

# SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

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## Chapter 1: The Islamic Middle East

**Impact of religion** The period of world history after the fall of the great classical empires was marked by the increasing role of missionary religions, including the advent of Islam around 600 CE. The religious impact on social structure, however, was hardly straightforward. In some cases, the opportunity to focus on spiritual goals and prepare for an afterlife may have distracted attention from social issues, including social inequality. Hinduism of course had actively intertwined with the caste system since the classical period. While Buddhism opposed caste, and argued for the fundamental spiritual equality of all humans, its role in social structure was otherwise fairly limited. Buddhist monks and nuns maintained equality in their own ranks, but they coexisted with more conventional types of social inequality amid the bulk of the population. Christianity, another source of belief in spiritual equality, proved compatible with the legacy of Roman social structure in the Byzantine Empire, and adjusted to new forms of social hierarchy in Western Europe as well. Some similar compromises marked Islam, though its influence on social structure in the Middle East, in the age of the caliphates and beyond, was arguably somewhat more distinctive. Revealing, while Islamic religious service segregated men and women in ways not characteristic of Christianity, they more commonly mixed people of varying levels of wealth and status. The strong Muslim obligation of charity on the one hand acknowledged economic inequality, but on the other pressed the wealthy to pay some attention to the poor.

**The Caliphates: legal structure** From the formation of the caliphates onward, Islamic society in the Middle East and North Africa was officially divided in terms of religious groupings. This would remain true in many ways later on, through the Ottoman period and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ruler and his family, or more precisely the men in his family, stood atop the hierarchy, wielding considerable power. Beneath them were what might broadly be called an upper middle class of Muslim professionals (doctors, teachers) and businesspeople. These commanded great respect for their wealth and service to society. Many families invested considerably in education for talented sons, into secondary levels and beyond, as a key component of social position. Next in rank were the *dhimmis*, people of protected faiths like Christians and Jews; these groups had considerable autonomy so long as they respected the primacy of Islamic groups and paid their taxes regularly. At several points, both under the caliphates and later in the Ottoman Empire, individual Christians and Jews could amass considerable wealth and power, even serving in the bureaucracy. At the bottom of the pyramid came slaves.

**Related hierarchies** The Islamic Middle East did not develop a formal aristocracy in the fashion of China or Western Europe. Hierarchy in this sense was constrained by the importance of the ruler and his family, and by the principle of spiritual equality of all believers. However, a variety of men definitely held a superior position not only because of wealth (including landed property) but because of political or religious roles and, in some cases, heredity. Many men thus held the title of sheik. In some cases this was an honorific reflecting religious leadership or scholarly achievement; but it also denoted village or tribal leaders, whose position was often hereditary. Caliphs also characteristically appointed viceroys and regional subordinates who wielded considerable power, though these positions were not usually hereditary. Islamic social structure was also marked by the importance of successful urban classes, including merchants; more than most religions, Islam gave merchants considerable prestige so long as they fulfilled religious obligations including charity. Male peasants who were Muslim (particularly if born

Muslim) had legal rights, and over time these extended to non-Arabs; but their position in the social hierarchy was otherwise inferior.

**Gender** Gender was a more crucial divide in Islamic society than in the other characteristically patriarchal societies of the classical and postclassical periods. Islam offered a number of protections for women in principle, including the right to own property and claim a share in inheritance (though with portions inferior to those of men). They also had rights to divorce, though again with more constraints than applied to men. In principle, their consent was required for marriage; and even when marriages were arranged in childhood, some women were able to void the contract when they reached adulthood. In general, however, the legal inferiority of women was strongly emphasized, including limits on their ability to testify in courts. In some cases, for example, the right to divorce was further qualified by a requirement that a husband's consent must be acquired first.

**Slavery** Slavery was an important feature of Islamic society, though with many complications. Early on, Arab conquests produced many slaves captured in war, and these were often put to work on agricultural estates. (Slavery had already been a feature of Arab societies before Islam.) However, massive slave rebellions responded to harsh treatment, most notably the Zanj rebellion of 869-883 CE, and this convinced Arab leaders that amassing large agglomerations of male slaves was a risky proposition. Thereafter, male slaves were primarily used for domestic duties or service to the state—including military service, where large numbers of slaves were frequently involved. (And where slaves periodically seized or acquired considerable power, as with the Mamluk slave soldiers under the Abbasids or, later, the Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire.) Ultimately, about 2/3 of all slaves were female, and used for sexual purposes ("slaves for pleasure"), up to service in the royal harems. Slave women included military captives, but an extensive slave trade also developed, particularly with Africa – with upwards of 11-15 million people, disproportionately female, imported from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Islam featured a somewhat ambivalent response to slavery, In principle it was inappropriate for a Muslim to hold other Muslims as slaves – and this provided considerable motivation for slaves to convert. A compromise often involved pledges to make sure Islamic slave families were not disrupted by sales and were otherwise humanely treated. At the same time many Muslim owners freed slaves as a matter of religious obligation – which is one reason that the extensive slave trade remained essential, since inherited servitude might not suffice to generate the necessary slave population. Finally, while Islamic slavery was rarely explicitly racial – many slaves and slave women were imported from Europe and Central Asia, for example – the African component was frequently unusually important.

### Study questions

1. How did Islam influence the social structure of the Middle East and North Africa?
2. Why and how was slavery a complex social category in the region?
3. How did Middle Eastern social hierarchy reflect the importance of the cities and urban activities?

### Further reading

Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1957)

Judith Tucker and Guity Nashad, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1999)

Gordon Murray, *Slavery in the Islamic World* (New Amsterdam Press, 1987)]

Ronald Segal, *Islam's Black Slaves: the other Black diaspora* (Farrer Strauss and Giroux, 2001)

## Chapter 2: Western Europe in Feudalism and Beyond

**Impact of Christianity** The Christianization of Western Europe was one of the central developments in the region from the later Roman Empire onward. With few exceptions, it did not have a major impact on social structure. The belief in the spiritual equality of all was not translated into social action, though it may have contributed to periodic popular protest against inequality: for example, in the social unrest of the later 14<sup>th</sup> century, spurred by the impact of bubonic plague, some peasants protested against the privileges of aristocrats with the argument that in God's original creation there were no social superiors.

Church officials were regarded as a distinct social group (like the aristocracy), but in fact they often mirrored the larger social structure: many top leaders in the Church's own hierarchy were drawn from the aristocracy (a favorite recourse for younger sons who could not inherit the family estate), though in principle religious orders of monks and nuns established internal equality around vows of poverty. Christianity may have had its biggest effect in reducing levels of slavery (passed on from the Roman Empire, though also a tradition in some Germanic tribes). Slave populations undoubtedly declined (replaced by serfdom), though Christian merchants (as in Venice) became active in trading slaves (including Europeans) to other societies – a foretaste of the heavy involvement of Europeans in the Atlantic slave trade from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward. To be sure, considerable slavery persisted within Europe, particularly through the use of nonChristians seized in border wars in east-central Europe; some monasteries even utilized slaves. Still, slavery became a less prominent feature of the overall social structure than was true in the Middle East or the Byzantine Empire.

**Aristocracy and feudalism** Landed aristocrats constituted the top tier of the social hierarchy. They formed initially, after the fall of the Roman empire, on the basis of military prowess, but this led – either directly or through royal grants – to control over large estates. Military capacity continued to be crucial, which meant an emphasis on prowess but also the resources to afford horse and some kind of armor, in a period when cavalry constituted a key component of military action. Aristocratic position became hereditary, often with transmission exclusively to eldest son. The class was further bound together with the hierarchical ties associated with feudalism: in return for protection, lesser lords, or vassals, pledged loyalty and military service to a greater lord (who might in turn be vassal to another superior; the crisscrossing of feudal ties could be quite complex). Later in the postclassical period, by the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, monarchs became somewhat more important in countries like France and England, but feudal linkages and aristocratic power persisted, often including maintenance of independent military force. Size of the aristocracy is difficult to calculate; it was larger in regions with frequent military action—like Spain during the Christian “reconquest”, where it could range up to 10% of the total population. In more settled areas, like France and England, the class constituted about 1-2% of the total. Despite the importance of heredity, entry to the aristocracy was not entirely closed to newcomers, including men who distinguished themselves in battle and gained knighthood on that basis.

**Peasants and the manorial system** Throughout most of Western Europe, rural peasants formed the bulk of the population – up to 90% -- and most of these, in turn, were serfs. Some free peasants operated their own land, and of course some slavery persisted. However, in the chaotic conditions of postclassical Europe, serfdom provided the bulk of rural labor, a system in between slave and free. (Serfdom formed part of the manorial system, which coexisted with feudalism but was in fact separate, rooted more in economic hierarchy in contrast to the political/military hierarchy within feudalism.) Under manorialism, serfs were obligated to pay rent (either in kind or in money) for use of their land, and also were required to do labor service on land the manorial lord controlled outright. On the other hand, in principle serfs could not be evicted so long as they fulfilled their obligations; the land they worked directly essentially belonged both to them and to their noble landlord. In principle serfs were not free to leave the estate, though tradition held that if they escaped (usually to a city) and maintained freedom for a year and a day, their obligations ended.

**Urban population** As in many agricultural societies, urban dwellers fit uneasily into the social hierarchy. Even the wealthy were socially inferior to the aristocracy, and had tax obligations to the government from which aristocrats, as the legally privileged order, were usually exempt. However, European cities often gained considerable independence from aristocratic control, and some merchants acquired great wealth. Within cities, the wealthier merchants clearly sat atop the hierarchy; some were organized into powerful merchant guilds. Right below them were skilled artisans, who had their own guilds, with considerable economic and political authority within the city. (As in many urban settings, artisans had their own internal hierarchy: young apprentices at the bottom; then trained journeymen; on top artisan masters, who actually owned the shops though working alongside their journeymen and apprentices. The result was a mobility ladder within each craft.) Though many urban positions were largely inherited (artisan masters often passed their operation onto their sons, after the latter were appropriately trained), opportunities for mobility did exist, even for rural newcomers, and there were some rags to riches stories. On the other hand cities also included a number of propertyless workers, dependent on occasional wage labor and including beggars and prostitutes; some of these migrated seasonally between city and countryside.

**Change over time** From the 12<sup>th</sup> century onward, the European social system began to gain complexity. Cities grew, making the urban component more important in society overall. Opportunities for agricultural sales correspondingly increased, and the opportunity to earn money, along with other factors, loosened the manorial system in some regions – often in favor of paying some rent rather than maintaining a full set of manorial obligations. (Regional differences also opened, between areas like England, eastern Germany, south Spain and Italy dominated by large estates and tenancy or wage labor, and areas like France where peasants gained greater independence.) Gradually expanding central governments created small bureaucracies, recruited mainly from the urban business classes; some of these, in turn, might be ennobled, creating a “nobility of the robe” alongside the older “nobility of the sword” – with concomitant jockeying for prestige and power within the aristocracy. In response to stronger monarchies, aristocrats in many regions insisted on the formation of parliaments, to provide some check on royal power (particularly, taxation power). These feudal parliaments, which spread widely in Europe, both reflected and long confirmed the hierarchical social structure. They were normally based on separate and equal representation for three “estates” – clergy, aristocracy, and a third estate effectively dominated by wealthier urban business groups. (In some parts of central Europe, a fourth estate provided some representation to wealthier peasants.) Finally, aristocrats themselves in many regions took on a more elaborate lifestyle, often associated with royal courts. More generally, the basic social structure – a hereditary but not entirely closed aristocracy at top; a somewhat inferior but separate urban hierarchy; the peasant majority including some outright serfs; a lowest group of propertyless workers, both urban and rural – would persist into the later 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it would be more fully challenged by more dramatic economic changes and more revolutionary social ideas.

### Study questions

1. What were the differences between feudal and manorial hierarchies?
2. How did urban populations fit into the overall social structure?
3. How did early parliaments both reflect and confirm the class structure?

### Further reading

Steven Epstein, *An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Jeffrey Singman, *Daily Life in Medieval Europe* (Greenwood, 1999)

Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bounazel, *The Feudal Transformation, 900-1200* (Holmes and Meier, 1991)

## CHAPTER 3: Sub-Saharan Africa

**Overview** Generalizing about African social structure before the 20<sup>th</sup> century is challenging. The subcontinent is huge, and embraced a number of different social and economic systems. Hunting and gathering persisted in some places, such as the Kalahari desert, with the characteristic lack of formal social structure. Several agricultural areas in west and west-central Africa continued to be “stateless” societies, without a very formal hierarchy. Many port cities on the Indian Ocean coast had a large merchant class that mixed natives and Arabs, along with usually small regional governments that included some aristocracy. In West Africa the growth of trade, including trans-Saharan trade, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onward, created the growth of merchant and artisan classes (often largely hereditary), and increasing distinctions between urban and rural social structures.

**Kinship** Kinship ties helped organize African social structure. This was a common element in stratification in many agricultural societies, such as China and India, but it may have played an even greater role in Africa (in both patrilineal and matrilineal families). Many Western African merchants, for example, shared common kinship and came close to being a hereditary class. Many African regions sponsored extensive polygamy, particularly though not exclusively among the wealthy (including royal families, which in some cases surrounded monarchs with scores of wives). This was an obvious source of inherited kinship ties often linked both to occupation and to status. Children were schooled in kinship relationships, carefully learning the respect due to various collateral relatives but also learning how relationships would provide mutually beneficial social and economic service.

**Aristocracies** A number of African kingdoms developed formal aristocracies. In some parts of southeastern Africa migrating Bantu peoples by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, gaining access to land and often exercising considerable force, formed a durable aristocracy over more local ethnic groups, that would last into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In some cases hereditary aristocracies formed from groups of priests. In the empire of Mali, by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, aristocrats may have originated as particularly successful merchants, then taking a rank right below that of the royal family, though successful warriors were also involved (sometimes called the “nobility of the quiver”). Emperors of Mali recognized particular kin groups in terms of hereditary occupation and status, in what for a time bore some resemblance to a caste system. As in other societies, West African aristocracies enjoyed diets and living standards far different from, and superior to, those of ordinary people.

**Slavery** Slavery was pervasive in many parts of Africa, quite apart from the important slave trading that developed for the Middle East and, later, for the Atlantic trade. However, the system involved a number of special features. Many different forms were present. Prisoners of war constituted a standard group, and were probably the worst treated. Other slaves were seized as debt payments. Impoverished parents sometimes sold children into slavery. Criminals were also frequently enslaved. Considerable slavery centered on prostitution. Slaves were also used as domestics and for service in royal courts. Slaves were also used on agricultural plantations, particularly in East Africa and some Western regions. This was a diverse system. Upper classes in the empire of Mali competed with each other in terms of the numbers of slaves they held; when the North African Ibn Batuta visited in the 14<sup>th</sup> century he was given a slave boy as a gift. Considerable slavery was inherited and indeed formed part of larger kinship systems; on the other hand slave kinship groups sometimes intertwined with those of the master, allowing some individual slaves to acquire great social importance. (This particularly contrasted with the inferior position of captured or socially-outcast slaves.) In some places slaves were freely bought and sold, but in others, particularly where kinship links were involved, domestic slaves could only be sold in rare circumstances. Some slaves could even own land and pass it on to their children. As in the Middle East, some slaves were also used in the military. This was, in sum, a complex and highly varied system. (In a few cases, slaves were also used in religious sacrifice.) However, slavery was rare in the stateless societies and several West African kingdoms banned slavery outright. Estimating slave numbers is difficult, particularly because of the variety of systems involved, but in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia up to a quarter of the population was regarded as slave (mainly domestics and sex workers). Finally, economic slavery undoubtedly increased in many parts of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the end of the Atlantic trade, as plantation owners sought cheap labor to produce vegetable oil and other products for export. This continued until the burst of European imperialism brought efforts to end internal slave trading and slavery itself – though some European colonies, like the Belgian Congo, introduced systems of forced labor for mining that were essentially a form of slavery.

**New urban centers and the Atlantic slave trade** Prior to the pressure of European traders, coastal areas in West Africa were far less populous than those of the rural interior. However, the rise of slave ports promoted new African activity, based on but not confined to the transmission of slaves. Various urban social structures developed, in some cases centered on enforcing the authority and privilege of African royal families. In other case, however, clear new urban elites arose among the African population. As usual, large extended families provided much of the composition of this new social structure. In some cases, as in Angola, small urban elites as well as regional aristocrats participated in church-run schools, enhancing their power by allowing them to serve as intermediaries with the Europeans.

### Further reading

Hilda Kuper, *An African Aristocracy: rank among the Swazi* (Routledge, 1961)

Martin Klein, “The Study of Slavery in Africa,” *Journal of African History* 19 (2009)

Monika Baumanova and Ladislav Smejda, “Precolonial Origins of Urban Spaces in the West African Sahel,” *Journal of Urban History* 75 (2017)

Guy Saupin, “the Emergence of Port Towns in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1450-1850,” *Journal of Maritime History* (2020)

## CHAPTER 4: The Americas

**General** A variety of social situation prevailed in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans. Many areas remained in hunting and gathering economies, or mixed economies involving some agriculture but very limited social hierarchies. Evidence from the Pacific Northwest figures prominently in recent studies of relatively advanced societies that preserved substantial social equality (and avoided extensive formal government). However, key civilizations emerged both in Central America and in the Andes, and though the two regions were quite separate, they both developed clearly hierarchical social structures.

**Evidence** Detailed evidence of the nature of social hierarchy is limited thanks to the destruction of most written records by European conquerors. However, imaginative work for example on the Mayan people in Central America uncovers clear data on pronounced social hierarchy. A minority – probably about 10% -- of the population thus lived in distinctively opulent and highly decorated housing. Their skeletons are better preserved in death, thanks in part to better nutrition, in part to more elaborate burial procedures. They had more cavities in their teeth, somewhat ironically reflecting diets richer in various carbohydrates. The Mayan upper classes also deployed some system of wooden clamps on the heads of their infants, creating elongated skulls that differentiated them visibly from the bulk of the common people.

**Basic Mayan structures** Beneath the ruler, the top layer of Mayan society was composed of priests and nobles, both wealthy and privileged; this stratum was ranked into several subgroups. Nobles provided government administrators and also led military forces. The two groups were the only literate segments of society. Merchants and artisans came next, followed by the peasantry, the largest group (some of whom were serfs). Slaves included criminals and military captive, debtors, children sold into slavery by impoverished parents, and some hereditary slaves. In some cases, slaves were sacrificed when their masters died (so they could continue service after death). Slaves did domestic work, agricultural labor, and helped build the monumental temples – as well as being the likeliest targets for ritual sacrifice. Social divisions were for the most part quite rigid, with the nobility a hereditary class.

**Aztec society** Patterns were similar to those of the Mayans earlier on. Technically a five-fold division prevailed, headed by the emperor (a position that was not hereditary, though a council chose new emperors from the family of the previous ruler). Priests, nobles and other military leaders formed the second tier (divided into four segments). Nobility was technically not hereditary, but based on government office; but most offices were filled from noble families. Most though not all priests were from the noble class. The broad cluster of commoners were clearly headed by merchants whose status was hereditary; this group had many privileges, including opportunities to send children to the schools of the nobility. Artisans came next, and then other commoners (about 30% of the population), most of whom were farmers or fishers. The fourth group were peasants, technically free but inferior to commoners; some of these were laborers, with no land of their own. At the bottom were slaves, some of whom however could actually own property. Slavery was not hereditary, and some slaves bought freedom during their own lifetimes or were freed on a master's death. Overall, this was not a caste system, and limited mobility based on talent was possible – even into the priesthood. However, class lines were rigid and largely hereditary.

**Inca society** This society, expanding in the Andes in the centuries shortly before European arrival, was close to a caste system, with detailed rules barring social interaction among different groups depending on position in the hierarchy. Mobility was difficult, though some young women managed to marry older men of a higher caste, based on looks and ability to work. Several gradations of nobility depended heavily on relationships to or positions in the royal family (with emperor clearly on top). The nobility in general were excused from taxation. And they were easily distinguished (in ways intriguingly similar to those of the Mayans): boards were attached to the heads of young children in the noble class, creating a visibly pointed skull – the symbol of nobility, up to and including the emperor himself. Leading nobles were all ethnic Incas, but as the empire expanded it needed more officials, so some non-Incas became lower-level aristocrats (regarded as Incas by adoption). Beneath them was a familiar pyramid of merchants and artisans, and then the agricultural population, some of them slaves though Inca society did not include a rigid category for slaves.

**Drawbacks** Features of the social structure contributed to problems in the later stages of empire, right before the arrival of the Spanish and contributing to their success. Particularly with the Aztecs, subject

peoples resented the taking of slaves for use in religious sacrifice, weakening support for the empire when it came under attack.

### **Study questions**

1. Were the pre-Columbian American civilizations unusually hierarchical?
2. What was the social position of the major urban groups?
3. How did ethnicity relate to social class for the Incas and Aztecs?

### **Further reading**

Michael E. Smith and Frederic Hicks, "Inequality and Social Class in Aztec Society," in D.L. Nichols and E. Rodriguez-Alegria, eds., *Oxford Handbook of the Aztecs* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

Jon Lohse and Fred Valdez Jr., eds., *Ancient Maya Commoners* (University of Texas Press, 2004)

Terence d'Altroy, *The Incas* (Wiley, 2014)