

Cognitive and Symbolic Aspects of Early States

Introduction

“So, did they REALLY believe their ruler was a god??”

- Um, do you REALLY believe GE is a person?
- “Corporate personhood” has been a legal concept in US since 1888.
- Recently dramatically expanded in the 2010 Supreme Court decision
- Abstract concepts like “divine kingship” can be widely held ideas, but “counter-ideals” are nearly always present.



Cosmologies, Ideologies, and World Views

- Religious systems
- Cosmologies
- Ideologies
- Standardized systems for analyzing, understanding realities (sciences, mathematics, writing, engineering, etc)
- Some of the most inferential of all data archaeologists work with
- Changed very dynamically in emerging early states
- Absolutely critical to the functioning of the state

Religion and Concepts of the Supernatural

- Role of religion in early states:
 - To provide basic metaphors for explaining and understanding social relationships, and natural phenomena
 - “Symbol system” that provides motivation for general order of society, and a model for perceiving reality

Ideology

- Ideologies are aspects of belief systems that function to maintain the status quo in a society's power relations
- Key definition: “a set of beliefs or propositions that are consciously or unconsciously used to promote social cohesion and unity by masking the inequality and exploitation that are present in a particular society” (Trigger, “Understanding Early Civilizations”)
- “In early civilizations much if not all ideology is religious in nature because political thought tended to be religious”

Differences with Modern Religions

- No real distinction between natural, supernatural and social realms
- “Humans lived in a world composed only of other beings; there were no things” Deities had full range of human powers and abilities, plus superhuman ones; they animated the existing world with this power
- People believed they could interact with the natural and supernatural world in much the same way they did with each other
- Causality was understood, but understood in terms that interpreted natural forces as having human personalities
- Humans could intercede with the forces of nature by persuasion

Ancient Deities

- Nonpersonified natural forces
- Ancestors
- Divine power or energy infusing universe
- Enduring supernatural essence (especially in a place)

Divine Intervention

- People believed deities participated in the control of natural processes and the shaping of social life
- (Some) people could intercede with deities, to affect events

Linking Deities to Humans

- Who could contact, intervene with deities?
- How many ranks of deities?
- How much power or control, over what, did different deities have?

Deities and Social, Moral Order

- Deities were not necessarily moral, omniscient, or all-powerful
- Did have a hierarchy that 'imitated' human social hierarchy
- Over time, both the individual deities and a divinely enforced social order could become connected to individual state powers, but that link could be fragile

Religion and the State

- Religious beliefs reinforced the authority of the state
- Religious rituals reinforced the importance of the elites
- Both connected the spiritual, social, and natural worlds with elite political power

How the World Works: Cosmologies and Cosmogonies

- A “cosmology” is an account or theory of the origin of the universe, and the basic workings of existence: explains what needs to be explained, why things work the way they do
- Cosmogony as subset: concerned with the origin of the universe, especially the solar system

Critical elements to explain:

- Time (Calendrics)
- Space (Axis Mundi, Quadripartitioning)
- Creation (beginnings, origins, creators)

Where do humans fit?

- What are birth and death?
- What happens after?
- What is “appropriate” behavior while you’re here?

Religious Practices

- Cult: set of practices unified around a single set of beliefs
- Ritual: specific act or practice that affirms, displays or enacts tenets of belief
- Sacrifice: a ritual in which an offering is made to affirm belief or affect outcomes
- Archaeologists can and do find evidence of all three of these.

Human Sacrifice: Special Case?

- Where does it happen?
- When?
- Who gets sacrificed?
- Who sacrifices?
- Does the ritual change over time?

Religious Administration

- Religious practice as an area of specialization: full or part time? Status?
- “Official” vs. “Unofficial”: controlling religious practice, ideology and “witchcraft”, or unauthorized, ‘heretical’ practices