**ANCIENT POLITICAL THOUGHT**

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**EGYPT**

The first surviving records of political thought are from Egypt under the Old Kingdom (2686-2125 BCE.). The gods were considered to be both the creators of people and the founders of states.

In Egypt the king was more closely identified with the gods than in any other culture. He was the incarnation of *Horus* and *Osiris*, the son of the supreme god *Ra* itself. He was the supreme representative of the religious as well as the political order. The king was revered as the ‘greatest god’, the ‘perfect god’.

Egyptian political thought was based on this relationship between religion and the state. It was the most extreme theory of absolute monarchy. While others could be brought to justice, there was no indication that the pharaoh could be judged even after death, presumably on the hypothesis that a deity could commit no wrong. The priests, who conducted the religious cult in the temples, represented the pharaoh, and they were appointed by him. The temples’ enormous wealth was part of the royal domain.

The pharaoh’s title ‘nesu-bit’ meant both the individual ruler and ‘the unchanging divine king’. Through his relationship with the gods, he managed nature for the welfare of his people. Amenemhat I (1985-1952 BCE) claimed that: “I was one who produced barley and loved the corn-god. The Nile respected me at every defile. None hungered in my years, nor thirsted in them.”

The pharaoh’s correct moral and ritual conduct kept the cosmos running, the sun rising, the Nile flooding. He promoted good relations between the gods and the people of Egypt. The king (*Pharaoh*) was a shepherd: Just as a landowner entrusts his sheep to a shepherd, the god transmitted his authority and responsibility to the king. The king was the theoretical owner of all resources in the country.

The pharaoh had the right to rule the whole earth. He was commanded by the god to conquer all lands. “What are these Asiatics to you, O Amon, the wretches ignorant of god?” Foreigners were regarded as neither “men” nor “people”. The oldest religious monarchy was globalist and racist.

The central values stipulated for both rulers and people in general, for both private and political conduct, were justice (*maat*) and benevolence. Justice revealed the king’s closeness to divinity. There were no castes, fixed classes, or other fundamental differences among the pharaoh’s subjects. Appointments should be made on the basis of merit, not status.

**MESOPOTAMIA, ASSYRIA, BABYLON**

Mesopotamian civilization was based on city-states. Here people from different areas and ethnic groups intermingled. In contrast to Egypt, there were several important centers; different cities achieved hegemony at different times. The central region was periodically invaded by peoples from the periphery. Merchants and craftsmen managed their own affairs and played a significant role in jurisdiction and in civic life. Temples were centers of administration, and for storing, distributing, and exchanging goods. Cities were identified with particular gods, the god being the true owner and king of the city. *Enlil* presided over Nippur, *Marduk* over Babylon, *Ashur* over Assyria.

These city-states were ruled by kings, sometimes alongside a civic assembly of elders, merchants, and others. There was less stability, and also less ideological continuity, than in Egypt. The social order was assumed to be continuous with, and part of, nature. The gods ordered and controlled both. People believed that the social order, with its elites, hierarchy, and kingship, was part of the natural order, just like the sun and the stars.

Kingship stood at a certain distance from the life of ordinary people, from civil society. The king stood outside society and delivered justice to it. When someone rose to be king, it was because he had the favor of the gods. Each city-state was regarded as the estate of a particular deity. The human king was the god’s estate manager (*ensi*), employed by the god to look after the land and its people, for the god’s and the people’s well-being. In the Mesopotamian model, unlike the Egyptian, supreme authority circulated from one city to another. But the model was universalist: There could only be one state in the world. The Akkadian king Sargon was the “king of totality.” The Babylonian king Hammurabi called himself “the sun-god of Babylon who causes light to rise over the land of the Sumerians and the Accadians.”

The Mesopotamian kings were put there (1) to maintain the established order of the god’s estate, including both the temple with its economic infrastructure, and justice among humans; (2) to carry out specific divine commands, notably temple-building, war, and peace. Temples were incorporated into the palace hierarchy; (3) to build and maintain irrigation canals, promote economic activities, and make people prosperous; (4) to ensure justice.

**THE GREEKS**

Ancient Greece consisted of more than a thousand separate political communities stretching from Spain to Georgia, especially on the sea coasts. In contrast to Mesopotamia, sovereignty remained with the separate city-states (called *poleis*, plural of *polis*).

The polis was based on a band of warriors, an all-male fraternity on which everyone’s survival and freedom depended.There was no sacred monarchy, no specific agent of religious authority. The sate was a forum rather than an authority.

**Solon**

In 594 BCE the Athenians elected Solon (‘the Wise’), an itinerant merchant, to sort out the class war between rich and poor. He was both a philosopher-poet and a master of the art of politics. He repaired the political structure by carefully thought-out innovations, based on factual analysis of the existing situation. His solution was to establish a balance of power between the wealthy and the populace.

He developed the rule of law and *demokratia.* His central idea was *eunomia* (good order) and a sound legal system. What differentiated the Greek states and constitutions from other types of states and regimes was said to be “rule by laws, not by men”.

Of course the Athenian democracy was limited in scope. It excluded women and slaves. There were up to 40,000 citizens out of a total population of around 250,000. Actual attendance was at most about 6,000.

**Plato**

The Republic is an inquiry into the nature of justice. It begins with the definition of justice: “To pay everyone what is owed to him.”

Plato observes that no one is self-sufficient. People have to specialize in particular professions (division of labor). Three classes or groups of people are: (1) Philosophers; (2) Warriors; (3) Producers (farmers, traders, merchants, etc.) To these classes correspond three parts of the soul: (1) The rational or wisdom-loving; (2) The ambitious and courageous; (3) The appetitive and pleasure-loving. Division of labor was based on differences in innate physical and mental abilities.

Four conventional virtues are: Wisdom (or knowledge), Courage, Self-Control, and Justice. But justice is not just one of several virtues; it is the master virtue, enabling all others to exist, by ensuring the correct distribution of functions.

Plato defines the good regimes as (1) Monarchy; (2) Aristocracy; and (3) Moderate Democracy. The bad ones as (1) Tyranny; (2) Oligarchy; and (3) Extreme Democracy.

**Aristotle**

Aristotle did more than anyone to integrate political philosophy with science. He came from Macedonia, where his father was court physician to King Philip. Philip conquered the city-states of mainland Greece in 338 BCE. In mid-career, Aristotle spent two years tutoring Philip’s son, Alexander, who went on to conquer the east as far as India (334-324). These two monarchs terminated the independence of Greek city-states.

Aristotle thus moved between the worlds of kingdom and polis. He applied the methods of analysis and observation, which he had developed for the natural sciences, to the study of human behavior and politics. In a sense, he combined natural science, social science, and philosophy. He organized a research team which sifted the constitutions of 158 *poleis* (city-states). He observed the polis as an outsider.

Aristotle classified states (or regimes) with respect to their beneficence for the people at large.

**(1) Monarcy:** One person ruling in the interest of all.

**(2) Aristocracy:** Several persons ruling in the interest of all.

**(3) Polity:** Rule of many in the interests of all (constitutional democracy).

The degenerated or corrupt forms of these regimes are:

**(1) Tyranny:** One person ruling in the interest himself. **(2) Oligarchy:** Several people ruling in the interest themselves. **(3) Democracy:** Rule of many in the interests of themselves.