HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE GOVERNMENT IN HISTORY – Ancient Period

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Overview

Forms of Government

Formation of States: Overview The establishment of formal governments, as opposed to more loosely-organized leadership groups, was part of the development of more complex societies, or civilizations, beginning in Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE. While "stateless" societies continued, even in some agricultural regions like parts of West Africa, most agricultural areas ultimately generated, or were conquered by, states, leaving nomadic and some hunting and gathering areas that main exceptions to the pattern of rise and consolidation of formal governments. During the Agricultural Age – after governments formed in the first place – there were important debates and divisions over political forms, for example in classical Greece and Rome. On the whole, however, key issues revolved around degrees of centralization or decentralization, with governments mainly in the hands of emperors, monarchs, or princes, and particularly by the postclassical period about relationships between states and religious organizations. The early modern period and particularly the long 19th century introduced much more complex disputes about state forms, with the initial series of modern revolutions, the rise of many republics, and the advent of modern nationalism. The contemporary period has seen a more systematic decline of effective monarchies and also multinational empires, though without full agreement on what state forms should replace these traditional versions.

Early States Many early governments took shape initially in small regions, often in the form of city states; this seems to have been the pattern in the Indus valley, and would later crop up in mountainous Greece. Monarchies were even more common (even in some of the city states), with kings often claiming authority from the gods or asserting they were gods themselves, while overseeing a small bureaucracy and military force. This was the pattern in Mesopotamia, in the Egypt of the pharaohs, and in early China. Links with the priesthood, and sometimes control over appointment of priests, was crucial for legitimacy. Elements of this legacy would persist in many regions, for example the Chinese imperial claim to be "sons of heaven" or the later idea of divine right monarchy in Europe.

Innovations in the Classical Period Both China and Persia considerably strengthened the monarchical state in the classical period. Classical China was long decentralized, with many internal wars and invasions. The resultant disarray encouraged later dynasties to centralize authority more firmly, creating a somewhat larger bureaucracy in the process. The rise of Confucianism, with its emphasis on the importance of political stability, enhanced this trend, and was actively promoted by the Han dynasty. The shorter-lived Persian empire also emphasized a strong central state. Constraints were obvious: it took many weeks, for example, for imperial emissaries to reach the outer regions of the Chinese empire. But a tradition of relatively strong government, under the emperor, was well established. Classical India, in contrast, maintained more decentralized politics. When empires formed they were more loosely organized, involving lots of bargaining with local authorities. And at times, city states and princedoms prevailed entirely. Classical Greece, also, never set up a centralized system. City states were diversely ruled: some fell under monarchs or tyrants; many were ruled by aristocratic councils; some, at in Athens,

developed democracies. The Roman republic mixed the predominant aristocratic council, with some officials who were democratically elected. The formation of the Roman empire involved more centralization, though not to Chinese levels: many parts of the empire had their own local governments, even monarchies, linked to Roman authority; Roman law, however, was developed to apply to all citizens, and of course the Roman army served to maintain internal order as well as to promote territorial expansion.

The Functions of Government

Overview State functions clearly relate to the forms of government. But they warrant separate attention. Sometimes different regimes will actually push toward similar definitions of function: thus both modern democracies, communist systems, and many authoritarian regimes seek to extend government provision of education. Government functions reflect regional differences, both in the Agricultural Age and since the industrial revolution. But there have also been some common trends, particularly in the past two centuries.

Core Functions: The Early States Early governments focused strongly on military and judicial functions. Defense was crucial, though the establishment of formal military forces and the ambitions of some rulers could lead to expansionist efforts as well. Judicial functions were crucial as well. States had every interest in trying to curb private violence and vendettas, through recognized courts of law. There was also great interest in defining and policing property rights. One of the sources of formal government, in places like Mesopotamia, may have been the need to organize irrigation efforts, and property regulations could stem from this interest. Codes of law could result, as in the 18th century BCE Hammurabic code, the first such effort that has left a record. Finally, many early governments developed religious functions, both to help organize this vital function and to embrace an official religion in support of the state.

Chinese and Persian Innovations During the classical period, government activities grew, particularly toward a larger economic role, though military and cultural functions increased as well. Greater economic involvement would include, for several states, responsibility for issuing money. The greater centralization that developed in classical Persia and China included expansion of state functions. The Persian government undertook new responsibilities for infrastructure: it created an unprecedented road network, with inns spaced so that travelers could find shelter at the end of a day of travel. The government also introduced the first postal service. The Chinese government sponsored road building, but also the great canals and an initial version of the protective Great Wall, expanding infrastructure and public works activities still further. The government also supported some practical scientific research, aimed particularly at improving agriculture but also embracing astrological calculations. It sponsored grain storage to guard against famines in cities; and it standardized weights and measures. It also sought some general regulation of culture. One dynasty directly attacked Confucianism in favor of the harsher doctrine of Legalism. More characteristically, the Han dynasty supported Confucianism, while also promoting the Mandarin language for officials and the upper classes throughout the Middle Kingdom. Infrastructure also preoccupied the Roman Empire, along with the emphasis on military responsibilities and on defining codes of law and the court system; the government devoted great attention to the development of crucial ports, a road system aimed particularly at facilitating troop movement, and the construction of aqueducts for major cities. Triumphal arches and entertainment facilities – colosseums, baths – not only in Rome but in provincial centers also extended the government role. The government promoted an official religion, but was normally tolerant of other religious sects; periodic persecution of Jews and Christians, whose religions seemed to preclude appropriate recognition of political loyalty, was the exception here.

Societies before Government

Basics Most human societies, during most of human history, did not have formal governments. They provided leadership and rule-making and -enforcement functions in other ways, without establishing or designating a particular institution. The pattern is fairly obvious in hunting-and-gathering societies, that predominated from the origins of the species until the advent of agriculture. But even many agricultural societies, well into recent times, did not set up explicit governments.

Hunting and gathering Hunting and gathering groups were, and are, characteristically fairly small – 40-60 people, half of whom are children, with adults frequently related to each other. In this setting leadership functions could be quite informal. Decisions were made by groups, if not all the adults involved. Women, whose work as gatherers was vital to the economy as a whole, were typically included in the discussions. Elders might wield particular authority because of their experience and memory, in societies that depended entirely on the oral transmission of knowledge.

Rules and enforcement Hunting and gathering societies develop clear rules of behavior, without the need for formal laws and regulations. Rules may apply to sexual behaviors or selection of marriage partners, or the admission of young men into the hunting group, or permissible and forbidden foods, or even the acceptability or unacceptability of boasting – the range is characteristically extensive, though because there is characteristically little or no sense of private property and little or no inequality some issues more common in complex societies were largely avoided. The rules are sanctioned by tradition, with no active sense that they were explicitly created or subject to legislative revision. Enforcement is a matter of group consensus, with heavy reliance on shaming as a punishment for transgressions and, even more because of the emotional pain involved, a deterrence for misbehavior. Hunting and gathering societies are typically highly regulated, with individual nonconformity discouraged, without the need for government.

Murder rates Downsides of the absence of government probably show up in the relatively high murder rates characteristic of many hunting and gathering societies. This is a difficult and debated subject, because direct evidence is thin (though the number of bashed-in skulls found in archeological sites make it clear that murder was an issue). Further, different societies – based on different social rules and ecological conditions – had different rates. Nevertheless, it is clear that unsanctioned violence was considerable in stateless societies, and that revenge responses constituted a common phenomenon as well.

Stateless societies As the next chapter shows, the rise of agriculture ultimately created conditions in which many societies could form – arguably, needed to form – governments. However, this was not an immediate development. In the northern Middle East, where agriculture originated, several millennia passed between the rise of agriculture and the emergence of government. And a number of successful agricultural societies continued to do without government well into modern times – perhaps particularly in some parts of western and central Africa.

Challenges involved Agriculture did generate at least two changes that would ultimately conduce to the formation of governments. Populations increased, actually quite rapidly, and the characteristic agricultural agglomeration, the village, was noticeably larger than the typical hunter-gatherer band – 300 people or more (though still half of them children), instead of a few dozen. Informal decision-making arguably became more difficult, the impulse to designate particular leaders more pronounced. Many agricultural villages thus did identify one or more holy men, or shamans, responsible for organizing key rituals – a potential step toward government.

How stateless societies managed Still, agricultural conditions did not automatically generate government. Stateless societies continued to rely heavily on informal, inherited behavioral norms, enforced by consensus and shaming – including potential banishment for offenders. Elaborate kinship ties, carefully identified and passed from one generation to the next, helped provide organization and order in the absence of government institutions – this was a key feature of many stateless societies in Africa. Disputes were characteristically handled by the village group, often appealing to the judgment of elders in the community – with verdicts accepted (usually) because of a desire to remain in good standing with the group. Stateless agricultural societies generally produced a range of subsistence crops – rather

than specializing – which reduced social stratification. But even many early cities, like Catal Huyuk in Anatolia, with 5000-10,000 inhabitants, provide no evidence of formal government institutions.

The Gender factor Even stateless agricultural societies developed levels of gender inequality well beyond the patterns of hunting and gathering groups. Norms reducing the status of women gradually added to the overall list of conventions. In the process, however, women's role in informal governance or dispute management – beyond the family level – characteristically diminished – which may have had the effect of simplifying decision-making without requiring the designation of fulltime leaders.

Nomadic herding societies Along with agriculture, the domestication of animals generated another human economy that was different from hunting and gathering. Nomadic herding groups were usually small enough that institutionalized leadership was unnecessary; and they did not produce the kind of economic surplus that would have supported this kind of institutionalization in any event. However, the historical record makes it clear that, at least occasionally, unusually strong leaders could emerge, with clear governance power even without a larger institutional apparatus.(The obvious example, from the 13th century, was Chingghis Khan and his power among the Mongols, after quarrels over leadership position early in his life.) And some historians believe that certain nomadic groups, particularly in parts of central Asia, did develop some clear government structures, though never with great elaboration.

Theoretical implications Increasing scholarly recognition of the human capacity to flourish (at least in many respects) without government, the maintenance of stateless societies even amid changes such as the rise of agriculture, and the recency of government itself as a human phenomenon have contributed to lively discussions about the need for a state. Earlier Marxist and anarchist arguments about the state as an invention of human inequality, and about the possibility of doing away with the state in a communist or anarchist utopia, gain new dimensions.

Study questions

1. How did stateless societies settle disputes?
2. How did stateless societies characteristically make decisions?
3. Why did agriculture not automatically generate the need for government?

Further reading

Raymond Hames, "Pacifying Hunter-Gatherers," *Human Nature* 30 (2019)

David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004)

James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: an anarchist history of Upland Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 2009)

The Advent of Government

Context There is little question that the world's first formal government emerged among the city states of Sumer around 3500 BCE. Unfortunately no one chronicled the innovation – which doubtless emerged somewhat gradually from more informal leadership in any event. We do not know whether people actually registered on the change or what the priorities were among several possible motivations. The development did occur as part of a cluster of changes: somewhat larger and more numerous cities (though still in the 10,000 population range), reflecting an increase in agricultural surplus and growing trade (though most of the inhabitants still depended on near-subsistence agriculture). Introduction of the wheel and the use of bronze metals improved production instruments and had implications for warfare. The advent of writing, though initially in cumbersome pictographs that required years of mastery, facilitated record-keeping and bureaucratic communication, both vital to the emergence of government (though later, some societies, notably the Inca, did generate governments without writing).

Social structure By this point relatively advanced agricultural societies, like Sumer, had produced a class structure including a landowning minority – an incipient aristocracy, or as they called themselves "free men" – along with a majority of workers, peasants, and slaves. This upper group might particularly support governments as a means of facilitating property protection and defending privilege in other

respects. It also stood ready to supply at least a portion of professional government staffing – as military leaders or judges, for example – a prime perch for younger sons, for example. Whether the small number of boys who were sent to learn the script came from this group exclusively, or were simply sponsored by them, is unclear. But it is obvious that the advent of government and class structure were deeply intertwined – as would remain the case. In the case of Sumer, urban governments also helped organize the exploitation of peasants in the surrounding countryside, who were kept clearly subservient.

Motivations Several issues may have prompted the conversion of informal leadership into a small government. Rates of internal violence and revenge may have generated concern. More probably, the need for more concerted social action on what today would be called public works fueled change. This was an irrigation-intensive economy, along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which already required coordination to make sure water was shared. Coordination could evolve into some official oversight as well as the desirability of more formal rules or laws. Cities needed public resources for monuments and walls – we know that the early Sumerian cities were heavily fortified. Finally, the states warred frequently, which could produce needs not only for fortifications but for a more formal structure to identify military leadership and a core group of semi-professionals.

Role of religion Evidence suggest that the first urban governments were sponsored by priests. This group already had a leadership position. Its needs for public support and temple-building could motivate efforts at more formal organization – to collect funds and oversee projects. Unquestionably priests sponsored the first training in literacy, and in many agricultural societies for centuries religion would generate the kind of education that in turn produced potential government officials. In this context it is not surprising that early political leaders – here and in many other cases – began invoking divine power as a source of legitimacy: the rulers were anointed by the gods, or were gods themselves. This reflected religious origins but also the need to provide as much justification as possible for rulers who, after all, were making new claims to power.

Warriors Fairly early the reins of government were taken over by the military upper class, though still with close ties with priests. This became the normal source for kings, and references to conquests and prowess in battle became a standard feature for many rulers (though some would seek a picture of successful peacekeeping). With this, conquest of neighboring city states launched a larger regional government in the Tigris-Euphrates region. And then subsequent conquests created even larger empires covering much of the Middle East, like the Babylonian or later the Hittite, running roughshod over a variety of subject populations. Growing numbers of people were introduced to formal government through this kind of expansion – though they usually retained some kind of government even in periods when empire receded. A precedent was set for large regional states in the Middle East that would persist, periodically, into the 20th century.

Government functions The Mesopotamian state had three clear functions. The need for military defense and, sometimes, expansion, was central. The public works role persisted, in building fortifications but also monuments, plus some roads and port facilities. From the outset Sumerian cities had also sponsored law codes, and this function was expanded, most famously by the Babylonian emperor Hammurabi (the code was created between 1755 and 1750 BCE). This code, initially invoking divine sponsorship, sought particularly to protect property rights, including damage caused by renters or other disruption; stipulations in these categories were quite detailed. But crimes against persons were also delineated, in the interests of reducing private revenge; punishments for crimes like assault were calibrated by social class. Family law was also a highlight, reinforcing patriarchal power though with provision meant to insist that husbands provide support for wives.

Government limitations There was much this early government did not attempt to do. While the state might assist in trying to assure food supplies for cities, there was no welfare system. Economic functions were limited to public works. Interest in punishing crime did not extend to maintaining a police force. Accusations had to come from subjects, which is why great attention was paid to punishing falsehoods. Limitations on policing, and the absence of extensive prisons, help explain why many punishments were both harsh and public, like loss of a hand for a thief and many public executions: absent elaborate detection and enforcement, it was vital to provide vivid examples of potential fate.

Resources Early governments sought a variety of revenue streams, particularly challenging before the introduction of money and in an economy where it required eight farmers to support ten people overall. Traders were taxed for a portion of their produce, with punishments for evasion (which must however have been quite frequent). Rulers had extensive landed property, and many subjects were required to provide work service on the estates. Even funerals required a payment to the state, in the form of a domestic animal or some produce. By 2500 BCE governments in the region were keeping elaborate tax records – one of the key uses of writing, and a source of bureaucratic employment. Still, resources were often slender – which was one reason early states so often resorted to conquest as a means of paying the troops through spoils of war. (Until fairly recently it was standard to allow soldiers who conquered a city at least three days to plunder – even under enlightened leadership.)

Other states Governments were also developed early on in Egypt, with even more emphasis on monument building and religious sponsorship. It is not clear that another early civilization, in the Indus river valley, had formal government or not, though it certainly had elaborate cities. China would begin to generate a government tradition, initially along the Yellow River, by the 2nd millennium BCE. Most of these introductions were independent of Mesopotamian example, but over time both example and conquest would help spread the idea of government to other regions—for example, in southern Europe.

Study questions

1. What caused the rise of governments?
2. Why were early governments and rulers heavily dependent on religion?
3. What was the relationship of early government to the class structure?
4. What were the main functions of early law codes?

Further reading

Bruce Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: a comparative study* (Cambridge University Press,2014)

Jonathan Valk and Irene Marin, eds., *Ancient Taxation: the mechanics of extraction in comparative perspective* (New York University Press, 2021)

Persia

The Classical period Several major regions of the world developed somewhat more elaborate societies, in comparison to the river-valley civilizations, beginning in the centuries after about 1000 BCE. Their development in turn forms the principal feature of the classical period of world history, in which these key regions evolved characteristic features – such as the emergence of Hinduism in India – that would continue to flourish for many centuries, and in some cases to the present day. The formation of distinctive approaches to government was part of this process. In all cases, the classical societies experimented with expansive empires – extending a process that had already been visible in Mesopotamia, but now often applied to larger territories – but other political structures and cultures were advanced as well. Classical societies benefited from the political precedents already established by river-valley civilizations, though their geographical focus shifted somewhat. They also featured some tools and weapons that reflected the advent of the use of iron – introduced around 1500 BCE – which offered some improvements in productivity and lethality over previous instruments, though the conversion to iron was gradual.

Persian Empire The Persian Empire is somewhat distinctive among the classical societies, because its legacies were somewhat less clear thanks to the later arrival of Islam and periods of Arab control. The Empire in some ways constituted simply a later version of the various conquest regimes that had spread through the Middle East from the Sumerian city-states onward. However, the power and expanse of the Empire created a relevant political memory for present-day Iran. The empire was territorially larger and arguably more aggressive than many of its predecessors. And, most to the point, it developed a number of new organizational features and functions that added to the characteristics of government.

Chronology and expanse The Persian (or Achaemenid) empire began to take shape in the 7th century BCE, with a series of conquests under Cyrus the Great, who proclaimed himself emperor after having served previously as a regional king. Various successors continued to expand the empire – though as usual with hereditary empires and monarchies the quality of particular rulers varied considerably, and some were decidedly less interested in military goals than others. Under Xerxes I, early in the 5th century BCE, the empire stretched from the Balkans in the west, to the Indus River valley, and included Egypt and much of the Caucasus (as far as the Aral Sea) as well. This was the largest empire ever constructed to that point, covering 2.1 million square miles. The empire was finally defeated by Alexander the Great in the 4th century, and while successor regimes arose in and around presentday Iran they never achieved the size of the original.

Innovations in government To maintain this territory, which embraced a wide variety of ethnicities and languages, a variety of innovations were essential. Basically, Persian rulers managed a combination of centralized, bureaucratic rule, including a large professional army with at least 10,000 troops, with accommodations to internal diversity. Different regional sub-units, or *satraps*, each had a governor of its own, with a military commander (responsible for recruitment) and state secretary (responsible for record-keeping) reporting to the governor. There were variously 20 to 30 satraps in all.

Taxation and monetary policy Tax policy was tailored to the economic potential of each satrap, with taxes levied primarily on subject peoples. Babylon for example (at the highest rate) annually paid in a large amount of silver plus enough food to sustain the army for four months. Egypt had a lower silver payment but a larger grain requirement. It seems likely that the government also sponsored private sales of slaves and levied what was essentially a sales tax on each slave sold (possibly the world's first sales tax). The Empire also introduced standard gold and silver coinage, another first.

Expansion of functions Beginning with Cyrus the government also expanded its public works functions beyond any previous precedent. It sponsored an impressive road network that helped link other parts of Asia to the Mediterranean. While this was designed partly to facilitate troop movement, it also highlighted commerce. Cyrus also spaced inns along the major routes, each about a day's ride from the other, another boon to merchants. Cyrus also introduced the world's first postal system, another interesting extension of the functions of the state. Under later emperors the government also embraced the religion of Zoroastrianism and also introduced a standardized solar calendar that is still used in Iran. Not all of these functions were sustained by later regimes, particularly when Alexander the Great's empire devolved into separate regional entities, but the precedents were significant.

Decline Ultimately the empire foundered partly because the tax exactions became excessive, burdening the economy as a whole. Subject territories were paying in a massive amount, supporting the huge army, the central government, plus lining the pockets of regional governors. (Alexander the Great was able to seize the equivalent of $2.7 billion from royal coffers alone, which he plowed back into the general economy through expanded public works and monuments.) Nor was there any effort to create imperial cultural unity, which ultimately affected military cohesion as well, with the troops drawn from so many separate ethnic identities. Finally, territorial overexpansion brought successful resistance and rebellion, first in frontier areas such as Greece – neither the first or last case in which government military ambitions were not carefully calibrated to durability over time.

Study questions

1. How did Persian rulers adapt government to the demands of its unprecedentedly large territory?
2. Why was a postal system now seen as a relevant function of government?
3. What brought the Empire down?

Further reading

Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: a history of the Persian Empire* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002)

Maria Brosius, *A History of Ancient Persia* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2021)

Classical China

Overview China and the imperial state emerged in several stages beginning as early as the 12th century BCE. Ultimately, by the end of the classical period, the Chinese had constructed a large territorial empire and established the tradition (not always successfully sustained) that government and Chinese territory should be one and the same. It had created a unifying political culture, in Confucianism, that particularly sustained the upper class throughout the empire – a marked contrast to the Persian Empire in this regard. And it had created a variety of government functions including, but surpassing, the basic trinity of military, law and judicial structure, and public works.

Early dynasties Regional kingdoms began to form in northern China from about 1766 BCE onward (though earlier dynasties may have preceded.) This was associated with the earliest evidence of writing in the region. Aside from this early origin, it is not clear that there was anything particularly noteworthy about the government involved: the main point was the establishment of a tradition of an imperial state that could survive any particular dynasty – a point frequently emphasized by later historians. This idea of imperial continuity was enhanced when the Zhou dynasty unseated the Shang in 1122. To justify their usurpation, the Zhou developed the idea that the emperor had a divine mandate – was in fact the Son of Heaven. The concept would be used to emphasize the god-like power of the emperor, but it also had a distinctive twist compared to other assertions of divine sponsorship. The Chinese Son of Heaven concept embraced the notion that the gods supported a particular dynasty only when it responsibly served society. The mandate could be withdrawn if this responsibility was not served – but then it would apply to an appropriate replacement. In fact, the Zhou government was not particularly powerful, frequently distracted by regional wars and checked by the powers of the landed aristocracy. But the claim of a special mission for the imperial government could be embellished in the future. (The idea would also be taken over in Japan and Vietnam, but with less nuance, more simple assertion of god-like status.)

Political culture Under the Zhou, three major schools of thought developed. Daoism was a religion that emphasized spirituality and balance in life; it was not usually overtly political, and could in fact combine with philosophies that paid more attention to the state – though there were some episodes of Daoist rebellion. The great innovation was Confucianism, which emphasized the goal of stability and prosperity in this world. In Confucian doctrine, the state assumed central importance as the anchor of an ordered society, with appropriate deference due to the emperor. An upper class should be ready to serve the state, expecting obedience from the mass of the population in return for which it would rule wisely, in the general interest. The family, a microcosm of the wider society, would serve as a training ground in hierarchy, deference and responsibility. Finally, at odds with Confucianism, the Legalists placed greater emphasis on raw state power, essential to keep people in line. While Legalism ultimately lost out to Confucianism in terms of government support, the two systems might combine to shape policy in practice. The main point was the strong emphasis, in Chinese culture, on the centrality of government and a value system that would support it, as well as helping to shape a social structure strongly oriented toward public service (for the upper class) and obedience. The political-cultural combination provided distinctive service to the Chinese government in the classical period and well beyond.

Territorial expansion The Qin dynasty forcibly unseated the increasingly enfeebled Zhou regime in 221. Its principal emperor, Qin Shi Huang, introduced a number of new features to Chinese government. Supporting Legalism, he actually attacked Confucian ideas as too soft. More to the point, he advocated a forceful central government that would effectively end the disorder of the later Zhou, backed by a strong military. He vigorously expanded government functions, undercutting the aristocracy and administering the peasantry more directly. Public works blossomed, including a major road system and the beginnings of massive, earthen defensive wall. Reforms of the writing system, currency and weights and measures were designed to stimulate the economy. Above all, the Qin greatly expanded imperial territory, conquering other regional kingdoms and extending government control to the south – even for a time into what is now Vietnam. From this point onward the Chinese government would typically claim control over the entire Middle Kingdom (and sometimes beyond), creating a massive territorial base.

The Han The ruthlessness, and heavy taxation, involved in Qin initiatives provoked considerable backlash, as the Qin gave way to the Han dynasty at the end of the third century, opening approximately 400 years of successful rule – including maintenance and consolidation of the expansive imperial

territory. Han success would further consolidate the tradition of strong government in China, while removing some of the rough edges that the Qin had introduced. Several major features are worth noting.

Confucianism and cultural support Han emperors actively supported Confucian scholars (after briefly flirting with Legalism), and sponsored school programs (mainly for the upper class) that instilled Confucian values. This emphasis was extended to the newer southern territories, helping to build an upper class imbued with some common principles that were, in turn, aimed at supporting a stable and responsible government. While the Han did not seek full linguistic unity, it did promote Mandarin for the upper class throughout the empire. And the government helped relocate some northern Chinese to the south, with a similar goal of encouraging imperial integration (this is a policy still pursued in China, as with the relocation of Han Chinese to the northwest).

Functions The Han maintained the wide government functions already initiated by its predecessors – creating the most active state in the classical world. Standardized coinage helped promote commerce. Elaborate public works now included the construction of a massive north-south canal that helped coordinate the economies of two rather different agricultural regions. The government subsidized practical scientific research (including work in astrology). It organized granaries to protect cities against famines. A major law code was combined with an extensive court system, actively aimed against a variety of crimes – including some against women; and the effort was bolstered by a formal police force (possibly the oldest in the world).

Structure and foreign policy At the outset, the Han took over an organizational structure involving a number of regional kingdoms, but these gradually lost independence in favor of the activities of a centralized bureaucracy. Given the size of the empire – it took 30 days to reach the outlying areas from the capital – it would be misleading to suggest detailed integration, but the effort was extensive. The Han faced a variety of military challenges, but ultimately extended imperial territories. However, this was not on balance a highly militaristic regime. The Han worked to conciliate nomadic groups on its western border through gifts and marriage alliances, and (on the whole) avoided war where possible. This was in keeping with the most prominent Chinese work on warfare, Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (5th century BCE) and differed, on the whole, from the military-diplomatic policies of some other classical societies (including Persia).

Bureaucracy and training Under the Han the Chinese bureaucracy was the largest in the world, and the Chinese pioneered in both training and recruitment. The government-sponsored Imperial School, at its height, had 30,000 students, and there were feeder schools in many cities – all emphasizing training in classical literature and Confucianism. Most bureaucrats were recruited by personal connections within the landed upper class – though they were formally trained. The Han also experimented with an examination system that would produce some additional recruits. Through this, a small number of talented young men from the lower classes, whose education was often sponsored by a local magnate, could reasonably hope to enter the bureaucracy. Fueled by the nature of the Han state and the values of Confucianism, service in the educated bureaucracy became the highest social goal, easily outstripping business success and forming the fabled scholar-gentry class (or Mandarins).

Legacy The Han dynasty was toppled by invasion in 220 CE, after a period of decline. Over three centuries of invasion and civil strife ensued, before a dynasty was restored in the 6tn century. But the basic features of classical Chinese government were remembered, and valued, which is why they were substantially restored and embellished when conditions permitted. The capacity for restoration was itself distinctive, testifying to the classical achievement and setting parameters for Chinese imperial government for centuries to come.

Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of the Chinese system of government?
2. Why was such a large bureaucracy sought and maintained?
3. How did government and empire come to be so closely intertwined in the Chinese tradition?

Further reading

Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Harvard University Press, 2010)

Ronnie Littlejohn, *Confucianism: an introduction* (I.B. Tauris, 2010)

Su Li, *Constitution of Ancient China* (ed., Zhang Yongle and Daniel Bell) (Princeton University Press, 2018)

India/South Asia

Overview Of all the classical societies, India left the least clear mark in terms of government traditions and roles. There are several reasons for this: the huge subcontinent saw a variety of political structures during the classical period, with a great deal of local variation. Despite two major empires, a tradition of unified government was not established. Nor did Indian intellectuals devote a great deal of time to political issues – in contrast to both China and the Mediterranean – though there were some discussions. This does not mean that India was badly governed, and certainly the periods of great cultural creativity and expanding trade show that political conditions did not hold the civilization back in any systematic way. But the approach was distinctive. The subcontinent simply relied more heavily on social and cultural frameworks than on political ones.

Context Indian structures emerged gradually after about 800 BCE, including the elaboration of a priestly religion that ultimately developed into Hinduism. The subcontinent was dotted with small regional kingdoms and other states. The strong religious emphasis gave an unusually prominent place to the priestly Brahmin caste, which ultimately gained the highest social rank. This already suggests a level of interest in spiritual matters and ritual that might overshadow political focus, though the Brahmins did sometimes play and political role; and religious epics tended to sanction monarchy as the preferred political form. Great attention was devoted to the creation and elaboration of the signature caste system, as means of organizing social and assigning economic roles and rules for interaction. In a real sense, caste regulations (though supported by regional states in the north) did some of the work that legal codes and bureaucratic arrangements did in other societies, helping to explain, again, why political focus was somewhat diffuse.

Political writings Between the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, a major teacher and intellectual, Chanakya (often known as Kautilya_) authored a basic political treatise, the *Arthashastra.* The work reflected political developments during India's first great empire, the Mauryan, and may have influenced imperial policy. The treatise paid great attention to monetary and fiscal policies, international relations, and war, and outlined the principal duties of a ruler. It may have built on earlier texts by various authors, suggesting the need to clarify political principles in India during a period of state formation. The treatise emphasized the importance of public works such as forts and irrigation systems, to help regions respond to disasters like famines and wars, and insisted on the fundamental importance of political knowledge. It assumed a monarchical government: the best king is a wise king, carefully educated to the duties of state. Officials must be chosen carefully, based on the king's personal knowledge of their integrity and moral character – this was not a formula for an elaborate bureaucracy. Rulers were urged to treat subjects kindly and tax sensibly, to win their favor; a considerable section was devoted to the role of the state in prosecuting crime. Frequent warfare was assumed, though peace preferred; a long section (reflecting conditions in the Mauryan empire) was devoted to spying. Overall, this was a major political text, influential at the time and affecting later authors. Sometimes compared to Machiavelli's work, because of the amount of attention to tactics for staying in power, it differed in emphasizing the importance of overall welfare and prosperity. However, it was lost at the end of the classical period (rediscovered only in 1905), which limited its role as a durable guide in India's government history.

Decentralization and variety During long stretches of the classical period, the subcontinent was divided into a host of political entities, and it was never centralized entirely. Localism and regional diversity formed one of the governmental legacies of the classical period. Many of the smaller units were monarchies, which comported with the assumptions provided in most Hindu epics and also the major law code (the code of Manu) developed after 200 BCE (where the king was a key figure in the overall caste structure). (This was an influential code revolving around the caste system, rather than the legal activities of any particular state.) Monarchs and their staffs, including the military, were drawn largely from the *kshatriya* or warrior caste (which along with the priestly caste constituted about 20% of the population). The caste was responsible for military success but also good governance in times of peace. Initially, in

fact, the caste was given top billing, but lost this position to the Brahmans as religion became more important – a revealing shift, in terms of government. Recent scholarship has made it clear that, amid varied regional jurisdictions, republican forms sometimes flourished as well – monarchy was not universal. Usually, these seem to have been governed by assemblies of warriors, but on occasion the merchant caste may have participated; and it is possible that participation even involved a somewhat democratic element (though among males of appropriate castes). This kind of alternative was most common in city-states, but occasionally showed up in larger regional agglomerations. In contrast to classical Greece, however, these alternatives were not given much attention in political theory.

Imperial tradition Classical India nurtured two periods of imperial rule, both rather brief and involving an uncertain legacy. The first, Mauryan, dynasty was the most impressive, forming partly in response to invasions by Alexander the Great's forces in the northwest. Launched around 322 BCE, it survived, though amid increasing decentralization, until about 185 BCE; at its height, it embraced the majority of the subcontinent and formed the largest unit ever developed before the British period in the 19th century. Its extent helped solidify the caste system. This was a period of considerable prosperity. Mauryan emperors, though warrior-conquerors, devoted careful attention to administration, setting up a provincial structure that may have reflected Persian precedent. Each of four provinces had a royal administrator, assisted by a council. The government took responsibility for coinage. The taxation system was carefully defined and reasonably equitable. Mauryan rulers sponsored a major highway across much of the northern part of the empire, a boon to commerce aided as well by vigorous efforts to eliminate brigandage. The regime supported a large army and an extensive espionage system. It was also backed by a substantial bureaucracy, dealing with matters ranging from international relations to municipal hygiene. Under the last great Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, the regime turned away from war, after the ruler witnessed massive slaughter in a key battle, and began sponsoring Buddhist missionary efforts. But the Mauryans declined rather rapidly after Ashoka, and left little direct legacy. Their success in setting up effective local governments, particularly in the cities, with boards responsible for economic activities, weights and measures, hospitals and schools, even tourism, may help explain why Indian society continued to function reasonably well even without an overarching imperial structure.

The Guptas Much later and separately, a Gupta empire emerged (4th century-6th century CE). As with the Mauryans, the empire developed through a series a conquests: individual rulers boasted of conquering as many as twenty other kingdoms. Indeed the Guptas introduced more military innovations than the Mauryans had, including fuller use of cavalry. The empire was divided into ultimately 26 provinces, each with an administrator and an advisory council. By the 6th century the empire began to disintegrate, fueled by usurpations by provincial leaders and invasion from the outside. Its passing left little legacy – though the period itself had been prosperous with important artistic and intellectual achievements. India fell back into a welter of smaller entities, some of which recalled some of the Gupta administrative arrangements, while others were more purely localized.

Aftermath India after the classical period had no particular difficulty maintaining its cultural and social legacy, with majority Hinduism and the caste system both spreading southward in the subcontinent. The mercantile tradition remained strong as well, though rising competition from Arab merchants in the Indian Ocean posed some problem. But there was no widespread or successful effort to revive internal empire. This meant that India was vulnerable to periodic internal warfare, and also to invasion from outside – now, particularly, by Islamic forces from the west. On the other hand, many local units remained quite successful, with a tradition of responsibility for a variety of services (supported as well by the occupational assignments of the caste system), back by competent administration.

Study questions

1. What was the main focus of Indian political theory? What were its limitations?
2. How do religion and the caste system help explain the patterns of government on the subcontinent during the classical period and beyond?
3. Why did India leave such a different political legacy from that of classical China?

Further reading

Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India: from the origins to AD 1300* (Penguin, 2015)

Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India* (Pearson, 2016)

Greece and Rome

Overview Greek and Roman contributions to government centered particularly on the array of government forms attempted at various times and in various places. Monarchy was a frequent staple, sometimes sliding into tyranny; aristocratic assemblies were widely popular; and several Greek states introduced a form of democracy. Finally Rome ultimately offered one of the great examples of empire, interestingly partly coterminous with the Han dynasty in China. The importance of these various forms was enhanced by the frequent commentary by political theorists and historians. This illustrated the high level of political interest at the time, while also contrasting with Chinese preference for a single form of government. It also facilitated a legacy, as later societies could look back on the Greco-Roman experience to sift through a variety of possibilities for government organization. Greece and particularly Rome also contributed to ideas about government function, including the centrality of a legal system.

Greek City-States City-state governments began to form in Greece (including settlements elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean) by around 800 BCE, from a previous period based on more scattered villages. The peninsula's mountainous terrain accounts for the separation among several hundred units, that usually fiercely guarded their independence. Greeks had a sense of their larger culture, but did not strive for political unity. Internal rivalry and warfare were common, though alliances also formed. Many city states began as monarchies, but on the whole rule by aristocratic oligarchies was more widespread. Tensions with the landowning aristocracy sometimes generated one-man rule, or what the Greeks called tyranny (without the modern repressive implications), governing with more popular interests in mind. After a period of tyranny Athens, one of the more influential city-states, formed a distinctive democracy: citizens met in an assembly to decide policy; officials were chosen from among the citizenry at random, serving short terms; and citizens were also responsible for military service. The majority of Athenians, however, were not citizens – women, slaves, and foreigners were not included; and behind the scenes some aristocratic politicians added some stability to the system. Still, there was no question that this was an innovative form of government, copied by a number of other city states for several decades. Quarrels over the form of government between Athens and the more tightly-controlled state in Sparta contributed to a major war for influence at the end of the 5th century, which ultimately led to the decline of the whole Greek system.

Roman forms of government Like Greece, Rome began as a republican city-state, after gaining freedom from an earlier monarchy in the 5th century BCE. Though there was no written constitution, the institutional structure was quite clear. Primary authority rested with an aristocratic Senate, responsible for legislation that was normally accepted by lesser magistrates; the Senate had fundamental budgetary power. Senators were selected from among the magistrates, who were in turn chosen by assemblies elected by the wider group of citizens – providing a partial democratic element that was further enhanced by the election of tribunes who were supposed to provide balance to the power of the Senate. The magistrates' initiatives were controlled in several ways: the most powerful positions had short terms of office, and in many cases two officials served in each position, providing checks on any individual. The whole system represented a clear example of checks and balances between government branches and, indirectly, between the landed aristocracy and the wider group of citizens. Tensions between these social groups, plus the growing role of military generals as the Republic expanded through frequent warfare, ultimately brought the republic down and led to the establishment of the Empire. Imperial rule supplanted the republican decision-making apparatus, though some earlier institutions were retained without significant power. Emperors began to claim religious authority as well as primary control over military and other policy decisions, guided by a rather informal group of advisors. Early emperors held various audiences and assemblies in which citizens could present concerns, but the imperial government rested increasingly on the authority of the military – which came to have a predominant role in the selection of emperors. While emperors often sought to name their successors, often from within their family, transitions became increasingly uncertain, dependent on military approval.

Empire and law Unlike the Chinese, Romans did not seek to develop a bureaucratic state that would embrace the whole empire. And while the empire did support a polytheistic religion, it did not really attempt a farther-reaching cultural integration. Only in the 4th century, with the effective adoption of

Christianity by the state, did this approach begin to change, but by then the empire was already in decline. Even at the highpoint of empire, many localities retained significant government authority – even their own king – subject however to imperial policy. As the Empire declined, thanks in part to overexpansion, a second administrative capital was established in Constantinople (in the early 4th century CE). From the later days of the Republic, Rome began to appoint a group of governors to oversee major provinces, but these were few in number. During most of the imperial period, overall political unity was retained through careful central control of the military and through the extension of Roman law. Roman law, as it evolved from the Republic onward, was a massive array of statutes regulating crime, family property, slavery and slave status, typically privileging the landowning class. Roman citizens throughout the empire were supposed to be able to claim access to courts of law, but here too, in many regions, local rules had primacy. However, in 212 citizenship was extended to all inhabitants of the empire, which generalized legal practice to some extent. Several emperors undertook major codifications of the law, which further bolstered the prestige of the legal system and its subsequent legacy in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire alike. Roman taxation was another intriguing system that combined central needs, particularly to support the military, with the patchwork quality of the empire overall: taxes varied by locality (including in-kind payments in areas where a money economy was less well established), though on average individuals paid in about 2-5% of income; customs duties on trade (including the sale of slaves) provided much of the state's revenue.

Pax romana and public works From the later Republic onward, military conquest became a key feature of Roman politics, going well beyond the earlier interest of many Greek city-states in military expansion. The prestige of the military, and under the empire the imperial emphasis on celebration of conquest, was noticeably different from the priorities in Han China. Long periods of internal peace, celebrated under the heading of the *pax romana,* were accompanied by steady fighting on various frontiers (particularly in the east and north), which among other things recurrently provided spoils to support the military. Public works, along with law and conquest, formed the other hallmark of the Roman state, again with precedents from the Greek city-states. Structures were distributed widely through the empire, including public baths and amphitheaters as well as a massive road system (aimed particularly as facilitating troop movement) and Mediterranean ports. While neither Greece nor Rome innovated fundamentally in the list of government functions, careful administration, plus public works such as the aqueduct system and state-sponsored entertainment, was responsible for sustaining up to a million people in Rome at its height.

Political theory Much of the impact of government in the classical Mediterranean was amplified by the importance and variety of political theory. In addition, historical work, from Thucydides onward, privileged accounts of political developments and changes in organization of the state. Launched by the Athenian philosopher Plato, Greek theory emphasized the importance of wise and ethical leadership, while detailing the merits of various forms of government (often favoring some kind of enlightened aristocratic rule and frequently criticizing democracy). Roman political theory, particularly through the writings of Marcus Cicero, highlighted the importance of checks and balances in the republic and emphasized the importance of the rule of law. Cicero emphasized the presence of an overarching, rational natural law, which no human law should violate, while insisting as well on legal equality and liberty.

Legacy The later impact of Greek and Roman government innovations was far more diffuse than in the case of China, and in some ways even India, because of the diversity of forms involved plus the depth of the collapse of the Roman system in the West. Arguably, some of the limitations of Greek and Roman government, particularly in the organization of empire, contributed to a more varied legacy as well: the simple fact was that, despite the vivid memory of the glories of Rome, Roman government structure was never recaptured in Western Europe. However, Roman institutions were preserved more directly in the smaller Byzantine Empire, with particular emphasis on codified law and the power of imperial administration (supported as well by links to the Orthodox Church). In the West, legacy (aside from memories of empire) highlighted selective revivals, rather than direct continuity – though the structure of the Catholic Church clearly emulated Roman administration. Thus Roman law regained prestige in the later Middle Ages. Ideas of democracy and division of powers, from Athenian precedent or Ciceronian theory, were retrieved from the 17th century onward, though without intending replication in detail. Some Greek political theory has also been seen as contributing to later totalitarian government structures.

Study questions

1. Should Greece and Rome be seen as the origin of modern democracy?
2. How do the political legacies of the classical Mediterranean compare with those of China?
3. What were the most distinctive governmental features of the Roman Empire?

Further reading

Aloys Winterling, *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* (Wiley, 2010)

Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: state power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Stephanie Budin, *The Ancient Greeks: an introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Irving Zeitlin, *Rulers and Ruled: an introduction to classical political theory* (University of Toronto Press, 1997)