

ANP 363

Huabin Zhou

A52537290

#### Question 4: The Significance of Ideology in Ancient States

Throughout this semester we have been examining and analyzing a whole series of different ancient states, to understand the factors of each state's emergence as well as its collapse. We have already talked about that many things were able to contribute to the transitions from one single complex society to a centralized state, factors like urbanization with dense population, mature and large-scale agricultures, specializations among state residences that did not conducted agricultural tasks, complex economics, and the emergency of social stratification, a increasing scales of hierarchical domain leading by local elites and authority, and eventually the kingship who ruled the state and resembled as the central power. And it is no doubt that the main strategy the ruling elites used to maintain the balance among his territory and certificate his own reign would be the usage of ideology.

One thing we need to understand first is, ideology was not something that only emerged when a ancient state was formed, it existed way before that. Essentially, ideology, or mostly traditional beliefs, are the ways that each human group interpret the world and their surroundings, through which they would develop a series of unique symbolism and ritual practices. Again, environmental factors played a significant role in the process, since we could see how closely ideology were embodied into each human group's agricultures and material cultures, for instance, the Mayan Maize God and the worship practices to this deity. We could see the signs of ideology or religious practices in almost most of the archaeological records in ancient human groups, especially after the Neolithic period, where the complexity of each society started to get more and more intensified. For instance, according to the lecture, in the late Neolithic ancient China, we could spot many unique ritual

practices from the mortuary records in the Liangzhu Culture. The heavy usage of jade for not only the symbols of prestige and social inequality, but also during rituals that associated with the heaven and earth (the Cong and Bi), were quite prominent.

As the specialization and ideological practices among ancient society got intensified, we started to see the rises of local elite who processed prestige and enormous ideological power, and eventually these would lead to the centralization of their authority. After the formation of each state, the rulers would again, highly depend on the ideological practices as ways to maintain their reigns. According to the lecture, the ideology of each ancient state, whether it was political or religious, helped to shape society and ensure the conformity of its members; those elites with enormous ideological statuses would often been interpreted as intermediaries by lower class residents, whose power and connection with the spiritual world would guarantee the agricultural products and balances among states; various ceremonies and public constructions that associated the elites with the divines, would justify social inequality and consolidate the reigns of the elites. Let's use ancient Chinese states as a quick example again, according to the textbook, in the archaeological findings found in Erh-li-kang site, one central settlement of Shang dynasty, we were able to see the clear distinctions between elites and common folks through the residences halls, where elites were associated with ceremonial centers and lived in those elaborate settlements in northeastern part of this site (445). The increasing bronze productions is another Shang dynasty characteristic, where it was thought mostly associated with elite statues and ceremonial usages instead of for warfare or other construction uses (446). The Shang king would implement heavy public works and military service to the lower classes, together with ceremonies like human and animal sacrificial burials to maintain and guarantee his reign over the state (447). All of these practices and characteristics were quite similar with those societies in Mesoamerica, especially Aztecs, which I would elaborate more later this paper. While according to the lecture, the emergences of oracle bone rituals during Shang period were also another important

ideological practices. Through this ritual, the elite and shamans would carved scripts on animal bones or shells and burn them, in order to incise questions to the gods. This ritual, even though did not have the same powerful contribution to the centralization to the state as public constructions and sacrificial rituals did, it is still very important to the ancient Chinese cultures as a whole, due to the fact that it was seen as the first formulized ways of writings, and the increasing usages of this ritual in Shang dynasty provided more historical text records for the details of Shang people's life and beliefs in the period (447).

One reason I separated Ancient Chinese states from the other three ancient states we discussed earlier this semester is the absence in the archaeological records that resembled large-scales public constructions like pyramids and ziggurats, which were a great display of how the rulers used ideology as tools to maintain their reigns in each state, and these traits were quite prominent in the Ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Harappan sites. Egyptian pharaohs would be the most powerful elite figures in these three societies I listed above, due to the fact that ancient Egypt were unified as one single state during the later predynastic era, and continued to remain as one powerful empire later in the Old Kingdom and New Kingdom periods as well. According to the lecture, the pharaohs were seen as the omnipotent figure who were closely associated with the divine, and their reign and this divine identity would be certified through material cultures and public constructions as well. For instance, according to the textbook, the Narmer Palette found in the largest Predynastic settlement Hierakonpolis, depicting Narmer, the ruler, wearing the crowns resembling both the north and south authorities, while indicating a military unifications of north and south; the presence of Hawk-headed god Horus, the central ideological symbol in Hierakonpolis, was depicted above Narmer as well, to certificate his divine authority and the rightfulness of this political unification of Egypt (376). Pyramids and Sphinx were again those public constructions that closely associated pharaohs with their divine authorities. For instance, according to the lecture, we knew that each pharaoh's stories

would be written as scripts or portraits in the wall of pyramids, while in many wall paintings we could see Sphinx played the similar role of Horus at that Narmer Palette - depicted above the head of pharaoh, as symbols of his rightful reign. Pyramids themselves were also the signs of centralizations as well, according to the textbook, since Djoser, the second king of the Third Dynasty Egypt, pharaohs had been utilizing their authority to lead their people to build this large scales, magnificent pyramids (379). While Akhenaten, one New Kingdom monarchs, even introduced a semi-monotheistic religion and challenge older polytheistic cults during his reign, by building massive temples to Aten for those new god and constructed a new capital at Tell el-Amarna - another example of how centralized the authority was in Ancient Egypt and how the rulers use ideology to certify their reigns (386). Likewise, we could see through the archaeological records that this strong connection between political centralization and ideology in ancient Mesopotamian and Harappan states, for instance, the gorgeous ziggurat and white temple of Uruk city and the magnificent urban planning of Mohenjo-daro. According to the lecture, even though for the later we had little evidence of how exactly did ideology or religious beliefs function in Harappan states, findings like The Priest King figurine and the highly formularized and deliberate construction of city Mohenjo-daro still indicated how central those Harappan elite/authority's power used to be and how closely it might associate with a state religion.

The most significant example when it comes to the ideology and its role with the state we've discussed this semester would definitely be those ancient states in Mesoamerica, where we could see how the ideology was practiced to a state-wise level and kept influencing this region through various different states/societies until the Spanish conquest. According to the textbook, the earliest Mesoamerican complex society, the Olmecs, had already developed a quite formulized religion that deeply rooted in each member's daily lives. For instance, the Olmecs started to move tons of earth and clay to level their plateaus and eventually conduct massive constructions of pyramids and

ceremonial platforms with elaborate stone sculptures after around 1250 B.C., especially in the Olmec site La Venta, where archaeological records indicated a series of mounds, platforms, courts, and pyramids covering more than 5 square kilometers (488). We could also see those famous Olmec stone head sculptures, something about 8 feet tall, depicting the facial expression of the possible Olmec rulers wearing helmets; other stone sculptures also depicted mythical creatures like the jaguar mask design of the La Venta pavements. All the signs of centralized state authority and religious practices were inherited by mostly every ancient state emerged after the collapse of Olmec.

According to the textbook, even though there were various complex societies existing in Mesoamerica, most of them shared a similar ideology, and the its role in each state was similar as well. For instance, the Mayans, one of the best known ancient complex societies in Lowland Mesoamerica, they viewed their kings as state shamans and intermediates who had the ability to penetrate the boundary between the three domains - heavens, earth, and underworlds - to intensify those power points on the earthly plane and brought balance between the cosmos and Mayans, and these unique divine identity of those Mayan rulers helped to justify the great social inequality as well (504). The Mayans also valued and practiced rituals in a daily basis as well, like the blood-letting rituals to bring their gods and ancestors to this earthly plane.

All these rituals and ideological beliefs were prominent in other Mesoamerican ancient states as well. According to the lecture, the Teotihuacan people, the neighbor of Mayans in the Highland Mesoamerica, built their own city as a huge symbolical indication according to their cosmology, where you can see the construction like the pyramid of the sun and moon and the huge temple of the feathered serpent. Those great public constructions, together with other stone sculptures found in Teotihuacan, indicated the ways of Teotihuacan leaders perpetuating the origin myth that their city was the place where the cosmos and the present cycle of time began. Likewise, the role of rituals was quite important in Teotihuacan society as well, where we could

actually see a shift from a centralized absolute political power to a more ideological focus, where various ceremonies were heavily practiced by both public and private.

The peak and the last shine of Mesoamerican ancient states was definitely the Aztecs, who again shared the similar cosmology and deities worship of their predecessors', where a divine king rule the state by performing rituals and bring balance between the cosmos and humanities. However, according to the textbook, the Aztecs were the ones who push the ceremonies of ancient Mesoamerican cultures to the extreme, where they practiced a lot of human sacrifices (from both war captives and their own residences, who both viewed their sacrifices as honorable) in order to forestall the extinction of the sun and the utter disappearance of humanity (520).

Another great contribution the ideology had for ancient Mesoamerican states would definitely be the fact that they helped to preserved their cultures and histories through scripts. According to the lecture, like the Oracle Bone scripts in Shang Dynasty, the Mayan script helped to record the calendar and king lists for ceremonial and political uses, which would eventually turned out to be one central key for our archaeology to understand and decipher the history of Mayans. And it always amazed me that Mayan scripts were the only formulized written languages among those ancient cultures in America.

To briefly summarize the points, ideology definitely played a significant role prior to and after the formation of each ancient state, acting as the way each culture interpret their worlds and brought conformity to the people. The rulers often would use ideology as a strong tool to maintain and certify their own reigns through massive public constructions and various ritual ceremonies, which also help to rationalize the great social inequality as well.