

Sociopolitical Organization

The Basic Political and Social
“Building Blocks”
Of Early Civilizations

Basic Concepts

- What is “social organization”?
 - ‘Public’ forms: class, status, ethnicity, political and economic systems
 - ‘Private’ forms: family, kinship, gender
 - Bottom line: how are individuals connected to some larger group? How do groups define their members?
- What is “political organization”?
 - Power structures
 - Formally defined positions and institutions
 - Geopolitical entities

Kingship

- The nature of political power: control, coercion, and patronage
- Intervention with the supernatural
- Badges of office: monumentality, exotics, and specialized labor

City States vs. Territorial States

- Self-governing cities
- Found in clusters or aggregates
- Had clear/known boundaries
- Territorial sizes varied, but were limited compared to larger states
- High levels of conflict that did not necessarily result in territorial expansion, dominance
- Full-time craft specialization (including urban farmers)

- Territories generally larger, and stays together in early development, rather than disintegrating
- Lower population numbers, but distinctive upper class lifestyle that supported elaborate administrative hierarchies, sharp distinctions between elites and nonelites
- Strong central control over the economy that lead to much larger surpluses
- Population distributions remained more stable, especially in terms of agricultural producers remaining rural

State Forms and Functions

- Nature of power and control internally:
ritual, settlement systems, and taxation
- Nature of power and control externally:
conquest, tribute, 'hegemony'

Main question: How does a state operate?

“The state can ... be viewed as an administrative mechanism that extracts sufficient resources from society to maintain itself, defends the territory it controls from foreign aggression, and is responsible for maintaining the unity of its territory, if necessary by force. To do this it must uphold a social and economic order which convinces ordinary people that, despite the demands the state imposes on them, it makes their lives more prosperous and secure than they would be if the state did not exist.” (Trigger, 2007).

City State Administration

- Cities dominate hinterland economically and politically as well as in numbers
- Frequent client relationships between political leaders in cities and those in smaller centers
- Competition for subsidiary leadership positions intense
- Power-sharing between rulers and other administrators fluctuated
- Interaction between political positions, lineages, religion, and military authority highly variable from case to case.

Territorial State Administration

- Needed much more elaborate regional administrations than city-states
- Constant tension between trying to expand territory, and trying to keep power centralized
- “Delegational” vs. “Bureaucratic” forms: reality is, most systems contained elements of both

Delegational Systems

- All the administrative functions for a region beyond the capital city were held by a single, subsidiary ruler for that province
- Main challenge for principal ruler was to keep this kind of administration from disintegrating
- Think “kings and nobles”

Bureaucratic Systems

- All levels of government administered by individuals responsible for separate sectors of the system, eg. military, legal, and fiscal 'officers'
- More expensive, less efficient at the local level
- Hierarchically arranged
- Think 'civil service'

Political Processes

- Highly dynamic: competitive, strategic
- Tensions between recruitment vs. control
- Tensions between central authority and lesser elites
- Responding to changes, negative and positive: how flexible were early civilizations? How stable?

Legal Systems

- Grew out of the pre-existing legal/moral systems of earlier, kin-based societies
- Functioned to maintain status quo, especially in terms of social order (hierarchy)
- Legal courts or adjudicating bodies present in all these societies
- Hierarchically arranged (ie, lower level institutions passed judgements on to higher level ones)
- Definitions of both crime and sanction (punishment), and how formally codified either was, highly variable across cultures
- Also highly variable across classes within a single culture

Aztec Courts

“There was a system of lesser courts, whose verdicts could be appealed to a supreme judicial council. This council had 80 days in which to resolve appeals, and would consult with the ruler before handing down its judgment. The ruler was the final arbiter of appeals. He appointed all judges and held them to high standards of conduct.

Before the reign of Moctezuma the administration of public affairs had not been done systematically until he, being a prudent and able ruler, drew up a code of common law; those who disobeyed were severely punished. This did not interfere with the restricted liberty which his subjects had, on condition that they minded their own business. “
—Codex Mendoza

Legal Records

- Legal decisions often involved precedent, testimony, and invocation of the supernatural
- Even without written records, scribes and other specialists could produce recorded evidence, records of precedent, and could document new decisions
- Less familiar aspects: trials by ordeal, oracles, interventions of supernatural forces

Law and Social Hierarchy

- No concept of equality before the law; many law codes set up explicitly to reinforce inequality
- Definitions of crimes and of appropriate punishment directly reflected the hierarchical social order
- In most societies, commoners did not (or could not) take members of higher ranks to court