

# “Social Complexity”

Stability, Sustainability, and  
Developmental Trajectories

# Review: What kinds of questions are scientists asking about early states, in this century?

- Where did they come from, and why did they happen when and where they did?
- How were/are they different from other (past AND present) forms of human society?
- How sustainable/stable were they?
- How/why did they collapse the way they did?

# Technological Emphases

- Eg., Childe's "urban rev.", Wittfogel's "hydraulic society", technology and trade, but also warfare as technology
- Tend to focus on enabling effects of tek: what tek makes possible
- Special focus on tech as solution to problems of civilizations
- Weakness: many of the technological innovations occur AFTER first phases of civilization development begun: not good for "sole cause", or "prime mover" models

# Ecological Emphases

- Early approaches: environment as “problem” overcome by civilization (like with Wittfogel)
- More recently: ecology as system that responds (in feedback loops, for example) that can direct development of civilizations AFTER initial appearance
- Special emphasis on environmental consequences of civilization, and effect on long-term sustainability
- Radically changed by advent of new climatological, paleoenvironmental data, technologies

# Social and Ideological Emphases

- Power: economic, social, and political: power negotiation, competition as critical dynamic in process of change within, between states
- Factionalism, competition, and ideology  
(\*Ideology: a set of beliefs, values, and institutions that explain, rationalize, and therefore reinforce the status quo)
- Individuals, Gender, Kinship and the State: extracting surplus from the kin group, and the transition to class-based societies
- Archaeological challenges: beliefs, ideologies, social units difficult (but NOT impossible) to dig up

# Social Hierarchy: Class, Rank, and Status

- Long-term debates over definitions, meanings of social difference
- Bottom line: in complex societies there is a strong correlation between wealth, power, and prestige
- 2 directions for comparison: states vs. non-states, (especially chiefdoms), and early states vs. later ones

# Chiefdoms vs. States

- New debates over the evolutionary relationship between chiefdoms and states
- Arising from new emphasis on stability, dynamism, sustainability of states, (especially relationship between expansion and stability in both)
- New concept of “complex chiefdoms”: multiple levels of decision-making, absence of indigenous “states” in these areas
- States ‘displaced kinship’ as main organizing principle
- Power based on control of agricultural surpluses
- Organization and management of human labor becomes more complex
- Institutionalized administrative positions replaced patron-client relations as main governmental structure
- Multiple levels of decision-making formalized
- More emphasis on controlling territory, with borders more formally defined

# Early States vs. Later “Pre-industrial” States

- Inherently derivative (see earlier “western civ” slide)
- Use of coinage: shift in relationship of wealth to power
- Specialized full-time military
- Desacralized natural world, rise of ‘international religions’, ‘portable gods’
- Decline of sacral kingship, rise of multiple forms of state organization, ideology (including nationalism)