The development of complex societies

Introduction

The development of complex societies differs from other societies, not only in the number of differentiated societal parts, but whereas in simpler societies that are basically self-regulating, in decision-making functions of its societal components of which these are not generalized and constant. The term ‘ state’ however contains an internally specialised decision-making subsystem. This subsystem or bureaucracy has the power to mobilise certain resources that are not totally embedded within the various societal components. In this essay I have tried to look at the reason behind the rise of complex societies, using material four different ancient societies that of Mesopotamia, China, The Indus Valley and Egypt in and broken down each ‘ state’ in turn to help define the possible reason for each.

Ancient Mesopotamia section

In Mesopotamia around 4600 to 3400 millennia B. C. which incorporated the Late Ubaid period and into the Middle Uruk period, a relatively complex political formations had emerged at various different times and places. By the end of the Ubaid period, around the late 5th millennia B. C., ‘ three-level settlement hierarchies with indications of two levels of political and economic control in south western Iran and probably elsewhere (Wright 1994) was present. By about 4000 B. C., the earliest Uruk formations had emerged along the irrigated regions of the Lower Mesopotamia, the Euphrates-Tigris river system.

Evidence from sites suggest a four level settlement hierarchy, with three levels of political control, this suggests a pattern not feasible without internal

administrative specialisation, typical of states. At this point due to the lack of unexcavated Early Uruk sites, there is no evidence from the architecture of public buildings or administrative technology – such as seals or sealings to indicate the control apparatus. Geographically major centres appear to be both closely and evenly spaced, without however showing a clearly dominant or primate centre.

In contrast to this, in the dry-farmed Upper Mesopotamia during the same period settlement patterns and arte-factual evidence suggests different aspects of emergent complexity. In the north eastern portion of Iraq recent analysis done by Rotham (2002) presents evidence of both domestic and public buildings. From the small centre of Tepe Gawra, seals and sealings showing increasing hierarchy in the production of crafts and exchanges as well as showing period of conflict.

Ongoing research in the central portion of Upper Mesopotamia indicates centres like Tell Brak had existed at the same time and appears also to have had specialised administrative buildings. Research only shows at this point three levels of hierarchy. The collective data can suggest that different elements of state organisation were present in different areas early in the Uruk period. From the Middle Uruk period, evidence points to a developed Uruk state with ‘ internally specialised control apparatus which is present in many parts of Greater Mesopotamia’ (Johnson 1987; Wright 1998).

The emergence of the Mesopotamian civilisation can be seen in the unique ecological and geographical framework of the alluvial lowlands of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers around the late 5th and 4th Millennia B. C. The

ecology framework gives the emerging Mesopotamian societies important advantages in agricultural productivity and subsistence; this is not seen by contemporary polities at the periphery: the geographical framework presents the Mesopotamian societies with sustainable transportation advantages. These two factors created opportunities for rising Mesopotamian elites who could use trade as an important tool for legitimate control of power and expansion resulting in unequal share of resources.

In forming a hypothesis for the growing socio-economic differentiation and urban growth giving rise to complex societies in Mesopotamia in the 4th Millennia B. C. modelling trade pattern growth can provide us with some answers.

Trade would have been at first largely internal, focussing on individual southern polities that exploited localised ecological rich niches during the Late Ubaid and Early Uruk period. Middle to Late Uruk periods shows a much stronger pattern of external trade between the growing southern cities and the societies at their periphery. Again those in control of more converted resources gained more prominence. Over time a import-substitution process then amplified the one-sided evolutionary impact on the southern societies and shifting trade patterns.

Mesopotamia shows gradualist evolutionary perspective, showing clear lines of continuity and change in presenting the core feature of the rise of complex societies of the Sumerian civilisation. A steady state or evenly paced change is nor seen. Both their long histories for their system of writing and temple complexes are salient comparative points. Social complexity is

seen through a gradual emergence of settlement hierarchy indicative of a growing administrative structure and cumulative change in craft specialisation.

Ancient China Section

Early agriculture, building foundations and burials have been documented in China dating back to around 7th Millennia B. C. belonging to the Peiligang culture, but it is not until the first half of the 2nd Millennia B. C. that there is evidence for the first cities from the ‘ Shang’ civilisation.

Though there is no significant visible trace above ground of the Shang cities, city sites can be portrayed of areas around 30 and 40 km2, with foundation ruins of clusters of buildings of various sorts. The clusters would have been densest around the centre, becoming sparser with greater distances between one another as they moved away towards the periphery.

The clusters probably performed special functions and only this entire ‘ web’ of clusters formed a functional whole. The term ‘ web’ works well, as the clusters of buildings formed the nodules – the invisible lines, served as complementary relationships that interconnected the nodules with one another and the centre as a whole.

An-yang and Hsiao-t’un are two very important sites showing clusters of buildings each laid out in a recognisable plan. At Hsiao-t’un although the general architecture is unimpressive, the houses are surrounded by sacrificial burials of humans and horse chariots, storage pits and bone archives of the royal oracle records: this evidence suggests a ‘ palace,

ancestral hall and ceremonial area of the house of the Shang dynasty' (Shih 1959).

Other remains of villages or hamlets of various sizes and sorts often within site of one another are also present. The An-yang ' web' of individual nodular components with Hsiao-t'un at its nerve centre projects am image of a single community, an urban settlement with many people with specialised segments all representing the Shang capital.

The location of a central city may have been looked upon for a limited period as geomantically favourable. The movement of one site to another dictated by divination. Once the capital was moved away whatever was left behind was then transformed into farming fields.

What was important was the city, not the site it sat upon. Movement from site to site was at the kings' prerogative, with layout and structuring designed to serve him as the centre of attention. The first cities were developed to serve a number of functions all associated to the emergence of a ruler who possessed extraordinary political powers.

Central features such as kingship are vital to our understanding of social complexity in northern China. The king presided over a hierarchy of economy, government and religion with himself at the top and centre. The central city was an effective mechanism at exerting political control over all the other settlements. Cities and towns can be seen as lineages at local levels, each hierarchically organised through the state. The elite's hold on the lower classes would have been total, one that was sanctioned by fiction and enforced by might.

The transition from the Neolithic Lungshan culture to the Shang civilisation presents a quantum leap in the quality of life for the elite, there is however no obvious change in the technology of food production. It is possible that the Shang used fertilizers or had more effective measures of irrigation. There is evidence of more effective cultivation methods that of the ’tilling of land by team, the so-called hsieh t’ien, a phrase often seen in the oracle records’ (Amano 1959).

This can lead to a conclusion that during the Shang period there was the successful organisation of large-scale exploitation of a large group of people by a small group of people from within the same society. This can also be seen as the beginning of an oppressive governmental system. This ‘ urban revolution’ was not based on technology or power of production but on reaps of human toil.

Clearly two factors not of significance here like in other archaic states are massive changes in the environment and large-scale waterworks. The success of social complexity is derived from a revolution of social systems, which in turn re-aligned societal segments in regards to food resources; coupled with advances in new weaponry, in particular the horse chariot used an effective tool for any necessary oppressive measures in the emergence of a great civilisation.

Ancient Indus society

The Urban Phase of the Indus or Harappan civilisation is beginning to be recognised in its own right as a unique complex society. The roots of sedentism and the village farming community can be dated back to around

the 7th Millennia B. C. or even earlier. Set in the central Indus Valley on the Kachi Plain at a site called Mehrgarh, the Indus urban revolution that was to follow is seen as being thoroughly ‘ Indianized’, being structured by environment, ecology and architecture.

Whilst other ‘ states’ in the archaic period emerged from a long, slow period of gradual and constant culture modification, that eventually led to an emerging pattern of urbanisation and social complexity; the Harappan civilisation seems to have come about in a very short period of transformation, something in the region of 100-150 years.

The Pre-Urban and Urban Phase of the Indus civilisation focuses on two things: items related to subsistence and the expression of style. There is clear signs of social stratification, craft and career specialisation, writing and urbanisation in the urban phase, which are all absent in the pre-urban phase. Great change is also seen in the urban phase with a significant increase in sites, followed by a gap in settlement size. Three major sites come to grow all evenly spaced within the Harappan domain – Mohenjo-daro, Ganweriwala and Harappa. Evidence indicates two tiers of Harappan settlement, with regional centres or ‘ capitals’ developing in the urban phase.

Most evident during the Urban Phase in many Harappan cities and towns is the clear demarcation of public versus private space. The ‘ citadel’ appears at a number of sites and is set apart from actual living space, whereas possible granaries or warehouses are within public spaces suggesting controlled forms of redistribution. Social differentiation is clearly seen in elite and lower class housing within cities.

Successful social complexity in the Mature Harappan presents itself through clear signs of social stratification, craft specialism (which was established in some cities within specific districts), and sophisticated engineering and technology development and maintenance, which is indicative of the growth of ‘ civic’ institutions. Smaller settlements were integrated with the great ‘ urban centres’. There is evidence for intensification of agriculture which concentrated on barley and wheat. Long distance trade networks were established to the east and west alongside internal commerce. Trade was advanced by the use of the wheel (the bullock cart), and that of the boat, with extensive maritime trading at outposts such as Lothal and Bakalot. Shallow harbours which were located at the estuary of rivers that opened into the sea promoted brisk trade with states like that of Mesopotamia.

Social complexity is also increasing evident seen through the rise of literacy and social classes, these are ‘ two critical axes on which an evaluation of the growth of the Harappan civilisation can proceed’ (Possehl, 273, 1990). The growth of writing plays a critical role in the Indus as it had in Mesopotamia.

Whilst trade and intense economic processes played a revolutionary role in the success of social complexity in the Harappan civilisation, there is one more ‘ institutional setting’ as referred to by Possehl (1990: 277) that is vital to the success of social complexity in the Indus, it is of the organisation of human ideology. The belief systems of what researcher Robert Redfield had referred to as the ‘ Great Tradition’, in describing a way of life as a vehicle that ‘ enables those who share it to identify with one another as members of a common civilisation’ (Redfield, 1953, 64). Redfield goes on further to explain in regards to the state that the ‘ transformation of folk-society into

civilisation through the appearance of development of the idea of reform… by deliberate intention or by design' (Redfield, 1953, 113). An important aspect to the growth of the Indus region was in its organisational aspects. The Urban phase of the Harappan civilisation was able to form strong temporary alliances from the surrounding area based on a unique human ideology. This belief system enabled the Harappan civilisation to sustain a successful way of life throughout the Indus region.

Operatives like trade, ideology and other institutional settings become centres of action that can promote social complexity and interconnect processes of change: they can in turn be changed by their own socio-cultural environment.

Ancient Egypt Society

Egypt's history is complex, by the mid 5th Millennia B. C. it appears to be occupied by communities of people living in small functionally similar agricultural communities which appear to be only weakly connected politically and economically. But by around 2500 B. C. Egypt had become an integrated empire whose ruler's power was expressed through a complex hierarchical bureaucracy.

Egypt's early settlements were concentrated along the small dynamic floodplain of the Nile. The Nile flood levels were powerful determents of Egypt's cultural history. However this flood plain offered the same approximate natural resources for the whole of Egypt's developing complexity, and therefore patterns of cultural change cannot be simply explained in terms of the flood variations of the Nile. Agricultural

intensification along the Nile would have it own geometric limits and it wasn't until a full conversion to an agrarian society making use of wheat and barley, and domesticated sheep and goats that were introduced from probably south west Asia that changes took place. These changes have been documented in one of the most important areas of the time that of the Fayyum.

Egypt: Origins of Complex Societies

Hierakonpolis is an extremely important site as it contains the complete Badarian-Amratian-Gerzean sequence. Settled around the 4th Millennia B. C., it is believed the rapid growth of the community was due to the ecological diversity and the exceptional agricultural potential of the region. A massive population explosion occurred around 3800 to 3400 B. C. Its economy was based on both technology (a major pottery producer for Upper Egypt) and productive cereal agriculture along with the exploitation of livestock. From its size and rich content of some tombs ' the economy operated in the context of significant social ranking' (Hoffman: 182). By 3200 B. C. there is evidence for cobblestone foundations that support a theory of a fortified palace, temple or administrative centre and Hoffman et al have concluded that Hierakonpolis had become the capital of a southern Egyptian state. The development of the Egyptian civilisation can be seen as an essentially internal and uninterrupted process, with Hierakonpolis lying at the centre. The Narmer Palette and other important finds at Hierakonpolis clearly suggest a centralised and stratified society.

Maadi dated to around 3650 B. C. is another important site. It shows pottery style connections to Syro-Palestine and that of Greater Mesopotamia. Burials show sufficient diversity in contexts to reflect differences in status and emerging social ranking. Its site plans, finds and other evidence point to an organised society that controlled commodity production and exchange, alongside evidence for substantial copper smelting and working.

Developing complexity in Pre-dynastic Egypt is seen in a shift with developmental focus now from the south to the north. The Delta was believed to be the critical region in the later Pre-dynastic as the main channel of foreign influence into Egypt and also overland trade routes. Trigger et al (1984) notes that the important changes that took place in Predynastic Egypt were the evolution of ritual systems and the expanded lines of political authority transformations. These changes are though having a dramatic impact may fail to survive in the archaeological record.

Many scholars such as Schulman or Wilding challenge the theory that a military conquest by southern rulers unified the Egyptian state as the Narmer Palette commemorates. It is now thought that the unification process occurred around 3100 B. C. and was formed successfully on a complex hierarchical social and political institution which was supported by a powerful economy with major interests in international commerce and politics.

The success of Egypt lies in its centralisation of its early political systems, despite it being the least urbanised. Agricultural productivity was still closely dependent on the Nile flood Levels; but the socio-political evolution was a

complex interweaving web, incorporating ecological uniformity and it exploited the transport potential of the Nile effectively.

Old Kingdom settlement patterns play an important part to the understanding of emerging social complexity it can be seen as the ‘ disintegration of central authority and the rise of semi autonomous families in the provinces’ (Kemp 101). By the Late Old Kingdom control of local affairs once controlled by the Pharaoh’s overseer now began to come from provincial governors or monarchs. There can be seen a slow but continuous expansion and diversity of society with provincial administrative institutions helping to grow its complexity.

The cultural history of Egypt cannot simply be explained in ecological or economic terms, these do play an import part, what is deeply rooted in Egypt’s success is its rise in Ideology. The Idea of ‘ divine kingship’, where the whole structure of both state religious and political institutions are all derived from the very notion that the Pharaoh’s authority and so the state’s was divine in origin.

Conclusion

The emergence of complex societies is an enduring focus for archaeologists. Identifying when and under what circumstances a political transformation has occurred combined with in some cases evaluating competing ideas explaining the ‘ origins of states’ themselves. Research itself has proven difficult, in part because the process is not easy to understand with limited archaeological evidence, but also as it is not a unitary and rapid process.