

Lecture 3. Classical civilizations of Europe and the Middle East

(600s – 400s BCE)

METHODS OF RULE

Administration and state institutions were crucial to rulership. Centralized government was the goal of most kings and emperors: among the most successful centralizers were Persia and Rome, Qin and Han China, and Mauryan India.

Societies organized on a city-state basis, such as Phoenicia, ancient Greece, and the Maya, tended to be culturally unified but politically decentralized.

Law codes and courts enforced rules, although in most premodern states they did not guarantee equal treatment of all classes—elites often received more rights and privileges, and lighter punishment for crimes.

Bureaucracies enabled rulers to exercise their will over large areas. Among the tasks they performed were tax collection, law enforcement, the mobilization of food and resources, military defense, the regulation of trade (including the creation of currencies and standard weights and measures), and the maintenance of infrastructure (roads, canals, postal systems, and so on).

Most rulers created regional and local levels of government and delegated authority to officials at those levels. Persia was subdivided into provinces (satrapias) governed by satraps, and large territorial units (provinces) in Rome were run by proconsuls.

In Qin and Han China, the empire was organized into large zones called jun, and then into smaller counties. Gupta and Mauryan India likewise operated several levels of government.

Other techniques of rule included religious justification (the Mandate of Heaven in the case of Han China, the priestly functions claimed by leaders like the Moche and Mayan rulers, the notion in most societies that the ruler was somehow blessed by the gods), claiming the legacy of an earlier regime (as the Gupta did in India by

emulating the Mauryan empire), and creating a secret police or network of spies and informants to monitor one's own people.

Official religions were one way to strengthen feelings of loyalty and social unity, but they could also create resentments in states with diverse populations. Some empires forced their official religion on all subjects, while others, such as the early Persians and India under the Mauryans and Guptas, practiced religious toleration to one degree or another. Because it made the task of governing easier, Rome's imperial policy was to allow those it conquered to worship as they pleased, as long as they obeyed Roman gods and respected Rome's gods along with their own. Alexander the Great followed a similar policy.

The projection of power often led to war, necessitating the effective use of military force. China, Rome, Mauryan India, the Greek city-state of Sparta, and the Mayans were known for powerful land armies.

Although horses were unknown in the Americas, nomadic peoples in Eurasia became especially adept at chariot and cavalry warfare, practices eventually borrowed by more advanced societies. (Invention of the stirrup, most likely by the Chinese in the 300s C.E., made fighting from horseback even more efficient.)

It took great wealth and specialized aptitude to excel at naval warfare, which tended to be the forte of societies with trade-based economies, such as Phoenicia and the Greek city-state of Athens.

Siege craft, the art of capturing cities, required knowledge of engineering and was a particular strength of the Romans, Indians, and Chinese.

To enlarge their armies without drafting too many of their own farmers and workers, or to acquire troops with particular combat skills (such as archery, siege craft, or cavalry or naval warfare), states frequently hired mercenaries or recruited soldiers from conquered peoples.

Diplomacy offered a less violent and less costly way to project power. States sought allies, negotiated treaties to end or avoid wars, and tried to keep their rivals divided or at war with each other.

Mauryan political advisers coined the famous phrase “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” and the Romans originated the slogan “divide and conquer,” but all major states operated according to these principles.

Divide and conquer was particularly useful for empires threatened by multiple nomadic tribes, many of whom disliked each other as much as they did the empire. China dealt with steppe nomads in this fashion, and Rome did the same with the various barbarians on its frontiers.

Some states bullied their neighbors into becoming tributary states, extorting money or dictating policy without going to the expense and trouble of conquering them. Han China and Gupta India relied on this technique.

The effective projection of force demanded that armies and navies be fed and supplied properly, and that they be able to move efficiently. Advanced states laid out supply lines and gained control over sea lanes, especially in the Mediterranean. They built roads, permitting the rapid movement of troops, and also facilitating trade. Persia’s 1,600-mile Great Royal Road could be traveled in less than a week, and Rome’s road network was masterpiece of engineering.

Fortifications in the form of city walls protected population centers. They also defended frontiers: familiar examples are the Great Wall in China and Hadrian’s Wall in Roman lands, built approximately on the border between present-day England and Scotland.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Cities distinguished civilized societies from less advanced ones. They served as hubs for trade, especially if they were seaports or river ports. They housed major temples and monasteries, and acted as garrisons and navy yards for military forces. They also provided seats of government.

Major cities of the era include Persepolis (ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire), Chang'an (capital of Han China and a key point on the Silk Road), Pataliputra (chief city of India's Mauryan and Gupta empires), Athens (birthplace of democracy, and the commercial and naval power of the Greek city-states), Carthage (Phoenician port on the North African coast and an early enemy of Rome), Rome (the Italian home to the most efficiently centralized state in the ancient world), Alexandria (Alexander the Great's capital in Egypt and the Mediterranean world's most cosmopolitan center of learning), Constantinople (eastern headquarters of the Roman empire and the Byzantine empire that followed it, situated on the crossroads between Europe and Asia), and Teotihuacan (near present-day Mexico City).

Most premodern societies were characterized by low social mobility, and some, like India and Persia, maintained strict caste systems that allowed no mobility at all. Elite status was generally hereditary.

Elite status was generally hereditary. Even when merit played a role in gaining jobs within a bureaucracy (as with China's civil-service examinations), literacy, available to very few in any given society, was needed. The wealth of aristocratic classes tended to be based on land ownership (often inherited), while merchants generated wealth through commerce and trade. A strong merchant class generally meant a higher degree of social mobility, as in Athens and Phoenicia, and to a degree in Rome.

Each society had to organize labor and food production. Unfortunately, common solutions included slavery and serfdom, which yielded servants to perform household tasks and skilled functions, as well as a labor force for physically burdensome jobs like growing food.

Free members of the lower classes paid rents to landowners, as well as taxes or tribute to the state, sometimes in the form of money, sometimes in kind (food or other goods). Serfs and free people alike could be mobilized against their will by states or landlords to provide corvée labor, which typically involved large-scale projects like clearing forests and swamps, irrigating fields, or building roads. (Prison labor was used for these purposes as well.)

The mit'a system found in the Andes involved elements of serfdom and corvée labor.

Military service, or conscription, was another form of labor organization, with members of the lower classes drafted to serve as soldiers or sailors (Persia).

Most societies maintained a system of food storage and distribution, whether for emergencies or everyday use. Rome preserved social order by providing grain, most of it from the breadbasket of Egypt, to its common people at little or no cost.

The Romans created lavish entertainments for the same purpose, leading some to speak of bread and circuses as a crude way to keep societies under control.

Without exception, major societies during this era were patriarchal, although the specifics of how women were treated varied from place to place, and also over time.

IMPERIAL AND POLITICAL OVERREACH

States and empires collapsed for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. The end could come suddenly or gradually, and it could be due primarily to internal or external factors. Often, the problem stemmed from overreach: the state assumed too many responsibilities, spent too much money, or conquered too much territory for its rulers, bureaucracies, and armies to handle. Typically, a combination of factors, and not just one cause, brought about the downfall.

(for Jigsaw questions)

1. Unwise or corrupt political leadership
2. Rebellions and social tensions caused by over taxation or injustice on the part of the elite
3. Civil wars
4. Conquest of more territory than one could effectively govern
5. Economic downturns and disruptions of regional trade patterns
6. Neglect of infrastructure, such as roads

7. War with one or more advanced states or the sudden appearance of a powerful enemy
8. Constant, long-term harassment by raiding or migrating nomads (classic examples: Germanic and Asiatic barbarians attacking Rome)
9. External environmental factors, such as climate change, natural disasters, or the appearance of new diseases (such as smallpox, measles, or bubonic plague)
10. Self-inflicted environmental problems, such as overpopulation, overuse of wood (deforestation), overuse of water (desertification), or the silting of rivers and erosion of soil caused by over farming or large construction projects.