

EIGHTEEN

Prestige Goods and the Formation of Political Hierarchy

A COSTLY SIGNALING MODEL

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PRESTIGE GOODS, STATUS STRIVING, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL RANKING

Graham Clark (1986, 82) observes that the particular “hierarchies of esteem” of materials considered to be precious vary—sometimes widely—by culture, “yet the transmission of precious substances in the form of jewelry or other objects of display has at all times and most notably during the last five millennia served the same purpose the world over, that of signalling and enhancing status,” an observation commonly thought to apply more generally to prestige goods of all kinds. For this reason, scholars studying the development of social institutions and structures of ranking and political hierarchy, particularly archaeologists, typically interpret artifacts postulated to be prestige goods as indicators of the presence of status ranking in past societies.

The advent of formalized and permanent social status ranking, including leadership positions and political hierarchy, constitutes one of the most fundamental transformations of

human society, one that took place very late in human history and very rapidly in comparison to the time scale at which physical transitions in human evolution took place. One of the major difficulties in understanding this transition is explaining why people voluntarily participated in its creation, given that in doing so most would have been accepting limits to their autonomy. Ethnographic accounts of contemporary egalitarian societies suggest that people are averse to such limits and demonstrate that strong norms against status striving often exist (Boehm 1993, 1999; Kelly 1995, 296–297; Lee 1979).

Recent archaeological theory proposes that ambitious men, coined “aggrandizers” by John Clark and Michael Blake (1994), were in large part responsible for the beginnings of social hierarchy. These individuals are empirically observed in ethnographic and historical accounts of many tribal and chiefly societies, and they are typically characterized as desiring prestige and as using prestige goods to gain prestige and attract followers. But why do these individuals want prestige and seem more willing than

others to expend effort to achieve it, and how exactly do prestige goods confer prestige on their owners? Examining these issues provides a point from which to more critically examine the “nature” of aggrandizers, and from there to construct more detailed models of their role in the processes of increasing social rank.

PRESTIGE GOODS’ ROLE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL STATUS

Johnson and Earle (2000) characterize how prestige goods work in slightly and moderately ranked societies:

Valuables are critically important in establishing a person’s social position . . . and in gaining personal prestige and associated political office. Valuables are marks of social status that define an individual’s political and economic rights in a society. By channeling the distribution of the valuables, ranking chiefs used them almost as a political currency.

Observations like this one have led to the general conclusion that prestige goods must have played some role in the initial appearance of social ranking and political hierarchy, specifically through convincing people to give up some of their autonomy and accept the authority and direction of would-be elites. This role may have been a particularly key one, given that little evidence exists suggesting that early high-status individuals and groups used force or violence to achieve or keep their elevated positions.

It is generally assumed that prestige goods are able to play such an important role in the development of social ranking because of the value placed on such items—the esteem in which people hold such goods and their motivation to possess and display them. If prestige goods played an active role in the emergence of social status ranking and formalized leadership, rather than merely reflecting differences in social power and resources, then it would be circular reasoning to argue that the source of their value was as indicators of status differences and wealth. Apart from their association with elevated status, the value of prestige goods is attributed to their scarcity or the labor involved in their manufac-

ture: prestige items may be exotic, finely crafted, or have special properties, but are almost always difficult to obtain in some way. However, they rarely have a utilitarian function or are valued much more highly than expected given their use function. Helms (1979, 1993, 1994) attributes the value of these exotic or finely crafted items to their embodiment of intangible powers and energies from the cosmological realms of gods and ancestors; she further asserts that not only objects from distant locations but knowledge of those locations can be a source of power (Helms 1988). While her arguments are compelling, they beg the question of why humans should universally have a feeling of reverence for geographically distant locales and how it might influence the use of valuables.

To resolve this problem, a theory is needed to explain the emergence of prestige goods apart from, and in all likelihood predating, the existence of social ranking and political hierarchy and of the attendant socioeconomic differences these generate. It must be explained why the possession and display of such goods increases the prestige of their owner, and why having prestige leads to increased authority and social power.

A THEORY FOR THE ORIGIN OF PRESTIGE GOODS

Any explanation of prestige goods’ role in augmenting prestige must articulate with what is known about the psychology and behavior of prestige, a phenomenon unique to human beings. In all other social species, including non-human primates, social ranking appears to be determined by dominance alone (Ellis 1995; Henrich and Gil-White 2001). In humans, dominance, which also includes coercive abilities due to socioeconomic resources, is certainly present in social relationships; and given its pervasive presence in our closest primate relatives and the social interaction of animals generally, it is reasonable to assume that dominance existed during the entire course of the hominid evolutionary trajectory. Nevertheless, prestige is at

least as pervasive as dominance in contemporary human social groups and likely just as important in shaping social relationships (Barkow 1975, 554). It is a “human universal” (Brown 1991), existing in all groups of people regardless of overarching political structure and degree of social ranking present.

Prestige is defined in common usage as respect and deference freely conferred on an individual by others, not compelled through violence, threat, or coercion. A person having prestige is honored by peers and wields influence over them. Social scientists who focus on the formation of political structures emphasize that prestige is associated with having authority and thus a form of social power. Demonstration of excellence in some valued domain of activity is one of the main ways by which a prestigious person achieves the respect of others and thus influence over them (Henrich and Gil-White 2001, 167). An interesting repercussion of this fact is that many different hierarchies of prestige can exist simultaneously (Henrich and Gil-White 2001, 170). While the diversity of economic and leisure activities in contemporary Western society allows people to achieve great renown from having skill in one or several of a wide range of activities, the range of possible activities likely would be more limited in traditional societies.

THE ORIGINS OF PRESTIGE PSYCHOLOGIES AND BEHAVIORS

If prestige processes arose early in modern humans’ evolutionary trajectory and have remained a pervasive feature of human psychology and social interaction, then it is likely that prestige is a product of design by natural selection. What adaptive function does prestige serve? And what in the evolutionary past of humans led to strong selection for prestige that was not present in all other species, including those most closely related to us? Recent work in evolutionary psychology has begun to address these issues, focusing on the function of prestige in small-scale societies of the kind hypothesized to have characterized human groups in the evolutionary past.

Henrich and Gil-White (2001) have recently proposed a model for the origins of prestige in early human societies. They suggest that, as culturally transmitted knowledge became increasingly complex and important for success, selection could have favored new strategies to assist in social learning. Juvenile, learning individuals, or those who simply wish to improve their success, such as recent migrants to the group, would benefit from learning from successful individuals, through observation and imitation as well as through direct teaching. Henrich and Gil-White theorize that selection would have favored the development of psychological mechanisms to assist in determining which members of a group are successful, and to generate admiration and attraction to that individual as motivation to maintain proximity to her and to copy her behavior. Furthermore, these feelings of attraction and admiration would also cause the learning individual to treat the target with increased respect and deference, as a means of providing the skilled individual with a reason to tolerate the proximity of the learning individual and to interact with her. It is also likely that prestigious individuals received other kinds of positive benefits in social relationships, such as leniency after a transgression of group norms or a failure to reciprocate in dyadic relationships, and possibly more support for self and family members following injury (see Bateson 1958, 91; Hawkes 1991, cited in Henrich and Gil-White 2001, 182–183). Because average skills can be attained from one’s parents and close relatives without deference payments (Henrich and Gil-White 2001, 179), clients should only be willing to pay for above-average levels of skill and knowledge. However, to the degree that the transmission of skills and knowledge is strictly vertical (from parents or other close relatives) (Shennan and Steele 1999; also see Tehrani and Collard, this volume), the opportunity to acquire prestige benefits from learning individuals should be limited.

Henrich and Gil-White’s model presents a compelling argument for how prestige could have arisen as the result of learning individuals’ desire to copy successful individuals. This model

explains three important observed facts about the psychology of prestige: (1) why people admire and defer to successful, skilled individuals, (2) why people desire to be prestigious, and (3) why people pay attention to those to whom others give prestige.

COMPETITION FOR PRESTIGE

Obviously, the possession of good skills and knowledge should improve an individual's personal fitness. If having prestige from the possession of those skills and knowledge further confers benefits on an individual, and if it also outweighs the costs associated with the presence of a group of inquisitive admirers and possibly time spent teaching, then skilled individuals should be motivated to strive for prestige. Henrich and Gil-White briefly address the issue of competition for prestige, suggesting that because prestige is freely conferred by clients on their "patrons" and clients are at liberty to "take their business" to whomever they chose, the distribution of prestige clients to patrons will have aspects of a market (Henrich and Gil-White 2001, 171, 178–179). If highly skilled models increase their benefits from prestige with every admiring client they gain, up to some optimal number, then models should do what they can to encourage clients to choose them as their patron. Henrich and Gil-White suggest that when competition for clients is high, then models should modify their behavior—be less arrogant, more approachable, and so on—in order to attract and retain clients (Henrich and Gil-White 2001, 171, 178–179).

Increasing affability is only one way that a would-be model could convince prospective clients that he is a better choice than one of his rivals for prestige. I suggest that an alternative strategy would be for a skilled individual to behave in some way that would convince prospective clients that his skills are better than those of other potential models. One way would be to signal his success with physical items. Since people should be predisposed to pay attention to the prestige rankings of the other members of their group, I would argue that this predisposi-

tion could expand to include other kinds of information that helps clarify prestige ranking, such as material possessions.

PRESTIGE GOODS AS COSTLY SIGNALS OF SKILL AND EXPERTISE

Drawing on costly signaling theory, I suggest that material items that honestly reflect some aspect of an individual's skills or knowledge could act as an advertisement in prestige competition and, as such, would constitute "prestige goods." The ways in which physical items could reveal success are numerous, in theory varying as widely as the number of skills and knowledge that a person could possess. Prestige goods could demonstrate skills directly related to making a living, such as hunting, craft production, or knowledge about the environment. They could also reflect the quality of an individual's social contacts outside the group, as might be important during times of environmental stress or other crises. Finally, prestige goods could signal success at a more general level in the amount of extra time or labor that an individual has to acquire and/or produce the item. The link among the signal's content, the skill or knowledge that the potential prestige client wishes to gain, and the specific form that it takes distinguishes prestige goods as a signal from other kinds of signals that could possibly and probably did exist, those aimed at different audiences, including potential mating partners, potential rivals for mating partners, and competitors for other kinds of resources.¹

The idea that material goods can serve as signals of personal quality and social standing is an old one, dating back at least to Thorsten Veblen's (1899/1994) *Theory of the Leisure Class*; his idea of "conspicuous consumption" describes how people use the display and consumption of costly luxuries as a believable way to advertise the amount of wealth they possess. The cost of the signal, in this case in terms of wealth, is the assurance of its honesty. A substantial literature on signaling theory now exists (for a complete treatment, see Maynard Smith and Harper 2003), developed in economics in

the 1960s and independently in evolutionary biology somewhat later, following Zahavi's "handicap principle" for fitness indicators under sexual selection (Zahavi 1975, 1995; Zahavi and Zahavi 1997). The dynamics of this idea have been formally modeled by Grafen (1990), Maynard Smith (1991), and others.

While signaling theory is not limited to scenarios of sexual selection, recent applications of it to human behavior from evolutionary psychology and human behavioral ecology have remained mostly within this area (see, e.g., Miller 2000). Pertinent to the present discussion, several scholars have proposed that contributions to public goods may be costly signals made in an attempt to gain prestige and related personal benefits, including the hunting of large game animals for public consumption (Bird et al. 2002; Smith, Bird, and Bird 2003) and the punishment of transgressors for violations of group norms (Gintis, Smith, and Bowles 2001). Recently, archaeologists (Boone 2000; Neiman 1997) have also begun to explicitly draw on costly signaling theory to explain status striving following the development of some degree of leadership and social ranking.

INCREASING COMPETITION AND THE EMERGENCE OF PRESTIGE GOODS

We do not know the time frame for the emergence of the psychological mechanisms underlying prestige-based exchange of knowledge for deference, but it likely was part of the transition to fully modern *Homo sapiens*, given that prestige is a part of all human societies. Prestige goods, in contrast, do not appear in the archaeological record until later, at different times in different regions of the world. The variation in the timing of the appearance of prestige goods implies that levels of competition for prestige have varied substantially across groups. What could cause prestige competition to escalate, such that the use of novel competitive strategies, including prestige goods, could be favored? I suggest two factors: (1) increasing group size and (2) increasing complexity and/or number of skills and realms of knowledge necessary for success.

An increase in the number of group members could favor the use of prestige goods in two ways. First, all other things being equal, as group size increases, the number of people in the group with some degree of success should also increase, although the number of the most highly skilled individuals (the best models) should be smaller relative to the group as a whole. As the number of successful people in a group rises, learning individuals would have more choices from which to select a model. Therefore, the level of competition between successful individuals to attract admiring followers should increase. Second, as the number of skilled individuals rises, it should also become more difficult for learning individuals to determine which individual is the most successful and therefore the best choice of model. In this context, a skilled individual who chooses to advertise her degree of skills/knowledge may have an advantage.

The expansion in skill and knowledge sets available and important to success could also favor a strategy of advertising. As new skills are added to the repertoire of ways of making a living and existing skills and bodies of knowledge are expanded and become more complex, the difficulty of learning everything necessary for success should increase. This in turn should make it more important for learning individuals to have access to a good model and should make learning individuals willing to invest more energy in evaluating potential models, and to increase the amount of social benefits they are willing to bestow on successful individuals in exchange for proximity and teaching. An increase in the benefits received from having prestige could compensate for increased costs incurred to win prestige competition.

In summary, building on Henrich and Gil-White's theory for the adaptive function of prestige, I have proposed a model to explain why prestige goods should function to augment a person's prestige and under what conditions they should first appear. I theorize that increasing competition for prestige "clientele" and the increased benefits to be gained from them could

favor new strategies to win prestige competition, including the use of physical goods as advertisements of degree of skill and knowledge. The factors influencing these two conditions—including the size of social groups, rates of innovation, and the size of cultural bodies of knowledge—are numerous and complex, and it would be beyond the scope of the present work to attempt to discuss them in detail. It is worth noting, however, that they include increases in population size, increasing group circumscription and technological innovation, which are also often implicated in the emergence of social inequality. Thus, while this model for the origins of prestige goods contains no causal arrow between the emergence of prestige goods and social ranking, it could well be the case that the stimuli for both lay in these overarching forces.

PRESTIGE GOODS AND THE SELECTION OF LEADERS

How then could prestige goods, as honest signals of an individual's skills and expertise, play a role in the formalization of leadership and the development of social ranking? Drawing on ethnographic observation of how leaders are chosen in contemporary egalitarian² societies, I suggest that prestige would have played an important part in who is selected—or accepted—as leader. Leaders for a given activity are usually selected from among those who have experience and/or skill relevant to the task at hand; in other words, they should have prestige in that particular arena. In groups experiencing increasing competition for prestige due to the factors cited, prestige goods should be one of the ways that a potential leader's skill and knowledge could be evaluated by the group.

While in egalitarian societies the authority that such a leader has is generally restricted to that specific activity and so is ephemeral, in groups experiencing increasing selection for the ability to act collectively, leadership would be needed more frequently and be more important to group survival, providing the opportunity for leadership to become more permanent.

Many ethnographic and historic examples support the idea that groups with the ability to organize themselves in efforts for the common good, such as military action and cooperative tasks for production, often do better than their neighboring groups. For instance, if intergroup conflict over resources or land increases in frequency and intensity, groups with an individual recognized to lead and organize group defense and raiding might be more successful than groups without such a leader. The same logic could apply to leading and organizing group labor for public goods projects, such as the construction and maintenance of irrigation systems, fish weirs, and the like.

Archaeologists generally agree that increasing population density, increasing group circumscription and conflict, and the intensification of subsistence production are factors that encourage the appearance of social stratification, while there is disagreement as to which, if any, are primary motors. If efficient collective action becomes more relevant to a group's success, then the presence of a leader to coordinate such activity may be one of several possible social institutions that are favored and become more common. In this way, competition for personal prestige, and thus prestige goods, could become linked to competition for the social power held by someone occupying a leadership role.

In this novel context of competition, prestige goods could fill a similar function to that described previously, but in this case acting as honest signals of skills and knowledge pertinent to leadership of collective action. For instance, material items could honestly signal a would-be leader's skill in group defense and/or raiding. In the Shuar, an egalitarian group living in the Amazonian lowlands of Ecuador, historical accounts relate how warriors retained the heads of those they killed during conflict with other groups, which then served as honest signals of a warrior's ferocity and success in conflict to his own group members. It is important to note that these items were displayed only in ceremonies for the warriors' own group and were not displayed to members of other groups;

in other words, they were not being used to intimidate their enemies.

Exotic (nonlocal) goods could index the quality of a would-be leader's external contacts, which in this new context of group competition would be important for trade and political alliance. The Kula Ring, a complex system of exchange among the Trobriand Islanders of the western Pacific, is one of the most famous examples of the importance of a prestige good system to the means by which leaders affirmed but also manipulated their elevated social rank. A chief's status was based not only on his inherited rank but also on his successful participation in the Kula and competitive yam harvests. Exchange of prestige goods between elites created networks of alliance and obligation between them, and display of the items at home after trading voyages acted as a measure of a chief's success, demonstrating his political prowess and economic capability and thus augmenting his prestige and cementing his authority.

I suggest that it was through this process that prestige became linked with social roles of leadership and elevated status. According to this model, prestige goods played an important part in the initial appearance of social ranking and more formalized leadership positions by providing one of the means by which leaders were selected or approved by group members for their abilities. The reason that they were able to play this role is fundamentally grounded in their operation in groups without ranking, where they arose as a result of individual learning strategies.

This alone would be only a partial explanation of the role that prestige goods continued to play in the formation of social ranking and political hierarchy; obviously later in time, prestige goods no longer function only, or even mostly, to signal individual skill and knowledge. Nevertheless, it is a critical point that that they could have begun their functioning in just this fashion because of its connection to the motivations and attitudes shaping people's behavior with regard to prestige goods. However, once leadership roles and the cultural norms and social institutions supporting them were in existence, their presence and

actions had dramatic and far-reaching impacts on both the operation of prestige goods and on the nature of social ranking.

PRESTIGE GOODS AS COSTLY SIGNALS OF SOCIAL POWER AND GROUP STRENGTH

It is very likely that occupying a position of authority brings with it personal benefits and opportunities to augment one's own as well as one's family's well-being, apart from the benefits to the group of having a leader, shared among all members. For example, Johnson and Earle (2000, 126) observe that headmen and Big Men are often polygynous and thus likely have elevated reproductive success. I follow these and other scholars in hypothesizing that the pursuit of personal advantage for themselves and their families could have contributed to the development of increasingly distinct levels of wealth and social power between different individuals within a group, and over time between their families and lineages.

I theorize that the association of leaders' abilities with prestige items and the involvement of leaders themselves with increasing disparities between kin and coalitional groups within a community forged a link between prestige goods and this novel dimension to social relations, "elite" social status. The possession of elevated social status through membership in a successful kin group would have enormous impact on an individual's social relations, making it beneficial to advertise it to others with whom she might interact. The audience for such a signal would differ from that for signals of skill: the latter would be those learning individuals looking for a skilled model, while the former would be widened to include all group members with whom the signaler might interact. Social status is now comprised of more than personally derived prestige and dominance; it now includes access and rights to resources, access to persons in position of authority, and so forth. In effect, the aspect of political and economic coercion has been added to the interpersonal dynamics in a group. Prestige goods

operating in this new social context continue to function as a signal, rather than a cue or an index, of social status. Just as the number of kills a hunter makes to eat is an index of his skill rather than a signal to learning hunters, the amount of social status an individual possessed should be indexed by things and actions directly related to furthering her survival and success: health, number of children, and the like. Prestige goods, in contrast, can reveal the political and economic power she can bring to bear that might otherwise not be observable.

The second way in which the existence of leaders transformed the signal content of prestige goods derives from leaders' ability to access and direct the labor of others. The amount of labor possessed by a group and the social power embodied in a leader's ability to direct that labor is in itself a new kind of quality that describes both a leader and his group. I argue that the signal content of prestige goods was expanded to include this aspect of social power. This new signal would be used by would-be leaders within a group and between the groups that these leaders represent. In a world where groups are increasingly interacting with one another as units (where factions form within a single group, and groups form larger factions of alliance), the quality of group strength and the ability to advertise it would take on a pertinence not previously possessed.

This general idea is by no means a new one; archaeologists have often employed the general idea that prestige goods act as signals of group and leader strength in models of the development of factional and peer polity competition. Several scholars have recently drawn on evolutionary frameworks and methods to examine the costs and benefits of prestige goods and other signals of competitive strength in terms of energy and, ultimately, reproductive and cultural fitness. Neiman (1997) created a model to support the common supposition that conspicuous consumption is universally a symbol of power. Specifically, in the case of the Maya, he proposed that carved stone monuments function as costly signals of what he terms political "competitive

ability," which he defines as the ability to win political contests with competitors (270). Level of ability depends on a variety of variables, among them "physical size, physiological condition, fighting skill, and psychological cleverness, which contribute in varying proportions to an individual's ability to build and maintain coalitions comprised of kin and non-kin." By winning political contests, individuals affect their individual reproductive success by gaining or losing access to mates and resources. In this way, Neiman links social power as a currency to the currency used in all other evolutionary analyses of animal behavior. This model is one of selection at the level of the individual, but it may also draw on kin selection to the extent that the performance of leaders in political competition relies heavily on the actions of their immediate family and kin networks (Neiman 1997, 271). This logic can be extended to nonkin corporate groups as well, and thus the problem could also be approached from a group selection perspective.

Pletka (2001) adopts an explicitly group selection approach in examining the possible function of Neolithic and Bronze Age Danish earthwork monuments (mounded graves and enclosures) as costly signals of group strength, by which term he specifically refers to the capability to defend rights to land and resources. Earthen monuments, like carved stelae, are just one of many possible ways to signal defensive capability, and I would argue that Pletka's model of honest signaling of group strength via the construction of earthen monuments could be expanded and adapted to apply to all such signals more generally. Like Neiman and Pletka, Boone (2000) uses costly signaling theory to answer the question of why conspicuous displays of wealth expenditure are universally associated with social inequality. His model addresses all material forms of display, including elaborate monumental architecture, exotic and nonfunctional objects, and also elaborate feasts and gift-giving performances (84–85).³

The emergence of these two phenomena—the formation of family and lineage social rank differences and the increasing interaction

between factions via their leaders—transformed the social landscape in which prestige goods were being used in dramatic and fundamental ways. Correspondingly, the content of the signal being made with prestige goods was significantly expanded in these new social contexts, in turn impacting their role in increasing political and social ranking. One result was that self-promotion and aggrandizement using prestige goods, once rebuffed by social equals, could become a tactic used by would-be leaders in advertising their social power and the success of their group, as well as in drawing followers into accepting their authority.

PRESTIGE GOODS AND THE AGGRANDIZER

Hayden's (1998) aggrandizer model of prestige technology posits that aggrandizers constituted one of the major forces of change in human societies, leading to the emergence and elaboration of sociopolitical ranking among other significant changes. According to this model, these changes are the sum result of aggrandizing individuals seeking to promote their personal self-interest through various means, the use of prestige goods being an important one. Hayden posits that "aggrandizing personalities" exist in all human populations but need only constitute a small percentage of a group in order to provoke change in social structure. He defines a person with this personality as ambitious; socially, politically, and economically aggressive; acquisitive; risk taking; as someone who manipulates other individuals in order to promote his or her own self-interest, and who often acts selfishly rather than in the interest of the community, concluding that "aggrandizers have, in effect, an inner motor, an inner drive to increase their own standard of living and their own reproductive success" (18–19).

The model of prestige goods function presented here should contribute to our understanding of the aggrandizing personality. Drawing on evolutionary principles, I would suggest that all people have such an "inner motor" to improve their lives and their reproductive success. In fact,

in animals with longer life spans such as humans, reproductive success hinges greatly on having success in life skills. This idea underlies Henrich and Gil-White's theory for the emergence of prestige as a means for both learning and skilled individuals to simultaneously improve their success through an exchange of benefits. My own theory for the emergence of prestige goods as signals of personal "quality"—in terms of skills and knowledge—also hinges on the idea that such benefits are sufficiently valuable to personal success that they drive competition to obtain prestige goods and to display them.

In any given group, there will be variation in the levels of skill and breadth of knowledge possessed by group members, determined by age and experience as well as talent. Because skill level should change (with any luck improve) over the course of the lifetime, so, too, should behaviors involving paying attention to and obtaining and displaying prestige goods. I propose that that part of the complex of personality variables constituting the aggrandizer that is composed by the desire to own and display prestige goods as well as to pay attention to them and admire them should exist in all people, rather than being limited to a certain personality "type." Which behavioral strategy a person uses at a given time could be called state-dependent, in that the choice to obtain and display prestige goods should depend on the level of skill and success currently possessed by the individual, and it should change during the course of the individual's life with their degree of competency.

The advent of leadership roles and social ranking would have considerable impact on the expression of these psychological dispositions. For one, the increased benefits from occupying a leadership position and the corresponding increase in competition for prestige that should accompany it could manifest in part as an augmented desire to possess and display such goods. Also, I have argued that the development of social ranking would give all individuals a new kind of quality that they would benefit from signaling to potential mates, allies, and

competitors. It is likely that both the increased importance of signaling personal skills and the addition of new signal content could augment the level of desire to own and display prestige goods already in place.

This augmented desire in turn should have had significant ramifications for the behaviors of would-be leaders, encouraging not just the display of prestige goods but also distribution of such items to followers. The distribution of prestige items by would-be elites should attract followers due to a psychology already in place that encourages owning prestige items as a means of increasing prestige and the associated benefits, and more generally as imitation of the behaviors of successful individuals. I argue that it is by tapping into these deep-seated desires that aggrandizers are able to shape political alliances by display and distribution of prestige items to group members, thus providing one of the mechanisms by which hierarchical power relations within the group develop.

CONCLUSIONS

The model proposed in this chapter addresses the problem of the origins of the value of prestige goods in the absence of formalized and heritable social rank differences, wealth, and other sources of coercive social power. It attempts to explain the role played by prestige goods in the processes leading to the emergence of social institutions underlying them. I began by positing that prestige competition in early egalitarian societies should have existed independent of the opportunity for formalized leadership roles and social ranking differences to emerge. In this context, prestige goods could come into being as costly signals of personal success and skill as a response to increasing levels of prestige competition, resulting from increasing group size and expanding skill sets and knowledge. When selection at the level of the group favors those with the ability to act collectively and thus a social position of a leader who coordinates and directs such collective activity, a new arena for competition is created. Prestige goods now fill

an additional role, acting as costly signals of leadership ability in competition for leadership and social rank in transegalitarian societies. This theory thus links how prestige goods operate in individual strategy to their role in political process, group competition, and ultimately the development of social ranking and political hierarchy. Obviously the model at present is a very simplified one, and it does not examine the role of other factors in the establishment of personal status or the emergence of permanent, formalized social inequality. Closer examination in the future of different processes outlined in the model will hopefully lead to a better understanding of such interactions.

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NOTES

1. In the case of potential mating partners, while they should desire a successful mate and thus presumably one with high levels of skill and knowledge, they should be less interested in the exact nature of those skills, given that they are not interested in learning those skills themselves. The same is true of rivals; they should be most interested in assessing the strength and competitive abilities of their rivals and not be interested in the particular details of their rivals' skills. In all of these cases, while potential mates and rivals should certainly pay attention to such signals once they are in existence, their interest in the success and formidability of the signaler should not be sufficient to cause signals of skill and expertise to appear in the first place. The honesty of the

signal must be maintained by a cost because of the conflict of interest between the signalers and the signal's audience, although the purpose of signaling is to coordinate skilled and learning individuals for their mutual benefit: while signalers would always benefit from receiving deference and other social perquisites from admirers regardless of their level of skill, learning individuals will benefit from the exchange only if the signaler truly is skilled or knowledgeable.

2. By the term *egalitarian*, I specifically refer to an absence of formalized leadership positions or social ranking. It is likely the case that status differences have always existed in human societies—by age, sex, and level of skill—and prestige differences do exist in contemporary egalitarian societies.
3. All of the models just discussed share strong similarities with the literature on contests in theoretical biology. Work here has demonstrated that signals between competitive rivals can evolve when signaling unobservable qualities relevant to fighting, thus transferring information about who is more likely to win a fight and allowing the outcome to be predicted, could prevent both parties from engaging in a costly contest. However, the winner of such contests attains dominance over his rival, not prestige from him. While competition between individuals, and later between groups of increasing size, also characterizes human interaction, I do not believe that this is sufficient to explain how prestige goods initially emerged or how such goods became initially involved in leadership and ranking. Rather, I would argue that once leadership and social ranking existed, prestige goods' use was transformed through involvement in competition between rivals, and it took on an expanded signal content having to do with coercion and dominance through their links with authority and social power.

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