
Early State Intricacies

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At the end of Leonid Grinin's article 'Democracy and Early State' (Grinin 2004: 149) the editors invite comments to the issues raised in the article. Being not familiar with Classical Antiquity I will limit myself here to some remarks on a few other aspects of his article, namely the problem of the end of the early state, and the problem of the monopolization of force by early state governments.

1. *The Problem of the End of the Early State*

The end of the early state is an intricate phenomenon. Logically speaking, there are three possibilities:

- the early state develops into a mature state;
- the early state is conquered or colonized and does no longer exist as an independent polity;
- the early state collapses as a consequence of internal weaknesses and disappears as an independent polity.

Regarding the first possibility it should be pointed out that in *The Early State* (Claessen and Skalník 1978) the mature state was not mentioned. We introduced this phenomenon some years later, in *Early State Dynamics* (Claessen and Van de Velde 1987: 4–5; cf. Bondarenko and Korotayev 2003: 126). In *The Early State*, it is true, we distinguished three levels of development, namely the inchoate (incipient), the typical, and the transitional type of early state (Claessen 1978: 589–593). The most probable candidates for the development into mature states are the transitional ones. They were defined as 'the early state in which the administrative apparatus was dominated by appointed officials, where kinship affected only

certain marginal aspects of government, and where the prerequisites for the emergence of private ownership of the means of production, of a market economy and of overtly antagonistic classes were already found' (Claessen 1978: 589). In a recent statistical reanalysis of the early state data base, Bondarenko and Korotayev (2003: 113–116) found that the development of private ownership of the means of production correlates only weakly with the political development in the direction of the mature state. This thus leaves us as characteristics the administrative apparatus, the limited role for kinship, the market economy and the antagonistic classes. To these were added as further criteria: the presence of salaried functionaries, and the development of codified laws, formal judges, and codified punishments (1978: 591). As transitional early states there were considered the Aztecs, China (mainly the Yin and Chou dynasties), 12th century France, Jimma, Kuba and Maurya. To this list several other early states, which were discussed in later publications, could be added: West African Asante and Dahomey, and the 17th century Central African Congo state. From these transitional cases but few reached the level of the mature state.

The mature state is defined as a state, where a different type of legitimacy and a managerial, bureaucratic type of organization replaces the earlier forms, the development of a legal system that transcends specific office holders, even the rulers, as well as the formation of a permanent police force, and the development of a regular system of taxation (Claessen and Van de Velde 1987: 4–5). The transformation of a transitional type of early state into a mature state must have been a gradual process, during which different ideas about legitimation, economy and organization replaced the earlier ones (cf. Claessen and Skalník 1978: 633–634). From the transitional early states mentioned above only China and France reached the next higher level. The Aztecs were conquered in the sixteenth century by Spanish conquistadores, Jimma, Kuba, Asante and Dahomey were colonized by European powers in the nineteenth century. The Mauryan early state declined and finally collapsed because of internal weaknesses (Seneviratne 1978: 399–400); the same fate befell Congo (Balandier 1992). Other early states that reached the level of maturity are Japan, under the *shoguns*, and Imperial Rome.

Almost unnoticed in the above the second way in which early states could end was entered, namely by conquest or colonization. Ancient Egypt was conquered many times, and though it succeeded in recreating itself several times, the conquests by Rome, and later the Arabs definitively put an end to the oldest state. The Dutch conquered a number of early states in Indonesia, varying from Aceh to Bali, the British conquered great parts of Africa (among which early states as Buganda, Bunyoro, Ankole). Alexander the Great finished numerous early states during his tours of conquest, and Julius Caesar eliminated quite a number of *civitates* in Gaul.

This brings us to the problem of collapsing early states because of internal weaknesses. Such weaknesses can be found in the way a state was organized, defects in the economic base, or a lack of legitimacy of the government (Tainter 1988). Renée Hagesteijn (1989) describes a number of early states (or paramount chiefdoms) in early continental Southeast Asia that all eagerly tried to enlarge their territory and promote their position by conquering surrounding polities. However, the legitimacy basis of a conquering ruler did not fundamentally differ from that of the defeated one and that was a great disadvantage for the intruder, the economy of the region was poorly developed, and the geographical surroundings, consisting mainly of steep mountains and impenetrable jungles prevented any form of lasting conquest. Consequently every political construction above the own region was doomed to fail and collapsed after a shorter or longer period of time. Only when after some centuries some of the rulers accepted Hinduism, they could base their claims to legitimacy on a new and stronger basis. In this way they finally succeeded in constructing early states, as Angkor. Till that moment internal weaknesses over and again made the development of larger polities impossible. The Polish historian Tymowski analyzed in great detail why in the West African Sudan between the 8th and the 19th century a mature state never developed (1987). In the course of time several well-known early states came here to the fore: Ghana, Mali, Songhai, all rich in gold, with large towns (Kumbi Saleh, Niani, Gao, Timbuktu) and a high level of cultural and religious development (Tymowski 1987: 57). The economy rested on long distance trade, agriculture and animal husbandry. Here lay the main internal weaknesses of these states. The

profits of the long distance trade went mainly to the foreign traders, while the agricultural communities never became integrated in the state. They were maintained as the lowest administrative level. Moreover also a number of peripheral regions was never really incorporated into the state organization. They remained under the leadership of the original chiefly families, who only were obliged to pay a certain tribute to the central government. The fact that these regions, as well as a number of pre-state communities (extended families, village communities, tribal unions) were allowed to remain, prevented a further development of the early states here. These states are a good illustration of Bargatzky's thesis that only when the centre succeeds in diminishing the importance of the sub centers, further development is possible (Bargatzky 1987). Successor states, developing here in the nineteenth century did not change the traditional structures. The local communities remained stable, numerous officials were obliged to pay the local leaders for their cooperation, and the unclear rules of succession led to too many claimants to the throne (Tymowski 1987: 64–65).

In many cases a direct connection exists between the occurrence of internal weaknesses and conquest. As soon as a state starts to weaken, conquerors are lying in wait. This was the fate of the Roman Empire after the fourth century A.D.; the realm of Charlemagne in the tenth century, and many of the cases discussed by Kennedy (1987) and Tainter (1988).

On the basis of the data presented it seems impossible to distinguish beforehand early states into those that reach – or will reach – the level of the mature state, and those that will not, as suggested by Grinin (2004: 97–98). Such a development cannot be predicted. The colonization of Dahomey and Asante ended the independent development of two cases that most probably would have reached the level of the mature state. To what extent the Aztecs or Jimma would have been able to come that far is an open question; also here colonial conquests prevented continuing developments. The fact that with the assistance of European councilors the early states of Tonga and Hawai'i reached maturity in the nineteenth century could not have been predicted from the eighteenth century structures.

2. *The Problem of the Monopolization of Force*

Any socio-political leader, whether the leader of a band, or the ruler of an early state, has to cope with the problem of how to make his (her) followers act according to the norms and values of the group. Every society has such norms and values, but people do not obey the rules and regulations automatically; they often seek to escape obligations or try to interpret the rules to their own advantage. Most societies thus have developed mechanisms to cope with deviant behavior (Claessen 2003: 163). Where increasing numbers of people live together on a permanent basis, inevitably more and more rules and regulations will be produced. If such rules and regulations do not develop the larger society will break apart into smaller units (Johnson 1982). Rules and regulations thus are not an invention of the (early) state, but are an indispensable requirement of every type of socio-political organization. The implementation of such rules will be most successful when they are based on a consensus between the ruler and the ruled; that is when the ruler and the ruled share the same norms and values. In that case the ruler can be considered as legitimate (Claessen 1994: 41). Even if the ideal situation of a legitimate ruler or government is reached, it cannot be expected that every individual in that society will agree with every governmental decision, if only because he or they do not share the norms and values of the ruling group or consider the rules as disadvantageous (cf. Malinowski 1926). Such individuals – or groups of people – make a degree of coercion by the ruler inevitable. Government in early states thus usually combines consensus and coercion to achieve its goals (Claessen 1994: 42–43).

General ideas about norms, values, religion and authority are inculcated upon the youth by parents and family heads – and in some cases as *e.g.*, the Aztecs, in schools. The majority by far of such rules and regulations are connected with family and household matters. Lack of respect for, or the neglect of such rules were corrected or punished by the family head or the local leader, and practically never came to the attention of the central government (Claessen 2003: 165). It was only the larger crimes that were brought to the attention of the central government: murder, arson, treason, and especially lese majesty, offences against the sacred ruler. The punishments meted out by the ruler in such cases often were draconic.

Ideally it is the ruler who is the lawgiver in early states. In practice a number of people exerted influence on the process of law giving. They did so formally in institutionalized bodies (councils) or as officials (ministers). There were also people who informally influenced the law giving: members of the family, friends, advisers (Claessen 1978: 559–561). Though in this way a reasonably organized system to construct laws and regulations existed, the implementation thereof was not an easy task. On the one hand the usual lack of a sufficient infrastructure made it difficult for the central government to control the country. The solution for this problem was sought in the appointment of regional governors who were responsible for the maintenance of laws and regulations. Such governors were difficult to control, however. On the other hand there was a problem that many early states were composed of a variety of cultural and ethnic groups, who did not share the norms and values of the ruling elite. Here often coercion rather than consensus was found to occur (Claessen 1994: 46).

In view of the many difficulties in maintaining laws and regulations in early states, it was necessary to disseminate as convincing as possible, the idea that all legal power rested on the central government. It was therefore generally found that capital punishments could be pronounced only by the ruler. It was also by the central government that incentives were issued aiming at the maintenance of laws and regulations. Laws were enforced and misconduct was severely punished. This all means that the central government (or the ruler) theoretically monopolized the application of force.

In reality no government ever succeeded in fully realizing this monopoly. Apart from such difficulties as the lack of infrastructure and the necessity to delegate power to governors and other functionaries, there are always uncontrollable groups of ‘rebels’ that are against the government for whatever reason, there will always be brawls or fights in which neighbors kill each other intentionally or by accident, murders by robbers, and so on. Even in modern well-organized nation states no government is able to prevent murder or gang fights (as appears from *e.g.*, the USA, or Italy). The question of whether there was found an apparatus of coercion standing above the society in Ancient Greece or Rome (Grinin 2004: 110 ff.) seems a bit unnecessary. In all polities, thus also in democratic

ones, there are found efforts by the central government (hidden behind whatever Council or Board) to maintain norms, values, rules and regulations, and in order to do so striving to monopolize force – even though in practice none ever succeeded in doing so completely.

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