Readings in Economic Prehistory

July 2013

This is a compilation of working papers, articles, and books written by economists on the subject of economic prehistory. Prehistory is loosely defined to mean the period between the evolution of anatomically modern humans and the appearance of written documents.

This list includes research on hunter-gatherers, mobility and sedentism, the transition to agriculture, marriage and kinship, the origins of warfare, inequality, and the state, social collapse, implications of prehistory for long run economic growth, and related topics.

Some adjacent fields in economics are not covered here. For example, this bibliography does not specifically address human biological evolution; development; growth theory; or economic history proper. In each case, however, we made a few exceptions for items that seemed especially relevant.

We do not attempt to survey the enormous literature on prehistory by archaeologists and anthropologists. Interested readers will find many references to this literature in the items listed here.

The bibliography has been compiled by Greg Dow, Leanna Mitchell, and Scott Skjei, and it borrows heavily from Greg's joint research with Clyde Reed. Funding was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and also by the Human Evolutionary Studies Program at Simon Fraser University.

We want to update this bibliography regularly and make it as complete as possible. Any suggestions about working papers or published material suitable for inclusion should be sent to Greg Dow, Department of Economics, Simon Fraser University (gdow@sfu.ca). Please include complete citations or web links to such materials whenever possible.

We would also appreciate hearing about any errors or suggestions for improvement.


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Bowles, Samuel, 2009, Did warfare among ancestral hunter-gatherer groups affect the evolution of human social behaviors, Science 324, 1293-98.

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