

Gimme Land, Lotsa Land: Land Tenure Systems in Early States

Three basic modes:

- Collective: held by kin group or other social unit
- Institutional: used for the benefit of the state, religious institutions, state office-holders, or other high-ranking individuals
- Private: Owned by individuals or partners, can be bought and sold however these individuals want

Collective

- Can co-exist with, sometimes even overlap with other modes of land tenure
- Doesn't mean individuals in the social group can't use for profit
- Doesn't mean the group can't lose the land

Institutional

- Could not be bought or sold
- Principal mechanism for “paying” state bureaucrats (“office” land)
- Title holders could use surplus produced on this land w/o consulting the farmers

Private

- No solid evidence that such a category existed in most early states (Mesopotamia a possible exception)
- More commonly, individual wealth was generated by owning the labor (or right to products of the labor) of those farming collective or institutional lands
- Private land-holding for all but extremely high-status elites very risky: too much vulnerability to economic, ecological, and political instability

Eminent Domain: Reality or Royal Hype?

- Did the state have a “right” to all land, or did rulers on occasion take land without compensation?
- Were they always successful?

Land tenure and the larger economic picture

- Some evidence of a trend from collective to institutional to private landholding
- Coincides with greater (and more successful) pressure by state to have farmers produce more from land AND give up more of that production in taxes