HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN MIDDLE EAST

Contents

Chapter 1: The Impact of Agricultural Society

Hunting and gathering Hunting and gathering societies normally had little or no social structure – which is one of the reasons many anthropologists highlight the quality of life they offered compared to what came later in human history. This was of course the original form of human organization, one that lasted for hundreds of thousands of years and still survives in a few isolated areas today. Hunting and gathering groups were small (40-80 people) and relatively egalitarian, among other things because it was impossible to store significant wealth. Men and women had different economic roles but both contributed substantially, reducing gender power distinctions. Many decisions were taken collectively, though children did not participate. Some individual leaders may have gained prominence: burial sites reveal a few skeletons with special adornment. But systematic social differentiations were not present. Families represented the main social institution apart from the group itself.

Advent of agriculture Beginning around 9000 BCE, initially around the Black Sea, reliance on agriculture began to replace the earlier economy, though diffusion of the new system was gradual. Once adopted, agriculture introduced a variety of innovations that might affect social structure. Populations settled down, creating durable communities. And these were larger than the hunting bands – averaging several hundred and sometimes more (quite apart from small cities, that also ultimately emerged). Land ownership became the prime form of wealth. Agricultural economies also normally generated some surplus: eight people could produce enough to support ten, which in principle could support greater occupational differentiation. Agricultural societies also introduced new methods of storing wealth beyond immediate needs. Many of these changes set the basis for new forms of inequality and, therefore, of more complex social structure.

Persistent equality A major new (2021) study, however, urges that many agricultural societies, or societies where hunting and fishing combined with some agriculture, long maintained substantial equality, revising the standard assumption that social differentiation came fast on the heels of agriculture. Even the advent of cities did not necessarily alter the picture. David Graeber, an anthropologist, and archeologist David Wengrow have uncovered evidence of substantial cities that display no particular differentiation at all. Catalhoyuk, for example, in present-day Turkey, a settlement of about 5000 people that lasted for hundreds of years, offered the same kind of housing to all inhabitants: there were no mansions or palaces. Hunting and gathering social forms – that is, considerable equality – were preserved, and there was no formal government (and writing, that crucial bureaucratic tool, had not been introduced). In other cases, some cities did at first introduce inequality only to reverse course and tear down the fancy buildings in favor of standardized housing. This occurred for example in Central America. Periodic meetings brought large numbers of people together to make decisions. In some cases, as in the Pacific Northwest, while certain groups did favor inequality, including slave holding, others explicitly held out, finding these new social forms repugnant. In some cases, as in North America, the relatively egalitarian social forms persisted until they were displaced by force by European arrivals. Graeber and Wengrow argue that their nuanced picture not only should revise conventional historical accounts of inequality, but also open windows to conceive of more radical social and political change in contemporary life.

Most agricultural societies But major inequality did develop, in almost all agricultural societies. Graeber and Wengrow argue that the origin may have rested in initial inequalities within families. Agriculture permitted and required higher birth rates, which in turn prompted growing divisions between men and women. Over time, these divisions began to affect larger political relationships, encouraging more formal inequality among men as well as between the genders. Property based on land and surplus was also

open to possible seizure by unusually strong or greedy men, another potential source of inequality. More complex agricultural economies, often built around irrigation, required more careful coordination and property rights, which ultimately encouraged the emergence of governments (and writing), and new distinctions between those in government and religious posts and the rest of society (and between that minority that could afford to learn how to read and write and the rest of society). Governments also developed more formal military forces, which though small could be used to enforce inequality within a society and also conquer other peoples, sometimes forced into slavery. Finally, while some cities may have persisted in collaboration with the countryside and without formal government apparatus, many cities more clearly differentiated urban from rural populations, working to subordinate the latter in service to the city centers.

Early civilizations: Mesopotamia Certainly by around 4000 BCE the first civilization center, in Sumeria in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, demonstrated pronounced social inequality, with many rural farmers held as slaves by the city-state governments. Early written law codes, ultimately including the famous Hammurabic Code of c.1700 BCE (in Babylonia), went to great lengths to defend differential property holdings and even differential punishments for crimes depending on social status. Thus an offense to a nobleman was punished far more harshly than the same offense to a “villein”, or ordinary subject, while an offense to a slave received even less sanction. And all this on top of clear differentiation between men and women. Some studies of Sumeria also differentiate priests as yet a fourth, and obviously superior, group, along with the nobles (warriors and government officials), common people (farmers, artisans, merchants) and slaves.

Egypt Ancient Egypt developed a basically similar pattern, but long without the substantial slave component. Three main social classes predominated: the royal family and wealthy landowners, government officials and priests; a middle class of merchants, manufacturers and artisans (predominantly urban), and the mass of farmers. Slaves, mainly prisoners of war, were less numerous, and had some rights including opportunities for marriage. Some fluidity existed, particularly between lower and middle: a good marriage or hard work could push a man and his family into a higher group.

Basic pattern From the early civilizations onward, most agricultural societies broadly shared a number of social-structural features. A powerful class on top, often hereditary, depended on disproportionate landed wealth plus access to political and religious authority. A major historical study argues that from this point to the present, very few societies have managed to dislodge this top group (though its personnel might change): only major wars or a few revolutions could seriously make a dent. Beneath the upper class, successful merchants came next in wealth, and sometime gained access to political power; but their social status might vary depending on the regional culture. With the towns, solid merchants and guild artisans held a special place, differentiated as well from the majority rural population as well as from an urban lower class of the unskilled (and prostitutes). Many merchant and artisanal guilds worked hard to limit inequality within their own ranks. Rural populations, aside from being partially separate from the cities and, on average, far less likely to be literate, would usually display some gradations in property ownership; and a variety of labor systems developed, from free farmers to serfs to slaves, with obvious implications for position in social structures. Finally, while no agricultural society eagerly promoted social mobility, patterns here varied as well from one regional culture to another. In other words, after an often fascinating gestation period, most agricultural societies developed a mixture between some standard basic features of social structure and a number of important options and variants.

Study questions:

1. Why and how did most hunting and gathering societies avoid much formal social differentiation?
2. How much do the recent claims about coexistence between agriculture and social equality alter the standard historical picture?
3. Why and how did social inequality ultimately develop?
4. What were the standard features of agricultural social structure, and what were the main variants?

Further reading

David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: a new history of humanity* (Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2021)

R. David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: violence and the history of inequality from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century* (Princeton University Press, 2017)

Chapter 2: 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 missionaries 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 coexixted 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 20th 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 7th to the 19th 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)