CHAPTER 1

Examining the Process of Secondary State Development in Iceland

1.1 Defining a Secondary State

Economic complexity was once considered alien to early medieval European communities. These so-called dark age societies were thought to have existed as insular, rural populations that had divorced themselves entirely from any of the commercial enterprises previously implemented by the Roman Empire.¹ More recent historical and archaeological studies have begun to illuminate the fallacy of this opinion, highlighting vigorous interaction among populations through trading activities as well as political alliances.² These activities ignited the Viking Age (790–1050 A.D.), a period characterized by long-distance travel, economic exchange, and political expansion. It was within this climate of social connectivity that new, second-generation state-level societies such as Iceland, the focus of this research, emerged. The process behind this development, however, has long remained an elusive study. This research quandary is best characterized by the observation that while state-level complexity shares many characteristics found in societies structured around other types of social organization, at some point, for unknown reasons, a transition occurs from the ephemeral access to wealth and power that characterizes small-scale societies to the development of an institutionalized elite faction that surpasses kin relationships and is sustained by an administrative and bureaucratic apparatus that manages the economy, plans the cities, marshals the armies, and promotes a shared sense of cosmology.³ Researchers can easily recognize state-level organization once it is fully formed, but the conditions under which these developments are likely to occur have remained a subject of ongoing and open

¹ Grierson (1959).
³ V. Gordon Childe suggested that a society can be classified as a State if the following traits are present: urbanism; full-time labor specialization; the organization of communities based on territorial residence rather than kin connections; class stratification; the ability to amass a surplus of subsistence and luxury goods; monumental architecture; long-distance trade/exchange networks; standardized systems of writing; arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy; and representational/standardized artwork (Childe 1936, 1942).
debate within the fields of anthropology, history, economics, and political science.

Anthropological discussions of these issues have tended to frame the debate in terms of what Morton Fried called primary and secondary state formation. Primary state formation is a rare cultural phenomenon where first generation state-level organization is the result of an entirely endogenous, cultural-evolutionary development. Secondary state formation, on the other hand, is a far more widespread cultural occurrence that “can be attributed to pressure from an already existing state and often [will make use of] parts or all the organization of some prior state as the model for emulation or improvement.” Despite their widespread occurrence, the study of secondary states has long been relegated to the sidelines of archaeological research on primary states. In fact, very little research has been carried out to evaluate Fried’s concept of the processes that underwrite the development of secondary states. According to Fried’s model, all secondary state formation is the byproduct of external stimuli rather than a direct product of indigenous forces. The secondary nature of these complex polities, argued Fried, explains their development and therefore obviates further investigation. Barbara Price later revised Fried’s model by adding a category of secondary states that develop as a result of historical succession from an already existing mature state, but complexity in these budding state polities is still ultimately seen as the product of the expansionary activities of an established state whose offshoot polities simply emulate the social organization of the parent society. This focus on the entirely derivative aspect of secondary states has resulted in very few examinations of the structural organization of second generation states, suggesting that most researchers have been content to accede to Fried’s conclusion that secondary states develop only out of situations where existing states pressure societies to the brink of social change.

The models currently available for examining secondary state development are additionally hampered by the tacit implication that smaller-scale societies are passive recipients of social complexity, and that their history and prior cultural achievements are muted by the voluble influences of their more complex neighbors. These two assumptions have rarely been challenged, yet

4 Fried (1967); Price (1978).
5 Cohen and Service (1978).
6 Fried (1967, 37).
7 Ibid., 179; Rhee (1992, 191).
8 Price (1978).
9 Parkinson and Galaty (2007).