphasized that such a mechanism can only operate in areas of productive diversity, population growth is possible in Mediterranean climates, and craft specialization is also possible in the same regions.³

He named the second model the “**craft specialization/wealthy model.**” In this model, the decisive factor is the formation of a stratified society, where high status correlates with material wealth and military prowess. These characteristics emerged largely due to the development of metallurgy and maritime trade, and their development is interconnected.⁴

Renfrew examined these two models within the framework of systems theory. The decisive event for the first model was the domestication of the olive, and for the second, the emergence of efficient bronze metallurgy. Both events must be explained in the context of a cultural system.⁵ The two models complement each other, despite having different causal chains of subsystems. Renfrew explained this complementary mechanism in terms of a **multiplier effect.**^{6 7}

The multiplier effect is the mutual interaction in different spheres of activity: innovations in one subsystem lead to innovations in another subsystem, and the interaction of subsystems (positive feedback) can ensure sustained growth.⁸

Culture has a conservative nature. The multiplier effect, where two subsystems are correlated in a way that mutually reinforces deviations (any innovation in a cultural system is primarily a deviation from existing patterns), is necessary to overcome this inherent conservative homeostasis of culture.⁹

“The Early State Module”

In 1975, C. Renfrew proposed the theory of “**The Early State Module (ESM).**” He linked the emergence of early civilization or state to the formation of early state modules, each of which had a stratified organization of exchange.

Renfrew identified **six processes** that can lead to the emergence of Early State Modules, all of which are based on the exchange of information or goods. Three of these processes are internal (endogenous), and three are external (exogenous). The endogenous processes are:

² Renfrew 1972/2011: 480–481.

³ Renfrew 1972/2011: 482–483.

⁴ Renfrew 1972/2011: 483, 488.

⁵ Renfrew 1972/2011: 485.

⁶ In this case, in the sense of “multiplicative.”

⁷ Renfrew 1972/2011: 485.

⁸ Renfrew 1972/2011: 486.

⁹ Renfrew 1972/2011: 488.

1. **Predominant Social and Religious Exchange:** Arises to ensure ritual ceremonies or social exchange that unite periodic central places. This model, according to Renfrew, is characteristic of early states in Mesoamerica.¹⁰
2. **Population Agglomeration and Craft Specialization:** Population agglomeration leads to the emergence of a distribution network and the development of craftsmanship, bringing about central control with all its ensuing consequences. Proto-types of this model can be considered Çatalhöyük and Jericho.¹¹
3. **Intraregional Diversity:** In a chosen region, specializations develop related to the cultivation of different cultures, and the procurement of metals and other resources. This again requires a redistribution network and a central place to implement it. This model is characteristic of Aegean civilization¹².

Next, Renfrew distinguished external processes that can develop in three ways through interaction with a more highly structured civilization (according to Renfrew, external trade and border conflicts can influence the morphogenesis of modules without making the process exogenous, and conflicts appear not as a process but as the initial phase of the latter¹³). These exogenous processes are:

4. **Urban Imposition:** Roman cities played such a role during the conquest of Britain; military camps gradually transformed into urban centers, but most of them ceased to function as a result of the severance of ties with Rome.¹⁴
5. **Implantation:** The emergence of another civilization's colony (usually a trading one) in an area. This can lead to the development of civilization without extensive adoption of the colonial newcomers' technologies, customs, and beliefs.¹⁵
6. **Emulation:** In this case, the society supplying the goods is already highly organized and stratified, and along with goods, information, value systems, and social procedures are exchanged. These are accepted with great readiness due to the prestige of the "**source society**" (unlike external trade, which does not lead to such transformations).¹⁶ Processes V and VI usually are combined.

In 1977, Barbara Price published the article "*Shifts in Production and Organization: A Cluster-Interaction Model*".¹⁷ Using material from Peru, China, and Mesopotamia, the author found that one could identify so-called clusters: several polities comparable in size, degree of complexity, and techno-economic structure. They are open systems and

¹⁰ Renfrew 1975: 26-27.

¹¹ Renfrew 1975: 27-29.

¹² Renfrew 1975: 29.

¹³ Renfrew 1975: 31-32.

¹⁴ Renfrew 1975: 32-33.

¹⁵ Renfrew 1975: 33.

¹⁶ Renfrew 1975: 33.

¹⁷ Price 1977.

periodically enter into contact (exchange, competition, wars). The author suggests that this cluster acts as a unique evolutionary unit, and that certain processes of adaptation and selection operate at the level of this super-system, and it is not necessary to consider them at the level of individual societies. The evolutionary sequences that lead to the creation of the primary states indicated by M. Fried are characterized by the organization of such super-systems as the origin of agriculture, the emergence of ranked society, irrigated agriculture, social stratification, and the emergence of the state.

In 1986, C. Renfrew, continuing B. Price's "cluster-interaction" hypothesis, proposed the **"concept of peer polity interaction."** Peer polity¹⁸ interaction refers to the full spectrum of exchange between autonomous socio-political units.¹⁹ Exchange includes trade, emulation, imitation, competition, warfare, and so on. Strong interaction between polities holds greater significance than external ties with other polities and can serve as a mechanism for change.

Neighboring polities, according to Renfrew, exhibit a "stunning range of structural homologies"²⁰; and apparently, these homologies developed as a result of long-term interaction.²¹

Organizational changes occurring in one polity typically lead to the same processes in neighboring polities; new institutional features also emerge, such as architectural similarities, similar systems for information transfer, artifacts associated with high status, customs (burial rites), and so on. Moreover, these features do not originate from a single source; rather, as far as chronology allows us to judge, they attest to the development of different polities in the same region during the same period.²²

Renfrew hypothesizes that the process of transformation occurs not only as a result of internal processes, and not only due to similar reactions to the same external stimulus, but as a result of interaction between peer polities, which can be viewed through the following categories: a) **competition** (including warfare, which contributes to both intensification and the emergence of hierarchical institutions within different polities²³) and competitive emulation; b) **exchange of innovations**; c) **increase in the flow of goods exchange**.²⁴

If a region contains peer polities that are not distinguished by a high degree of internal organization but exhibit strong interaction, both symbolically and materially, then it is presumed that transformations in these polities are linked to the intensification of production and the further development of structures serving the exercise of power.²⁵

¹⁸ The term "polity" in this context does not imply any specific scale or degree of complexity of organization, but rather refers to an independent socio-political unit. See Renfrew 1986: 2.

¹⁹ Renfrew 1986: 1.

²⁰ Structural homology [Lat. *structura* — structure; *homologia* — agreement, correspondence] – similarity of structures resulting from their common origin.

²¹ Renfrew 1986: 5.

²² Renfrew 1986: 7-8.

²³ Renfrew 1986: 7-8.

²⁴ Renfrew 1986: 7-8.

²⁵ Renfrew 1986: 7-8.

Renfrew also identifies another process he calls “**symbolic entrainment**.” This process involves the adoption of a more developed symbolic system (as well as a writing system, certain institutions of royal power, etc.) by a less developed system. This refers not to conflict between systems, but to peaceful assimilation or adoption.²⁶

According to Renfrew, a true innovation is not the discovery of a new quality or process, but its widespread dissemination within a society or societies. The adoption of an invention in one society facilitates or validates its adoption in another society, where that innovation might even have appeared earlier.²⁷

As an example, Renfrew proposes considering the formation of Greek city-states (poleis) in the 1st millennium BCE: it is difficult to identify specific state-forming causes for each polis individually; this is where the “concept of peer polity interaction” comes to help.

Political Formations of the Armenian Highland in the 2nd Millennium BCE

We can discern the **multiplier effect of various factors** already in the 3rd millennium BCE to understand the integration processes occurring within the Armenian Highland²⁸, particularly to consider the role that metallurgy and trade might have played in the Armenian Highland. However, this integration phase did not reach its logical conclusion due to the **4.2-kiloyear climatic event**²⁹, which was followed by the **depopulation of the Highland** (with the exception of the Upper Euphrates basin, where the same process would begin later, approximately in 1900 BCE, during the post-Kura-Araxes IIB phase³⁰) and the establishment of a **nomadic lifestyle** in most of the Highland³¹. In the next phase, during the 19th-18th centuries BCE, the factor of **Assyrian trading colonies (karums)** played a significant role in the development of state-forming processes in the western part of the Armenian Highland, as the western part (the eastern part of the Upper Euphrates, the right bank of the Euphrates³²) was a region where three important cultural zones of the Near East (Mesopotamia, Syria, Asia Minor) converged, and it had favorable climatic conditions.³³ This corresponds to points 5 and 6 of Renfrew’s “early state module” (implantation, emulation).

By the mid-2nd millennium BCE, there were already about two dozen “lands”³⁴ in the same regions (Išuwa and neighboring areas), whose subsequent development and strong Hittite influence led to the formation of the **state of Išuwa**.³⁵

At the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, the formations in the Armenian Highland, collectively referred to as **Nairi**³⁶, were apparently mostly small or medium-sized

²⁶ Renfrew 1986: 7-8.

²⁷ Renfrew 1986: 9-10.

²⁸ Avetisyan 2014: 66.

²⁹ Kosyan, Grekyan 2024: 269-274.

³⁰ Kosyan, Grekyan 2024: 275-276.

³¹ Kosyan, Grekyan 2024: 276.

³² Kosyan 2004: 51-52, 104-105; Michel 2011: 4; Kosyan 2016: 74-75.

³³ Kosyan 2016: 75-76.

³⁴ Kosyan 2006; Kosyan *et al.* 2018.

³⁵ Kosyan 2016: 74; Kosyan 2022: 182-183.

heterarchical tribal unions, which can be called **chiefdoms**, especially considering their number.³⁷ They were apparently in peer positions, as the appearance of **Cyclopean walls** already suggests constant warfare, especially among those chiefdoms that had important strategic locations (mountain passes, highlands, river crossings, pastures, etc.³⁸), while the emergence of citadels speaks of deepening social complexity and the process of early state formation.³⁹ The same can be said about the pre-Urartian irrigation system, which was organized at the level of separate political formations, evidence that agricultural production in the Ararat Valley was divided among separate and competing political formations.⁴⁰ The absence of a dominant center contributed to, rather than hindered, the formation⁴¹ of numerous centers.⁴² Apparently, even under conditions of nomadic lifestyle prevalence, each fortress with its surrounding area must have had its strategic and tactical objectives, which the construction of Cyclopean fortresses and control over the surrounding area aimed to solve. The flourishing of copper-bronze production⁴³ and elite kurgan burials, characteristic of the northeastern part of the Armenian Highland in the 2nd millennium BCE⁴⁴, are also expressions of this multi-layered process.

As a working hypothesis, we can propose considering the further development of the socio-political organizations of the Armenian Highland in the 2nd millennium BCE, both in the western (Settlement Area⁴⁵) and northeastern and central parts (or Fort Area⁴⁶), within the framework of Colin Renfrew's concepts. Apparently, both the **multiplier effect** (trade, metallurgy) and the activation of **peer polity interaction** in the west of the Armenian Highland led to the formation of a more significant polity, Išūwa⁴⁷ (in which case the factor of the Hittite empire had a significant influence⁴⁸), and in the northeastern part, and in a later period, to the formation of the **Etiuni confederation**.⁴⁹

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³⁶ Salvini 1967.

³⁷ Guarducci 2019: 161.

³⁸ Palmisiano 2018: 8.

³⁹ Kushnareva 1977: 9, 10. For a comparison with political formations in Northern Mesopotamia, see Wattenmaker 2009.

⁴⁰ Smith 1999: 54.

⁴¹ Wattenmaker 2009: 122.

⁴² For the number of Cyclopean fortresses in the northeastern part of the Armenian Highland, see Sanamyan 2022: 214.

⁴³ Gevorgyan 2022: 71.

⁴⁴ Wattenmaker 2009: 124. For kurgans excavated to date in Western Armenia, see Özfirat 2019.

⁴⁵ Guarducci 2019: 152-153.

⁴⁶ Guarducci 2019: 164.

⁴⁷ Kosyan 1997; Kosyan 2022 (with bibliography).

⁴⁸ Kosyan 2022: 182-183.

⁴⁹ For literature on Etiuni, see Amiryan 2012; Grekyan 2022; Hmayakyan, Bichione 2022.

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