Understanding Early Civilizations

A Comparative Study

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5 Kingship

All the early civilizations compared in this study had kings. In modern political terminology this signifies that sovereignty, or supreme authority, was symbolically embodied in an individual person rather than in some collectivity of people such as all adults, all males, all property owners, or all nobles or some abstract concept such as God or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's General Will (Kamenka 1989: 7).

The terms used to designate kings had different meanings and connotations in the different civilizations. The Aztec word that is glossed as 'king' was *tlatoani* (plural *tlatoque*), which in Nahuatl meant 'great/revered speaker'. The Aztec and their Nahuatl-speaking neighbours applied this term to all hereditary heads of states, but they conceptualized political leadership in a dyadic fashion. The tlatoani shared sovereignty with the *cihuacoatl*, a hereditary official appointed from a junior branch of the royal family who could not become king. The cihuacoatl oversaw the courts and palace administration and when necessary acted as regent. Although his title meant 'snake woman', like the tlatoani the holder of this office was always a male. In Aztec thought, the tlatoani and cihuacoatl together symbolized lordship, just as the supreme deity Ometeotl, Lord and Lady of Twoness, was a dual entity that constituted the totality of existence. In practice, however, the Aztec tlatoani was a supreme ruler.

The Yoruba also had a generic title for their hereditary heads of state, *oba*. This title indicated descent from Oduduwa, the god who had created the world, and was traditionally restricted to the hereditary rulers of the significant Yoruba states and neighbouring Benin. Some subordinate local rulers also claimed the title of oba, although they did not enjoy many of the prerogatives of that office. In contrast to the English term 'king', 'oba' did not refer to the hereditary rulers of non-Yoruba states or to the heads of smaller Yoruba polities. Each Yoruba state also had a special title for its oba, such as the Oni of

Ife, the Alafin of Oyo, the Aleketu of Ketu, the Owa of Ilesa, and the Orangun of Ila. Among the Maya, the ruler of a city-state was designated *k'ul ahaw* (holy lord). Various Sumerian terms (*en, ensi, lugal*) designated the heads of Early Dynastic Mesopotamian city-states, but none of these terms was exclusive to a single city.

In Egypt the most important title used to designate the head of state was *nswt*. Only one legitimate nswt could exist in the world at a time, although the title was also applied to the king of the gods (*nswt nṯrw*). The nswt ruled by right not only Egypt but the entire world and was responsible for maintaining both the social order and the cosmic balance. He had to be Egyptian. If, during periods of civil strife or political division, more than one person claimed the title, it was understood that only a single claimant could be the true universal ruler. The kings of other countries were called *wr* ('prince' or 'great one') or *ḥq3* (ruler), terms which were also applied to subordinate officials or chiefs within Egypt.

Egyptian royal titles expressed many levels of cultural meaning. 'Nswt', in addition to signifying 'universal ruler', meant more specifically 'King of Upper (Southern) Egypt'. Rulers were also given the title *bity*, which meant 'King of Lower (Northern) Egypt'. According to the assymetrical dualism that dominated Egyptian thought, the term 'nswt' not only contrasted with 'bity' but also incorporated it. This usage reflected the Egyptian belief that at the dawn of history an Upper Egyptian kingdom had conquered and incorporated a Lower Egyptian one to create the Egyptian state. The king was also called *nswtbity*, 'King of Upper and Lower Egypt', which meant the same as 'nswt' in its inclusive form. After death kings were referred to only as 'nswt', which presumably designated the eternal, unchanging aspect of the monarchy: kingship as an eternal (*ḏt*) office and the dead kings who were identified with the god Osiris. The title 'bity' may have referred to the transitory, accidental, and renewing (*nḥḥ*) aspects of kingship: the king as a living individual. The titles *ḥm* ('Majesty' or 'individual in whom kingship is incarnated') and *nb* (lord) also designated the king as a mortal individual (Allen 2000: 31–32; Ray 1993: 70; Silverman 1995: 64–69).

The Inka ruler also had an exclusive title, *sapa inka* (unique Inka) (Rowe 1944: 258). The Shang ruler was titled *wang*. It is unclear whether the Shang rulers acknowledged the existence of other wang, ruling regions the Shang kings did not control.

Thus the terms for 'head of state' in different early civilizations covered only partially overlapping semantic fields. In general, city-states tended to designate kings generically, while territorial states acknowledged the existence of only one universal ruler. While 'king' may provide a reasonable gloss for these various words, a sound understanding of kingship in early civilizations can only grow out of a detailed comparative study of the concepts of kingship of particular early civilizations.

falta/ausente

In recent years it has been suggested that some early civilizations may have lacked monarchs, but the proposed examples, which include the Teotihuacan state in the Valley of Mexico in the first millennium A.D. (Cowgill 1997) and the Indus Valley civilization (Possehl 1998), are archaeological ones for which there is no contemporary written documentation. The main argument advanced in favour of the absence of kings is the lack of representation of rulers in the iconography of these states. There is, however, a conspicuous lack of royal portraiture in the surviving art of Shang China and the Inka. For the Shang, there is no evidence that kings, who feature prominently in written records, were ever represented in art. We know, however, from historical sources that life-size statues of Inka rulers hammered from sheets of gold were objects of veneration. All these statues were melted down by European invaders in the sixteenth century. Likewise, in the Valley of Mexico, clearly identified royal representations appear to have been infrequent during the Late Aztec period and were associated mainly with larger and more centralized states. Hence a dearth of royal portraiture in some early civilizations does not indicate an absence of kings. Furthermore, each of the Yoruba states, in which much of the political power is known to have been formally shared among the heads of various leading families, had a divine king.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that all early civilizations probably had monarchs, even if kingship was defined somewhat differently and the actual political power exercised by such rulers varied considerably from one to another. While some small, non-state societies may have survived within or on the borders of city-state systems, republican forms of sovereignty within states, whether they took the form of despotisms, oligarchies, or democracies, arose from and replaced monarchies. The universality of kings in our sample suggests that in all early civilizations political power was represented in a personal manner. Hallpike (1986: 282) has observed that monarchs provided a concrete and hence easily understood way to represent supreme authority at the state level.

Early states also had kings. There are examples, in Hawaii and among the Zulu, of the evolution of kingship as the political power of certain chiefs increased (Flannery 1999). In the early civilizations, however, supreme power was less charismatic, more institutionalized, and more routinely transmitted from one generation to the next. As a result, the office of kingship grew ever more important by comparison with the particular incumbent of that office. Sovereignty nevertheless continued to be viewed as an attribute of an individual

person. Even though kinship was no longer the only or even the most important principle structuring society, kings styled themselves fathers to their nations, a metaphorical status that combined concepts of benevolence and authority (Trigger 1985b). Kings were regarded as responsible for the general well-being of their realm, and their duties included maintaining internal order and prosperity, defending their kingdom from foreign enemies, and managing relations with the supernatural.

Kingship provided the ultimate level at which conflicts were resolved and decisions were made about general policy, although this was often done in the king's name rather than through his personal intervention. Maintaining public order required ensuring that farmers remained submissive to the state, produced food surpluses, and paid taxes and rents. It also involved mediating and resolving conflicts among the ruling classes that threatened the unity of the state. Kings were normally supreme military commanders. Although in Oyo and other Yoruba states military leadership was monopolized by a chief official from a leading non-royal lineage, Yoruba kings formally declared war and were held to be supernaturally responsible for the success or failure of military campaigns (R. Smith 1969: 120). It was believed that, if an army were defeated, the king had failed to perform his supernatural role, and regicide or royal suicide sometimes followed (Ajisafe 1924: 21). While the powers of kings varied, kingship constituted a focus that was essential for coordinating and managing matters of general concern.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR KINGSHIP

In all early civilizations male monarchs were preferred, and in at least five (Mesopotamia, China, the Valley of Mexico, Inka, and Yoruba) it appears that only males were allowed to rule. Among the Yoruba, references to female obas are confined to the early and largely mythological period (Denzer 1994: 8). The only female ruler reported in Mesopotamia was Ku-Baba, the reputed first ruler of Kish, who was also a goddess (Lerner 1986: 59). Occasionally female monarchs ruled Egypt, and the late Egyptian historian Manetho said that it had been agreed in very early times that women might rule. Nevertheless, female monarchs generally were installed only during dynastic crises, and their reigns were regarded as contrary to the normal order. They also contradicted Egyptian religious dogma, which viewed kingship as transmitted directly from the god Osiris to his son and reincarnation Horus. The goddess Isis, wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, was solely the means by which divine kingship renewed itself (Troy 1986). It is uncertain whether the female Maya rulers reported at Piedras Negras, Palenque, and Naranjo were

monarchs in their own right or merely regents for juvenile male rulers (Graham 1991: 473).

A king symbolically embodied a polity's identity and reconciled the conflicting interests within it. The normal pattern of political and religious leadership in the Valley of Mexico was based on a principle of dual authority that reflected the primordial order of the universe. Yet the tlatoani, who represented the male cosmic principle, predominated and was the de facto paramount ruler of each city-state (Rounds 1983). In the 1960s some anthropologists theorized, on the basis of the Aztec example, that all early civilizations had two or more kings who shared power and reigned at the same time. Zuidema (1964: 127) suggested that the Inka had a pattern of dual kingship, with the leader of the dominant royal moiety acting as the primary ruler, but it is now clear that at the highest level the Inka specifically rejected the general principle of moiety co-leadership in favour of a single ruler (Gose 1996b). Some kingdoms in the Valley of Mexico and among the Yoruba simultaneously had multiple kings, but these were inevitably small, poorly integrated states made up of a number of groups each of which followed its own leader.

Kingship was hereditary in practice in all seven early civilizations and hereditary in theory in all except perhaps the Sumerian parts of Mesopotamia. This arrangement reflected the generally stable, institutionalized nature of leadership in early civilizations. Kingship tended to pass from father to son or from older to younger brother before descending to the next generation. In some states, such as the Asante kingdom of northern Ghana which developed as recently as the eighteenth century, royal office was inherited matrilineally. Yet, even in this matrilineal society, kings sought to marry in ways that would ensure that their sons or grandsons would succeed them (Wilks 1975). Because most kings had to play an active role in governing early civilizations, the inheritance of the royal office was rarely determined strictly by male primogeniture. Choice was required to maximize the likelihood that each king would be followed by a capable successor. Under these circumstances, various selection procedures were used to determine the succession. There was variation from one early civilization to another in defining both the group from which a successor might be chosen and how and by whom the selection was made.

Among the Classic Maya, kingship appears normally to have passed from a ruler to a son by his principal wife. Recent studies of Maya royal genealogies eliminate the suggestion that in the Early Classic period Maya kingship had rotated among a number of different patrilineages (A. Miller 1986: 41). The prestige of both parents' patrilineages played a role in establishing the hereditary status of an heir, thereby weakening the chances of succession by a king's sons born to women other than his principal wife. It is unclear, however, whether

there was a preference for male primogeniture. The Maya practiced special heir-designation rituals, apparently in an effort to ensure a stable succession. This suggests the possibility that an eldest son's right to kingship might be called into question. It has also been argued that the custom of holding Maya rulers captured in battle as prisoners for long periods before killing them was intended to induce instability in their kingdoms by preventing their sons from formally succeeding them in the interim (Schele and Freidel 1990: 194).

In Mesopotamian city-states, kingship likewise regularly passed from a ruler to his son. Nevertheless, the succession had to be sanctioned by a city's patron deity, whose will was determined by oracles and divination. Urukagina of Lagash, who did not become ruler by inheritance, boasted that his city's god had selected him to be king from among thirty-six thousand male citizens (Postgate 1992: 268). Some early kings are also reported to have been selected or approved by popular acclaim. It was envisaged that a king could be unseated by an uprising of his own subjects, who were carrying out the wishes of their city god. J. N. Postgate (1992: 270) suggests that patrilineal descent was not an exclusive or adequate qualification for kingship and that Sumerian ideology did not admit of a hereditary right of royal succession (see also Mander 1999; Steinkeller 1993).

Both in Egypt and among the Inka, kingship was passed down from father to son, with the heir being designated by the ruling monarch. Ideally the heir was a son of the king's chief wife, but in exceptional circumstances such sons could be passed over in favour of a more capable son by a secondary wife. Even when an heir was designated well in advance, conflict over the succession might break out following a king's death, with different factions of the royal family and the upper classes supporting rival candidates. To further ensure a peaceful succession, Egyptian and Inka kings sometimes installed their preferred heirs as junior rulers during their own lifetimes. Often the junior king took command of the army as a deputy for his elderly father. Aged or weak monarchs in both civilizations were sometimes killed or deposed by ambitious sons seeking to prevent another brother or half-brother from being named as successor. In Egypt it was essential for a new king to perform his predecessor's burial rituals in order to validate his claim to the throne (Shafer 1997b: 283 n. 16, 287–88 n. 52). Among the Inka the previous ruler's choice of an heir was confirmed by a council of high officials, by oracles from the sun god that were delivered through the high priest of that deity, and by the oracle priests who spoke for previous kings (Kendall 1973: 72–73; Patterson 1991; Rostworowski 1999). In both states the transfer of royal office was regarded as an event by which both the cosmic and the political order were first threatened and then ultimately renewed.

The Aztec king was selected, often amidst considerable rivalry, from among the brothers or sons of the dead king by a council made up of the four highest officers of the state (van Zantwijk 1994). These officials were usually members of the royal family, and the new king was one of them. The cihuacoatl, acting as regent, also played a role in the selection. It is reported that in the formative period of the Aztec monarchy the election of a new king had been confirmed by all the men and women of the state (Durán 1964: 40–41), but later the people merely acclaimed the new ruler. As the Aztec state grew more powerful, succession shifted from a father-to-son pattern to one in which the kingship often passed from one brother to another before descending to the next generation. This change is believed to have been intended to increase the number of experienced adult candidates from whom a new ruler might be selected. The new procedure favoured the appointment of a member of the royal family who was already militarily and politically successful. As the Aztec state came to dominate more neighbouring kingdoms, such qualities were increasingly valued in a leader (Rounds 1982).

It has been suggested that in the Shang Dynasty kingship may have rotated between two patrilineal branches and ten matrilineal divisions of the royal clan (K. Chang 1976: 84). (Simpler rotations occurred among branches of royal families elsewhere, including Yoruba ones and that of the early medieval Scots [Whitaker 1976].) Yet there is no conclusive evidence that such a circulation of kingship occurred in Shang China (Vandermeersch 1977: 284–93). At first kingship appears to have passed from older to younger brothers of a single lineage before descending to the eldest son of the eldest brother. Later, kingship passed from father to son, with a strong preference for primogeniture (Chêng 1960: 216–17). This trend – the opposite of what happened among the Aztec – may have reflected a need to balance the strong emphasis on seniority as a source of higher status with a growing need for rulers who were in the prime of life as military leadership became more important. Strictly fraternal succession, with little possibility of passing over any but the most hopelessly incapable candidates, would have encouraged a rapid succession of aged rulers.

The Yoruba king was chosen from among the male descendants of previous rulers by hereditary officials who belonged to the most important non-royal patrilineages, acting in consultation with prominent members of the royal clan. Kingship frequently rotated among two or more lineages or branches of the royal family, so that a king was rarely succeeded by his own son. The state council could order an unsuccessful king to commit suicide or to be slain by his palace staff, but kings in turn had to confirm the appointment of new members to this council (Bascom 1969: 30–33; Pemberton and Afolayan 1996: 76–79). The obas of Benin, who had gone farther than any of the Yoruba kings

in reducing the powers of their state council, also established a direct father-to-eldest-son inheritance of kingship, which accorded with the general Edo rule of inheritance. In contrast to Yoruba kings, the oba of Benin also could not be deposed by his chief councillors (Bradbury 1957: 40–41). Like the ancient Egyptian kings, a new king of Benin had to validate his succession by burying his father and performing elaborate installation rituals. Inability to fulfil these requirements might disqualify an incompetent elder son from becoming king. In Oyo and some other Yoruba states, the king's biological mother was killed or expected to commit suicide at the same time that her son was 'reborn' as king (S. Johnson 1921: 56) and was replaced by a woman who was appointed to be the official queen mother (*iya oba*) (Law 1977: 70–71). In Benin, the king's mother was not killed but installed in a palace at Uselu, just outside Benin city, where she wielded considerable power. She and her son, who was now a divine ruler, were, however, never allowed to meet again (Ben-Amos 1983; Bradbury 1973: 55).

Thus in early civilizations sovereignty was embodied in an individual, and the stability of kingship was both guarded and symbolized by the continuity of royal office within a single family. In more powerful royal families, kingship tended to be inherited either fraternally or generationally within a single lineage, but in some weaker ones it rotated among a number of lineages that claimed descent from a single remote ancestor. While such rotation has been explained as a device for holding together extensive kingdoms in the absence of centralized authority (Whitaker 1976), this cannot account for the practice in Yoruba city-states. Among the Yoruba, rotation perhaps mitigated competition among branches of royal families that might have torn states apart and resulted in the out-migration of defeated candidates for royal power and their supporters. The relatively low population density of the Yoruba facilitated such movement.

Because kings in early civilizations, unlike modern constitutional monarchs, had to be able to govern effectively and often provide personal military leadership, it was highly desirable that they be adult and competent males. For that reason, it was also desirable that a selection be made among a number of rival candidates. Where kings had more power, kingship was inherited according to male primogeniture or the reigning monarch decided which of his sons should succeed him. In other cases, decisions about the succession were made either by representatives of the royal family or by powerful members of the upper class. Even where the heir was specified by primogeniture, the need to perform various rites in order to become king ensured that a new ruler either could govern effectively or was controlled and supported by people who could.

THE SACRED CHARACTER OF KINGSHIP

Although individuals, families, and small communities often had patron deities with whom they communicated either directly or through the spirits of their dead ancestors, ordinary human beings had only limited contact with the supernatural. The king, standing at the apex of society, constituted the most important link between human beings and the supernatural forces on which the welfare of both society and the universe depended. These relations were mediated by rituals that only kings or their deputies were able to perform.

Only the Shang rulers were able to sponsor the scapulimantic divination rituals (divining according to the cracks that appear on burnt bones) that allowed them, through their dead ancestors, to communicate with their high god, Shangdi. These divinations also made possible the correct sacrifices that ensured good crops and the welfare of the realm (K. Chang 1983: 44–45). Maya kings sought, by ritually shedding their own blood or ingesting hallucinogenic substances, to enter into trance states that would permit them to communicate with the spirits of their dead ancestors and with cosmic deities. In Egypt official doctrine maintained that only the king could make offerings to the gods in temples throughout Egypt, to the royal ancestors, or even to dead commoners in their graves. The ritual formula that transferred offerings to the life-force (*k3*) of a dead person described them as 'a gift that the king gives'. Thus, in theory, even the water that a farmer poured onto the grave of a dead relative passed into the spirit world as a gift from the reigning monarch, whose presence caused Egypt to prosper (Gardiner 1950: 170–73). It has been suggested that in Egypt prolonged natural catastrophes at certain periods may have led to the slaying or deposing of kings who were judged incapable of sustaining the cosmic order (B. Bell 1971).

Their being regarded as the embodiment of the strength and vitality of the kingdom led to an emphasis on the health and vigour of individual kings. Egyptian pharaohs, after a thirty-year reign and at frequent intervals thereafter, celebrated a Sed ritual (*ḥb sd*) in the course of which they symbolically died and were reborn. This ritual was believed to renew an aging ruler's physical and mental powers (Gohary 1992). Egyptians believed that a similar renewal took place when an old king died and was replaced by his son. In general, the iconography of kingship in early civilizations emphasized youth, prowess, and martial skills. Egyptian kings were rarely, if ever, portrayed as old or feeble.

Because of their close association with supernatural forces kings were ascribed various divine attributes. The most extreme claims about the divinity of kings were made in large territorial states, where direct contact between the ruler and most of his subjects was very limited. Because royal authority

was necessarily mediated through multiple levels of officials, the ruler was perceived as a remote being who affected people's lives in much the same way as deities or natural forces (thought to be the same), and this made it easier for ordinary people to accept the notion of the divinity of rulers.

The Egyptian state placed special emphasis on the king's being the son or earthly manifestation of the solar-creator god and hence a universal ruler. Like the sun, the king experienced endless cycles of death and rebirth. Kings claimed to be the earthly manifestation of all the major Egyptian gods, each of whom was associated with a particular community in Egypt and identified in that place as the creator deity. By nourishing all these gods as a son nourished the spirits of his dead ancestors, the king played a key role in maintaining the cosmic order (Frankfort 1948; Silverman 1991: 56–71). Living kings, alone of human beings, were referred to as gods (*ntr*) during their lifetimes (Hornung 1997: 301). It was as a direct result of the supernatural power of kings that the enemies of Egypt were defeated and the Nile River flooded each year. Yet kings appear to have been viewed as divine only in the sense that their bodies, like cult images in the temples, were receptacles which various gods could enter. An individual king became endowed with such power as a consequence of enthronement rituals which involved his purification, ritual rebirth, and crowning by the gods (L. Bell 1997: 140; Goebs 1998: 340). As a consequence of these rituals, each successive king represented the rebirth and earthly renewal of the previous monarch (and ultimately of Horus), while dead kings were identified with Osiris, the unchanging ruler of the realms of the dead. It may be as the earthly incarnation of divine power that the reigning king was referred to as *ntr nfr*, which is conventionally translated 'beautiful god' but may have meant 'young' or 'reincarnated' god (Hornung 1982: 138–42; Malek 1997: 227).

Egyptian Kings were believed to be so charged with supernatural power that simply touching them or their regalia without taking ritual precautions could cause serious injury. Yet, while they regulated the cosmos, they were not expected to perform miracles. If a trusted adviser became ill, the king ordered a royal physician to attend him. An elaborate funerary cult was maintained for each dead king in the expectation that, as the unchanging (*dt*) form of supernatural power, dead kings could bestow supernatural blessings on Egypt. Despite many scholarly suggestions to the contrary, it is clear that even in the Old Kingdom all dead human beings became *dt* forms, even if only very minor ones. Thus the difference between dead commoners and dead kings was the extent of their supernatural power rather than a difference in kind (O'Connor and Silverman 1995).

Subjects of the Inka kings were taught that the king was a descendant and earthly manifestation or counterpart of the sun god, Inti, and perhaps

of the older creator god, Wiraqucha, as well. The sun was regarded as the immediate source and repository of power for each Inka ruler. As in Egypt, the cosmic order was thought to be re-created with each successive reign (MacCormack 1991: 117). The transformation in the king's nature that resulted from his installation rituals required him to remarry his chief wife, who now became his queen (*quya* [*coya*]), a practice that led many Spanish chroniclers to believe that an Inka ruler married his chief wife only after becoming king (MacCormack 1991: 125). Two hundred or more boys and girls were sacrificed throughout the kingdom as part of the royal enthronement rituals (Kendall 1973: 197). If the king became ill at any time, four llamas and four children were killed and large amounts of cloth burned to ensure his recovery (Murra 1980: 58).

Both living and dead Inka monarchs were viewed as playing key roles in promoting agricultural fertility and military success, activities that were closely linked in belief and ritual. Dead kings were believed to be reunited with the sun, although their mummified bodies, which maintained their personal identities, continued to be clothed and offered food as if they were alive. Each dead king was a locus of supernatural power and an important source of oracular pronouncements on political matters. Living and dead kings were thus regarded, as was the sun itself, as a source of life and prosperity for their descendants and for the Inka state as a whole (Gose 1996a). As in Egypt, the dead ancestors of ordinary people also looked after the welfare of their descendants; what distinguished dead kings in this regard was the source and extent of the power.

In China, the Shang kings performed sacrifices to Shangdi. Whether the god was the apical ancestor of the Shang royal clan as many experts believe, as the senior living descendant of the royal ancestors – whose spirits alone were able to communicate and intercede with Shangdi – the king was uniquely qualified to manipulate supernatural power in order to promote the well-being of the whole nation (K. Chang 1983). Kings referred to themselves as *yü i ren* (I, the unique [foremost] man), using the status-neutral term applied to males (*ren*) of any rank (Wheatley 1971: 52). Later Chinese kings, including those of the Zhou Dynasty, did not claim divine status, although they bore the title 'Son of Heaven', *tian* (sky) having either replaced Shangdi or become a new name for him (Hsu and Linduff 1988: 320–21). The spirits of dead kings were regarded as extremely powerful and were consulted through divination. Their cults were aligned with that of the ten different suns that were believed to shine on the world on successive days in a ten-day cycle, each being identified with a particular sun. Dead kings were offered human and animal sacrifices just as were the spiritual forces inherent in the natural world.

Among the other civilizations in our sample, which were composed of much smaller states, there was considerable variation in the extent of deification ascribed to rulers. The Yoruba kings shared political authority with the title-holders of powerful non-royal patrilineages. Yet kingship was regarded as a divine office, and kings were believed to possess extraordinary supernatural powers that enabled them to ensure the fertility of their realm and the well-being of its people (Bradbury 1973: 74). Kings were venerated as the vehicles through which divine power was channelled into the human world, animating human beings as well as plants, animals, rivers, and the atmosphere. To protect people from their supernatural powers, kings were ritually secluded in their palaces. While each Yoruba state carefully remembered the names of its successive individual rulers, royal power was viewed as a continuous presence. Each successive ruler was endowed with an unbroken continuity of such power and spoke of what his royal predecessors had done as if their deeds had been his own (K. Barber 1991: 51). An oba's authority was described as 'unchallengeable' and his power 'like that of the gods' (Pemberton and Afolayan 1996: 1). In Benin asserting that the king performed human acts such as eating, sleeping, washing, or dying was an offence punishable by death (Bradbury 1957: 40).

Only Yoruba kings could perform the rituals that were crucial for the well-being of their land and people. The powers of dead kings were transmitted to their successors in rituals that involved the new king's ingesting small portions of his predecessor's body. Nevertheless, individual kings who grew senile or whose behaviour seriously displeased their councils might be slain. Many Yoruba still believe that gods take possession of ordinary humans for brief periods and speak and act through them as ordinary worshippers enter into trance in the course of rituals. Kings, it would seem, were believed, in the course of their installation ceremonies, to become possessed of the power of various deities, which remained with them for the rest of their lives or so long as they remained healthy and ritually pure. These rituals were accompanied by human sacrifices intended to increase the power of the king. While the spirits of all dead Yoruba were venerated by their descendants, who sought to benefit from their supernatural protection and support, the spirits of rulers were the objects of especially elaborate cults. Because their power benefited the living ruler, as did the power of cosmic deities, it helped to sustain the entire realm (Pemberton and Afolayan 1996: 73). The cult of royal ancestors was most elaborate in Benin, where each dead king was provided with a separate ritual compound (*ugha*) with its own altar (Bradbury 1957: 55). Yet here too royal power, although supernatural in origin, tended to be quantitatively rather than qualitatively different from that of other people.

The Maya term for 'ruler' that was commonly used after A.D. 400, *k'ul ahaw*, has been interpreted as signifying a leader with divine power or godlike status. Maya rulers wore the costumes and attributes of various gods and bore names that incorporated references to numerous deities. At Tikal these references often were to Kawil, a god of fertility and dynastic continuity; at Naranjo they were to Chak, the storm and rain god (Houston 2001; Martin and Grube 2000: 17). They may have been thought to receive supernatural powers in the course of installation or heir-designation rituals. There is, however, no evidence that they were believed to be gods. Dead rulers, in contrast, were identified with ancestral heroes and major cosmic deities, apparently while retaining their own personalities, and were worshipped in elaborate mortuary temples that each king had erected for that purpose (Freidel and Schele 1988a; Houston and Stuart 1996).

Finally, the Maya appear to have believed that, while rulers died, kingship was eternal. The succession of Maya rulers resembled the periodic deaths and rebirths of the gods who had presided over the universe in successive cycles since the beginning of time. Every Maya king symbolically re-emerged from the underworld at the time of his accession to direct the social order and passed back into the underworld, as the sun did at the end of each day, at the time of his death. The notion of royal sons' giving rebirth to the fathers who had engendered them has been described as the central mystery of official Maya religion (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 281). Yet, by Late Classic times this cyclical renewal was iconographically less important than chronicling the linear succession of specific rulers in each Maya city-state. This was made possible by the invention of the calendrical long count, which permitted short cycles of time to be viewed as segments of an endless, ongoing series (A. Miller 1986).

The Aztec and the other inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico believed that deities entered and possessed the bodies of their worshippers for varying lengths of time. At the installation of new kings, elaborate rituals were performed in the course of which the king was dressed in the regalia of major cosmic deities. These rituals were intended to ensure that the powers of these deities came to reside in the king and allowed him to ensure good harvests, lead armies to victory, and govern the state wisely (Clendinnen 1991: 78–81; Townsend 1989). The Aztec king was identified as the surrogate of Xiuhtecuhtli, the creator and fire god, who, as a manifestation of Ometeotl, controlled the central axis of the universe. Having this supreme ancestral deity as his patron did not, however, prevent the Aztec king from identifying with other major deities who were Xiuhtecuhtli's progeny (Heyden 1989: 39–41).

In this manner Aztec kings became divine (*teotl*) even if they were not regarded as gods. It was said that their lips and tongues became those of

gods, since the gods spoke through them, and that they were the ears, eyes, and fangs of the gods (Townsend 1992: 205; López Austin 1988, 1: 398–99). Once installed, a monarch was expected to launch a military campaign that would demonstrate his newly acquired powers and produce a large number of prisoners for the sacrifice to the gods that would complete his installation. At their funerals, Aztec kings were again dressed in the costumes of leading cosmic deities, one on top of the other, in order to be identified with these gods prior to cremation (Heyden 1989: 41). The human sacrifices that are reported to have been made at regular intervals to strengthen King Mochtezuma II's *tonali* soul (the source of his vigour and rationality) may have been intended to nourish the special divine powers dwelling within him (Clendinnen 1991: 82). While Aztec kings were treated with great reverence, there is no evidence that they were thought to be different in essence from other members of the hereditary nobility (Read 1994). Instead, they were men in whom supernatural powers manifested themselves to a unique degree. Although the ashes of dead kings were interred in the platform of the chief state temple, there was no state cult of dead kings.

Mesopotamian concepts of kingship likewise were grounded in religion. The Sumerians believed that the gods had invented kingship as the most effective means for governing themselves and had then transmitted it to humans. Joan Oates (1978: 476) argues that the position of king (en or ensi) had evolved from a paramount male temple ritual office most commonly associated with female deities who were the patrons of city-states. In cities where the chief patron deity was male and therefore the en priest was female, kingship passed into the hands of a lugal (literally 'big man'), whose office may have been derived from that of a part-time military leader. Only after the Early Dynastic period did these titles begin to form a hierarchy in which lugal, now construed to mean 'hegemon', took precedence over ensi, meaning 'city ruler' or 'governor' (Hallo 1957).

Early Dynastic Mesopotamian rulers were viewed as human beings occupying much the same position in relation to a city's patron deity as the steward or foreman of an estate owner. The power that a ruler enjoyed as a result of the approval and support of the gods was symbolized by his being invested with the divine emblems of kingship – a crown, the throne of life, the sceptre of justice, and a mace to control the people – that were believed to have been sent to earth with kingship itself (Postgate 1992: 261–63).

It was the duty of Mesopotamian kings to ensure that deities were well fed, clothed, and housed. They risked divine punishment if they failed to carry out a god's wishes. A prudent king might, however, reasonably expect the favour and protection of his city's patron deity in return for his personal good behaviour

and diligent conduct of his city's affairs. Kings received divine revelations and commands in dreams and visions. To avoid unwittingly offending the gods, they constantly sought through divination to ascertain the will of deities. The only inherently supernatural aspect of kingship was that kings, together with female priests or women of the royal household, impersonated major deities during the annual New Year's rituals that were associated with fertility and cosmic renewal. Presumably the power of these deities entered into the king and other participants during this brief period (Postgate 1992: 265–66).

Ironically, Mesopotamia, the civilization whose kings were perceived as most human, was the only one whose legends portrayed proud or impious kings taunting and insulting deities (Pritchard 1955: 84). These tales, however, illustrated that it was impossible for even the most ambitious humans to oppose the gods or acquire their powers. Mesopotamian rulers sometimes sought to escape divine wrath when they learned about it through divination by temporarily appointing a person of humble origin as a substitute king whose death might assuage the anger of gods. Such a substitute was slain after the danger had passed (Frankfort 1948: 262–65).

During the Akkadian dominance over Mesopotamia (2350–2190 B.C.) and again in the Ur III period (2112–2004 B.C.), hegemonic kings attempted to claim divine status. Their names were written after the classificatory sign (taxogram) that indicated a god, they were shown wearing horned headdresses like those of gods, and legal oaths had to be sworn in their names as well as those of deities. Some of these kings also established elaborate mortuary cults. It may have been in this context that some of the more celebrated rulers of the Early Dynastic period, such as Gilgamesh, who was claimed as an ancestor by the Ur III kings, began to be described as gods or demigods. Yet these claims failed to win widespread acceptance, and later, more powerful kings such as those of Assyria shunned such pretensions. Once the human status of kings had been established, it was impossible even for the most successful hegemons or hereditary rulers to transcend it (Engnell 1967; Frankfort 1948: 297–99; Postgate 1992: 266–67).

The rulers of early civilizations invariably claimed divine support, and most of them were believed to be endowed with divine powers. The most far-reaching claims were made in Egypt and among the Inka, both large states in which rulers tended to be remote from their subjects, but even here the human nature of the individual ruler was acknowledged. Strong claims of divinity in rulers were made among the Yoruba, whose heads of state were ritually secluded from their subjects. The weakest claims were found among the Mesopotamians, who in Early Dynastic times had become the most urbanized people in our sample and therefore the best able to observe their rulers at

close range. The failure of Mesopotamian hegemons to achieve divine status suggests that historical as well as functional factors helped to shape the image of kings in these societies.

Kings also claimed to be the descendants of major cosmic deities. According to one version of Egyptian cosmology, at the beginning of time Egypt had been ruled by Atum or Re (the solar-creator deity), and he was followed in succession by his son Shu (air), Shu's son Geb (the earth), and Geb's son Osiris. Each of these deities had in turn withdrawn into a cosmic realm, leaving Osiris's son (or reincarnation) Horus to rule Egypt. All later Egyptian kings were linear descendants of Horus, who, after death, became identified with Osiris, the quintessential dead ruler (Meeks and Favard-Meeks 1996: 16–32). The Inka kings maintained that the sun god was the divine ancestor of their dynasty, his beams having engendered (either at Lake Titicaca or in the caves of Paqariktambo, near Cuzco) four pairs of males and females from one of which the Inka royal family was descended (Urton 1990). The Shang rulers belonged to the senior descent line of the Zi clan, which, according to a legend recorded at a later date, was descended from a mortal woman who had been made pregnant by a black bird that may have been Shangdi and was perhaps also identified with the sun (K. Chang 1976: 167). Yoruba kings each claimed to be descended from one of the sixteen sons of Oduduwa, the god who had lowered himself from the sky on an iron chain to create the world (Bascom 1969: 10–12). In Benin a descendant of Oduduwa replaced a previous dynasty of *ogiso* (sky kings) that had been deposed for misrule (Ben-Amos and Rubin 1983: 21; Egharevba 1960: 1–6). The Aztec rulers and the nobility in the Valley of Mexico traced their descent from an incarnation of the god Quetzalcoatl, who had ruled at the ancient city of Tollan (M. E. Smith 1996: 37–38). Maya rulers likewise traced their lineages back to one or more major deities of their pantheon (Houston and Stuart 1996: 290). The blood of Maya kings and of the descendants of kings was believed to be specially charged with supernatural power. Only Mesopotamian kings did not normally claim descent from the gods.

These claims established a genealogical affinity between kings and cosmic deities. They also implied that kings differed from commoners in origin and nature. Myths of this sort did not, however, clearly distinguish kings from hereditary nobles who were descended from earlier rulers. In the case of the Aztec and Inka nobility or the Yoruba royal clans, these descendants might be quite numerous. A Shang or Zhou king was further distinguished as the highest-ranking member of the senior lineage of the royal clan, which endowed him with indisputable genealogical superiority and ritual power. The Egyptians claimed that individual kings were fathered by the sun god, Re, who had taken possession of the reigning king's body at the time of their procreation. While rulers such as the New Kingdom Pharaoh Ramesses II might boast that their divine conception had set them apart from other humans even when they were still in the womb, the only proof that they had been conceived in a special manner was their eventual succession to the throne (Hornung 1982: 142). Claims like these generally emphasized not kings' uniqueness but their leadership roles, and they appear to have given kings powers that were greater than but not inherently different from those possessed by other humans. It was installation rituals that played the pivotal role in endowing kings with the supernatural powers that set them apart from other people. In the course of these rituals, which generally involved fasting, penance, and being invested with diverse regalia associated with deities, kings were identifed with various gods and acquired their divine powers. Egyptian and Yoruba rulers and perhaps others also became reincarnations of their predecessors. The sacred powers acquired in the course of these rituals were henceforth symbolized by the veneration with which rulers were treated, by the distinctive costumes they wore, and by the special regalia, such as crowns, staffs, and royal thrones or stools, that they alone were permitted to use. Like the kings themselves, these objects were often thought to be charged with supernatural power. While Mesopotamian kings were normally not believed to possess supernatural powers in their own right, even they enjoyed the special protection and support of the tutelary deities of their city-states. Installation rituals transformed kings into intermediaries between the human and the divine.

As individuals, kings remained human and mortal, but as incumbents of a sacred office they were set apart from all other humans as the result of having acquired unique supernatural powers. These powers enhanced their authority but also tended to delimit the scope of what they could do (Postgate 1992: 274). Supreme political power was universally understood and expressed in religious terms. Kings, like the cosmic gods, possessed powers to assist and harm human beings. To their subjects these powers must have resembled the immense forces that were inherent in the natural realm.

Some early civilizations emphasized possession of supernatural powers more than others. Those that most stressed such powers tended to be ones in which states were larger and kings more remote from most of their subjects. Yet the failure of increasingly powerful Mesopotamian kings to achieve recognition for claims to possess divine powers reveals that cultural traditions played a major role in determining to what extent kings were regarded as divine. Nevertheless, in Mesopotamia no less than in other early civilizations, political power was conceptualized in supernatural rather than simply political or economic terms.

RETAINER SACRIFICE

An interesting indication of how kings were viewed in early civilizations is the extent to which retainers and other human victims, willingly or unwillingly, were slain at the funerals of kings and high-ranking members of the nobility. There is evidence of retainer sacrifice in the early phases of both Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. Hundreds of female and male servants, as well as artisans, were slain and buried around the Egyptian royal funerary complexes of the First Dynasty at Abydos and in smaller numbers around the tombs of the highest-ranking officials at Memphis (Edwards 1985: 23). Substantial numbers of retainers were interred in what are generally considered to have been Early Dynastic royal burials at Ur in Mesopotamia, although the female burials may have been those of high-ranking en priestesses rather than queens (Pollock 1999: 211). Some memory of this practice may survive in later Mesopotamian epic poetry, which speaks of servants' accompanying deceased rulers to the underworld (Kramer 1963: 130). Yet these sorts of killings do not appear to have persisted for long in cultures in which human victims were not regularly sacrificed to the gods.

Among the Aztec, Maya, and Yoruba, who regularly made human sacrifices to deities, human victims were slain in the course of high-status funerals. Human sacrifice was regularly part of the burial rituals of Yoruba and Benin kings (S. Johnson 1921: 44, 55). At Benin members of the oba's bodyguard were among those slain. In addition, wives and slaves of rulers committed suicide so that they could continue to serve them after death (Egharevba 1960: 76; Lucas 1948: 256). Human victims were also periodically sacrificed as part of the cult of deceased kings (Bradbury 1957: 39, 55).

The Shang interred up to several hundred humans in royal graves. While it has been suggested that most of these victims were foreign captives, archaeological data indicate that they represented a cross-section of royal retainers – women, officials, guards, and servants – as well as some prisoners of war. The latter were often decapitated or dismembered and had their hands tied behind their backs at the time of death (Keightley 1969: 369–77). Human beings were also sacrificed periodically, along with various domestic animals, and buried around the graves and ancestral temples of deceased members of the royal family. These practices appear never to have been extensive at the Zhou court, even during the Shang period, and died out completely during the succeeding Zhou Dynasty (Chêng 1960: 69–79; Hsu and Linduff 1988: 172).

It is reported that when an Inka king died, his favourite secondary wives, servants, and some officials were strangled, many of them voluntarily. In addition, one thousand boys and girls five to six years old, many of them children

of the non-Inka provincial nobility (Betanzos 1996: 131–33), were assembled and buried in pairs throughout the kingdom. Among the Shang and the Inka, retainer sacrifice was practised on a much smaller scale at the burial of major officials.

Whatever the purposes served by the killing of humans in funerary contexts, it is clear that it was not a unitary phenomenon. Some killings appear to have been, like animal sacrifices, blood offerings intended to strengthen the soul of the dead person with the victim's life-force. This appears to have been the case with the humblest Shang and Inka funerary killings. At least some Yoruba human sacrifices made after the time of burial were charged with carrying messages and requests for supernatural assistance to the deceased (Connah 1987: 145), but these sacrifices also appear to have been intended to nourish and strengthen the spirit of the dead person. Sacrifices of this sort closely resembled those made to cosmic deities. In other cases it seems that household servants and officials were buried with, or near, a dead king or member of the upper class so that their souls might accompany and continue to serve that person. The killing of people, whether to nourish or to serve the dead, was a form of conspicuous consumption and thus a striking symbol of the deceased's high status, but its restriction to societies in which human beings as well as animals were regularly sacrificed to the gods suggests that it was associated with the equation of kings (including dead ones) with supernatural power. It is also significant that a more restrained form of retainer sacrifice was practised by high officials in societies where it was an attribute of royal burial practices, Mesopotamia being the exception. While kings were publicly recognized as being politically and symbolically unique, they were also identified in terms of ritual treatment as members of the upper classes.

VALIDATING POWER

Kings everywhere validated their claims to both temporal and supernatural power through their lavish lifestyles. Regardless of the extent of their power, kings, high officials, and their families lived in splendid palaces, wore magnificent clothes and elaborate jewellery, and were served by a large number of retainers. They also entertained lavishly and bestowed rare and valued presents on their principal supporters. The style and customs of the royal court set a standard that other people emulated to whatever extent they could afford and the law permitted. The wealth of kings provided visible evidence of their high social standing and the power of their kingdoms. At the same time kings were assiduous in their public and private devotions to the supernatural: building temples, making elaborate sacrifices to the gods, and presiding over lavish

rituals that ensured the proper functioning of the universe and the welfare of society.

They also had to guard their personal authority in their relations with others. Their interactions with their subjects were heavily ritualized and governed by special etiquette. Among the Inka, for example, even the highest officials had to wear simple clothes, go barefoot, and carry small sacks on their shoulders when they were granted an audience with the king (Rowe 1944: 259). Among the Aztec and elsewhere, making eye contact with the ruler was forbidden. Kings tended to spend much of their time in the private apartments of their palaces, to which few people other than their servants had access, granting audiences to only a select few of their subjects and appearing in public only in connection with major rituals and communal festivities. Royal seclusion was carried farthest among the Yoruba, whose kings rarely left the inner quarters of their palaces and appeared in public only with their faces hidden by the beaded fringe of their crowns (Bascom 1969: 30–31).

To protect their supernatural powers and maintain their ability to communicate with and influence the supernatural, kings were expected to observe various taboos and penances. Major rituals sometimes required purification, fasting, sexual abstinence, and staying awake for long periods. Maya rulers subjected themselves to painful blood-letting to induce trances that facilitated communication with the supernatural (Schele and Miller 1986). Mesopotamian kings had their faces ritually slapped once a year by the high priest of their city's patron deity to remind them of the need for humility in their relations with the gods (Kuhrt 1987: 33).

Kings also had to be able to manage the political affairs of their kingdoms effectively. Many kings led armies into battle, and their ability to defeat foreign enemies both reflected and reinforced their political power. In centralized states powerful kings could, if necessary, use force to maintain public order and keep both officials and subject peoples under control. Where power was less centralized, kings had to rely more on their persuasive and diplomatic skills (Apter 1992). The political role of kings in preindustrial states was summarized in an observation that Arab writers attributed to the sixth-century-A.D. Persian monarch Khosrow I. He is supposed to have remarked that a kingdom could prosper only if its ruler had the skill to curb the rapacity of his officials so that agriculture and craft production might flourish and support the taxation system on which royal power depended (R. McC. Adams 1965: 71). Even an astute Yoruba king could transcend the severe physical and political limitations of his office to curb mutually destructive competition among rival members of the upper classes and enhance his own authority.

Finally, it is we, not the people who lived in early civilizations, who differentiate between political and sacred power. The Yoruba believed that a king who channelled supernatural energy into the human realm played no less a role in defeating foreign enemies than did the non-royal hereditary official who led the state's armies. The New Year's rituals that played a major role in Mesopotamian state religious observances, by reenacting and thus renewing the creation of the world and the establishment of kingship among the gods, affirmed the parallelism between the earthly realm and that of the celestial deities on which the prosperity of the earth depended (Hooke 1958). In Egypt the same verb (*ḫʿ*) designated the appearance of a king in glory upon his throne and the dawn, and the generational cycle by which a young king succeeded an older one complemented the daily birth, death, and rebirth of the sun and the annual Nile flood. Royal succession was as essential as these natural cycles because it renewed the cosmic power by which the gods and hence the universe, no less than Egypt itself, were maintained (Frankfort 1948: 148–61). In a culture in which kingship was perceived to be 'a power like that of the gods' and essential for maintaining the cosmic order, such parallels embraced both the central ideology and the practical role of kingship.