THE CREATION OF INEQUALITY: HOW OUR PREHISTORIC ANCESTORS SET THE STAGE FOR MONARCHY, SLAVERY, AND EMPIRE

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[...]

# Part I - Starting Out Equal [Clanless societies]

## 1. Genesis and Exodus

We were all born equal, and our birthplace was Africa. Whoever we are, wherever we live, whatever language we speak, whatever our customs and beliefs, whatever the color of our skin, at some point in the last two million years our ancestors lived in Africa.

It took several emigrations to get us to the four corners of the earth. One exodus, beginning 1.8 million years ago, brought some of our distant ancestors out of Africa but no farther than the warmer parts of continental Eurasia. Joined by African game like the rhino, the hippo, and the elephant, they made it to the northern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean. From there, some of them reached the Caucasus, while others continued on to India and China. From the Mediterranean, they spread west and north into Europe, reaching the British Isles between one million and 700,000 years ago.

Our distant ancestors did not rush into colder latitudes and had no watercraft capable of reaching places like Australia and New Guinea. But 400,000 years ago they already had wooden spears and throwing sticks for hunting and stone tools for digging, cutting, chopping, and scraping. Innovation does not seem to have been their strong suit. The change in their tools was unimaginably slow, and there is little evidence that they wore clothing or ornaments, imagined a spirit world, or engaged in art or music. More often than not, the raw materials from which they made their tools came from within 30 to 35 miles of their camping places. This would have been about a two-day trip for twentieth-century foragers.

Some 200,000 years ago, the people just described were in decline. The newcomers who replaced them were more “modern-looking” than their predecessors, though far from anatomically uniform. Biological anthropologists see them as consisting of at least two distinct groups of people: those they call Neanderthals and those they call, by that wonderful oxymoron, “archaic modern humans.” [...]

Beginning at least 100,000 years ago, this competition among early humans [Neanderthals and ‘archaic modern humans’] took place during a period of global cooling called the Ice Age. Authorities on climate point to evidence that the world’s temperature was falling dramatically 75,000 years ago. [..] Finally, 10,000 years before the present, world temperatures had rebounded, and the Ice Age was essentially over.

To many anthropologists the Ice Age seems like the kind of stressful environment in which a more resourceful type of human—clever, more resilient, and more able to adapt to difficult conditions—might come to the fore. Others believe that such a scenario relies too heavily on the environment. They prefer to believe that our archaic modern ancestors succeeded by using social skills to create larger networks of kinship, alliance, and mutual aid. [...]

### THE DISPERSAL OF ARCHAIC MODERN GROUPS

Even before the disappearance of the Neanderthals, our more modern-looking ancestors had been on the move. Now their exodus would carry them to every part of the Old World, and their descendants would eventually colonize the New World and the islands of the Pacific. It is to this emigration of our more recent Ice Age ancestors that we now turn. [...]

During the second half of the Ice Age, our modern-looking ancestors spread all over the world. This second major exodus was aided by the fact that much of the earth’s water was by then locked up in ice. Having so much water frozen into glaciers significantly lowered sea levels, temporarily turning large areas of shallow ocean floor into bridges between formerly separate landmasses. Now our ancestors could colonize places that their predecessors could not have reached.

With remarkable speed, some of them hiked east through the warmer parts of the Old World, including India and Southeast Asia. Once in the Far East, they took advantage of the fact that lowered sea levels had created the Sunda Shelf, an area of exposed former ocean floor that linked Cambodia and Vietnam to Sumatra, Borneo, the Philippines, Java, and the Celebes. All these regions could now be colonized. [...]

### THE BRIDGE TO A NEW WORLD

[...] The land surface of northern Asia, like that of Southeast Asia, became more extensive during the lowered sea levels of the Ice Age. [...] [L]owered sea levels created another land bridge across the Bering Strait, linking Siberia to Alaska. [...] At least 20,000 years ago Siberian hunters followed the game across the Bering land bridge into Alaska and found a whole new continent waiting for them.

Archaeologists now believe that the peopling of the New World involved several waves of immigrants. Some moved south through ice-free corridors into what is now Canada and the United States. Others may have moved even more rapidly down the Pacific coast with watercraft, reaching Patagonia before the Ice Age had ended. [...]

Fifteen thousand years ago the New World was populated from Alaska to Patagonia, though nowhere densely. And when the glaciers melted back at the end of the Ice Age, sea levels rose and the Bering land bridge disappeared. [...] Over more than 15 millennia, the Americas became a wonderful laboratory for social change, witnessing multiple independent cases of the emergence of inequality.

### LIFE ON THE ICE AGE TUNDRA

[...] Some 28,000 to 24,000 years ago the plains of central and eastern Europe had been converted to a tundra, or cold steppe, by falling world temperatures. The good news was that [...] the premier game animal of central Europe was the woolly mammoth, a creature providing up to eight tons of meat. The bad news was that one had to hunt such mammoths on foot, armed only with a wooden spear. Into this tundra strode the Gravettians, cold-adapted people whose tool kits resembled those of the recent Inuit, or Eskimo. [...]

At warmer latitudes our ancestors lived in ephemeral windbreaks of branches and grass, but the tundra was far too cold for that. At places like Gagarino in Ukraine, the Gravettians dug into the earth to create warmer semi-subterranean houses. Based on the number of hearths, archaeologists think that some Gravettian camps may have been occupied by 50 or more people for most of a season. Families came together to hunt mammoths and reindeer, then dispersed for a time, maintaining social networks through visiting, cooperating in ritual, and exchanging raw materials over hundreds of miles. [...]

The plains of Europe were at their most bitterly cold between 24,000 and 21,000 years ago, and the Gravettians did not hang around to see how much worse it would get. [...] Some 18,000 to 14,000 years ago the bitterest cold of the Ice Age had ameliorated, and people were drifting back to some of the areas abandoned by the Gravettians. The landscape was changing from tundra to an environment called taiga, essentially a brushy steppe with evergreens, willows, and birches.

[...] Some 15,000 years ago, during the last stages of the Ice Age, that part of Europe was a cold steppe with dwarf birches and willows. Archaeologists call the people of this land and era the Magdalenians, after a site in France. [...]

The Magdalenians had the cutting-edge hunting technology of 15,000 years ago: bow and arrow, spear-thrower, and harpoon. Reindeer provided them with meat, fat for lamp fuel, skins for clothing and tents, sinews for thongs, and antler and bone for tools. [...] [T]he archaeological evidence reveals a full-blown complement of art, music, and ornaments. The Magdalenians played flutes carved from animal bone, made figurines depicting humans and animals, and decorated themselves with beads and pendants of bone, ivory, and animal teeth. Their most celebrated forays into the humanities, however, can be found on the cave walls of Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain. There these late Ice Age people painted realistic scenes of deer, bison, mammoth, humans carrying bows, and humans and animals penetrated with arrows. Even the most cautious archaeologists concede that the Magdalenians must be considered fully equivalent to the hunting-and-gathering groups of the recent past. And that opens the door to a huge archive of detailed information on living foragers, collected by anthropologists over the last century.

Our search for the origins of inequality can, therefore, take 15,000 B.C. as its starting point.

### WHY DOES EVIDENCE FOR A “MODERN MIND” NOT APPEAR EARLIER?

Most observers agree that the behavior of the Magdalenians reflects a mind as fully “modern” as the one possessed by the archaeologists who dig them up. An increasing number of scholars, however, pose the following question: If anatomically modern humans have been around for at least 100,000 years, making ornaments for 80,000 years, and carving figurines for 25,000 years, why was it not until 15,000 years ago that we finally see overwhelming evidence for a “modern” mind?

There is no widely accepted answer to this question, but a few suggestions have been offered. One popular view holds that growing population density was the reason. Proponents of this view argue that the ability to generate art, music, and symbolic behavior was probably there throughout the Ice Age but remained latent as long as people were expanding into unoccupied wilderness. Once the world had become more extensively occupied by groups of hunters and gatherers, or so the argument goes, there would have been increasing pressure to use symbolism in the creation of ethnic identities and cultural boundaries. After all, one of the activities that regulate interaction among neighboring ethnic groups is ritual, and ritual often involves art, music, and dance.

We concede that population growth took place throughout the Ice Age. We suspect, however, that there was another process taking place, one that explains why the archaeological evidence for symbolic behavior appears discontinuous—strong in some localities and weak in others. It has to do with an important difference between two types of hunting-gathering groups, recently emphasized by anthropologist Raymond Kelly. The difference hinges on whether a group of foragers has, or does not have, permanent social groups larger than the extended family.

In Kelly’s words many foragers—including the Netsilik and Caribou Eskimo of the Canadian Arctic, the Hadza of Tanzania, and the Basarwa of Botswana/Namibia—once manifested “only those social groups that are cultural universals, present in every society, and nothing more.” These societies had both nuclear families and extended families, but the extended families rarely persisted beyond the death of the parental pair. Most significantly, families were not grouped into larger units of the type anthropologists refer to as clans or ancestor-based descent groups.

Other foraging societies, however, did feature larger units, each of which contained many families. The Aborigines of Australia had many levels of units beyond the family. Foragers with lineages, subclans, and clans often do have higher population densities than clanless foragers and have moved beyond the informal ways in which extended families can be organized. Essentially they created large groups of people who claimed to be related, whether this was true or not. […]

The division of a society into such units can take many forms. Sometimes each unit reckons descent through one gender only, either the father’s line or the mother’s. Early anthropologists, needing a term for such multigenerational units, borrowed the word “clan” from the ancient Scottish Highlanders. In other cases, one social unit may reckon descent from a real or mythical ancestor, without weighing one gender more heavily than the other. Both clans and ancestor-based descent groups can be made up of smaller units called lineages.

Why would the creation of multigenerational lineages and clans during the late Ice Age have escalated the use of art, music, dance, and bodily ornamentation? The answer is, although one is born into a family, one must be *initiated* into a clan. That initiation requires rituals during which clan secrets are revealed to initiates, and they undergo an ordeal of some kind. To be sure, even clanless societies have rituals, but societies with clans have multiple levels of ritual, requiring even more elaborate symbolism, art, music, dance, and the exchange of gifts. […]

We suggest, therefore, that even without the pressures of growing Ice Age populations, the creation of larger social units would have escalated symbolic behavior—in effect, launching the humanities. This scenario could explain why the archaeological evidence for symbolic behavior appears at different moments in different regions. Simply put, not all Ice Age societies made the transition to units larger than the extended family. [...]

The advantages of clan-based society may even tell us something about the disappearance of the Neanderthals. Neanderthals displayed low population densities and show no archaeological evidence for social units larger than the extended family. In face-to-face competition for territory, they probably stood little chance against archaic modern humans organized into clans. We find this likely because by the twentieth century, most hunting-gathering societies without clans had been relegated to the world’s most inhospitable environments. They were pushed there by groups with more complex social organization.

The popular press likes to suggest that Neanderthals simply were not smart enough to compete with our more modern-looking ancestors, but that view sounds racist to us. The Neanderthals may simply have gone the way of most foragers who had no social units larger than the extended family.

Before we begin congratulating our Ice Age ancestors for creating clans, however, bear in mind the fact that they had taken a step with unintended consequences. Clans have an “us versus them” mentality that changes the logic of human society. Societies with clans are much more likely to engage in group violence than clanless societies. This fact has implications for the origins of war. Societies with clans also tend to have greater levels of social inequality. Later in this book we will meet societies in which clans are ranked in descending order of prestige and compete vigorously with each other. The germ of such inequality may have been present already in the late Ice Age.

## 2. Rousseau’s “State of Nature”

Rousseau felt that to understand the origins of inequality, one had to go back to a long-ago time when nature provided all human needs, and the only differences among individuals lay in their strength, agility, and intelligence. People had both “anarchic freedom” (no government or law) and “personal freedom” (no sovereign master or immediate superior). Individuals of that time, which Rousseau called the “State of Nature,” displayed self-respect but eschewed self-love.

Most anthropologists do not like the phrase “State of Nature.” They do not believe in a time when archaic modern humans had so little culture that their behavior was directed largely by nature. While conceding that the capacity for culture is the result of natural selection, anthropologists argue that humans themselves determine the content of their culture. Many anthropologists, therefore, bristle when evolutionary psychologists presume to tell them which parts of human social behavior are “hardwired into the cerebral cortex.”

Suppose, however, that we pose a less controversial question to anthropologists: What form of human society, because of its highly egalitarian nature, best serves as a starting point for the study of inequality? In that case, many anthropologists would answer, “those hunting-and-gathering societies that possess no groupings larger than the extended family.”

In this chapter we examine four such societies: the traditional Caribou and Netsilik Eskimo, who lived in a setting as cold as Ice Age Europe, and the traditional Basarwa and Hadza, who lived in a world of African game like many of our earliest ancestors. We do not look at the twenty-first-century descendants of those ethnic groups; we look, instead, at the way they lived when anthropologists first contacted them. The less altered by contact with Western civilization any foraging group was when first described, the more useful that group’s description is to our reconstruction of ancient life. [...]

### THE CARIBOU ESKIMO AND THE EGALITARIAN ETHIC

When anthropologist Kaj Birket-Smith visited the Caribou Eskimo during the period 1921–1924, some 437 of them occupied 60,000 square miles to the west of Hudson Bay. Their land was an Arctic heath of lichens and low bushes, and their staple foods consisted of caribou, seal, walrus, Arctic hare, ptarmigan, salmon, trout and pike—not unlike the diet of the Ice Age Magdalenians.

Men built igloos in winter, hunted, fished, and drove sled dogs; women built tents in summer, tended fires, and tailored clothing from skins. As with so many foragers, no one amassed a surplus. No one claimed exclusive rights to the land. Traps and weirs were communal property. During famines, all food was shared with neighbors. After a successful hunt, the actual slayer of each caribou was identified by the markings on his arrow. The meat was then divided by rule, with the slayer receiving the frontal portion and his hunting companions the rest.

So crucial was food sharing that the Eskimo used ridicule to prevent hoarding and greed. Anyone who has seen Eskimos singing satirical songs about greedy individuals or dancing in masks to ridicule stingy neighbors realizes the crucial role that humor plays in human society. [...]

Life in the Arctic was stressful, but the behaviors just described are not unusual for a clanless society. It was a truly egalitarian society in which the slightest attempt to hoard or put oneself above others was discouraged. A skilled hunter and good provider might be universally respected, but even he was expected to be generous and unassuming. [...]

### THE NETSILIK ESKIMO AND THE CREATION OF LARGER NETWORKS

[...] Like many other Eskimo groups of central and eastern Canada, the Netsilik lived in a society without clans. Female infanticide was frequent but could be forestalled when women were in short supply. At such times the parents of infant girls might be asked to betroth them early. This is a good example of a contradiction in social logic, which can be expressed in the following principles:

  1. Male infants are valued because they will become hunters.

  2. Female infants are expendable because the Arctic has few plants for women to gather.

  3. Hunters need wives to process their caribou and seals.

  4. At the moment, there are not enough girls to provide wives for all the young men in the region.

  5. Premise 4 trumps premise 2, so female infants are no longer expendable and might even be worth bride service.

### SEAL-SHARING PARTNERSHIPS

We come now to a very important Netsilik social strategy called *niqaiturasuaktut.* That awesome word is the name of a Netsilik meat-sharing partnership [...]. Early in the life of a Netsilik boy, his mother chose for him a group of male partners, ideally 12. Close relatives and members of the group who camped with the boy’s family were not eligible; his mother’s goal was to choose individuals who, under ordinary circumstances, would have no close relationship with her son.

Eventually the time came when the boy in question had become a hunter. Waiting silently by a breathing hole in the ice, he saw his chance and harpooned a seal. Ritual demanded that the animal be placed on a layer of fresh snow before being carefully skinned. [...] Next, the harpooner’s wife cut the seal open lengthwise and divided the meat and blubber into 14 predetermined parts. Twelve of these parts would go to the partners chosen for him. The last two parts, the least desirable, would go to the harpooner himself. The first partner—addressed by the term *okpatiga,* “my hindquarters”—would receive the *okpat* or hindquarters of the seal. The second partner—addressed by the term *taunungaituga,* “my high part”—would receive the *taunungaitok* or forequarters. Subsequent partners received the lower belly, the side, the neck, the head, the intestines, and so on. […]

Let us now consider the implications of seal-sharing partnerships. The Netsilik did not have clans or, for that matter, any social grouping larger than the extended family. Clearly, however, they felt the need for a widespread network of allies on whom they could rely to share resources when they were scarce. They created such a network using only their language and the magical power of the name, choosing respected acquaintances to be their sons’ “hindquarters,” “kidneys,” and so forth. And once that network was operating, they allowed parts of it to become hereditary.

Twelve meat-sharing partners is admittedly a small group compared to a clan. But when we consider how many partnerships there were, and the likelihood that a set of brothers might belong to several, we can picture a mutual aid network covering thousands of square miles. [...]

## 3. Ancestors and Enemies

Among clanless foragers like the Basarwa and Hadza, homicide was an individual matter. The assassin might be killed by his own relatives or a member of the victim’s family. […] An important change in social logic, however, took place with the formation of clans: a kind of “us versus them” worldview seems to have been created. If someone from Clan A murdered someone from Clan B, it was considered a crime against the victim’s entire clan. This required a group response. As the result of a principle Raymond Kelly calls “social substitutability,” Clan B could avenge its member’s death by killing anyone from Clan A, even women or children who were innocent of the original murder. Sometimes, in fact, merely doing something that Clan B interpreted as an insult—trespassing on their territory, for example—could get members of Clan A killed. [...]

## 4. Why Our Ancestors Had Religion and the Arts

Each hunting-and-gathering society discussed so far had its own distinctive character. All, however, featured a set of common principles, a few of which we list here.

  1. Generosity is admirable; selfishness is reprehensible.

  2. The social relationship created by a gift is more valuable than the gift itself.

  3. All gifts should be reciprocated; however, a reasonable delay before reciprocating is acceptable.

  4. Names are magic and should not be casually assigned.

  5. Since all humans are reincarnated, ancestors’ names should be treated with particular respect.

  6. Homicide is unacceptable. A killer’s relatives should either execute him or pay reparations to the victim’s family.

  7. Do not commit incest; get your spouse from outside your immediate kin.

  8. In return for a bride, the groom should provide her family with services or gifts.

  9. Marriage is a flexible economic partnership; it allows for multiple spouses and variations.

In addition to these principles, which imply no inequality among members of society, we also encountered some premises that allowed for a degree of inequality. They were as follows:

10. Men have the capacity to be more virtuous or ritually pure than women.

11. Youths should defer to seniors.

12. Late arrivals should defer to those who were here first.

In those societies that featured lineages, clans, or ancestor-based descent groups, the following new premises appeared:

13. When lineages grow and divide, the junior lineage should defer to the senior lineage, since the latter was here first.

14. You are born into your family, but you must be initiated into your clan.

15. The bad news is that initiation will be an ordeal. The good news is that you will learn ritual secrets, become more fully a member of your ethnic group, and perhaps gain virtue.

16. Any offense against a member of your lineage or clan, such as murder or serious insult, is an offense against that entire social unit. It requires a group response against some member (or members) of the offending group.

17. Any armed conflict should be followed by rituals of peacemaking.

Many of the aforementioned principles are considered “cultural universals,” shared by virtually all societies. It should come as no surprise that another widespread social attitude is ethnocentricity. Each society believes that its behavior is appropriate, while its neighbors do things improperly. Foragers, however, tend to be philosophical about these differences. Convinced that each human group has a different origin and different ancestors, foragers adjust to their neighbors rather than try to change them. Ethnocentricity thus need not lead to intolerance, although in larger-scale societies it sometimes does.

Another widespread principle is that in life there are no accidents; everything happens for a reason. If you fall ill, it is because you have offended a spirit. If you die, it is because someone has worked witchcraft on you. Failed hunts are the outcome of hunting magic done wrong. Failed harvests are the result of rituals incorrectly performed.

The latter premise, of course, did not disappear with the Ice Age. We know that the Power Ball Lottery depends on randomly generated numbers. Yet we often hear the winner, interviewed beside his newly purchased RV, attribute his victory to supernatural intervention. Then he adds, “I believe that everything happens for a reason.”

### COSMOLOGY AND SOCIAL LOGIC

Cosmology is a universal institution. All societies have a story that explains how the universe and its beings came into existence. Since no humans were present at the origin of the cosmos, the story is of necessity a myth. Anthropologists define *myth* as a folktale believed to be true and regarded as sacred. Myth differs from *legend,* which is also believed to be true but not regarded as sacred.

Most foragers’ creation myths begin with a chaotic Earth that is without form or void. Often there is no light until a spirit or creature requests it. The first humans were created from earth or clay, from plants or animals, or from half-formed beasts. The original humans often had superpowers, magic, or the ability to speak directly with animals. They lost these abilities, often as a form of punishment, when they took on their final form.

Creation myths, however, are more than just folktales. Myths serve as charters for social groups. They include instructions from supernatural spirits on how to earn a living and behave toward each other. In the case of the foragers discussed so far, their cosmology generated many principles of their social logic.

That same cosmology supplies yet another universal premise: many beings, objects, and places are sacred. […]

For hunters and gatherers, as we have seen, the transition from natural to supernatural was seamless. The Netsilik were raised not only to harpoon seals but also to give the dead seal a drink and return its bladder to the sea. Once reincarnated, the seal would remember the hunter’s kindness and allow itself to be harpooned again. That seemed entirely logical.

Anthropologist Roy Rappaport, who experienced firsthand the power of the sacred in New Guinea society, has provided us with a framework for the study of religion. Rappaport argues that all religion consists of three components. First are the *ultimate sacred propositions,* beliefs considered irrefutable despite the fact that there is no empirical evidence to support them. These propositions direct the second component, *ritual,* which must be performed repeatedly and correctly in order to achieve its goals. If done correctly, ritual induces the third component, an *awe-inspiring experience.* Because this experience deeply stirs the emotions of the participants, it verifies the sacred propositions in a way that cold, hard logic could not.

For archaeologists, ritual is the key component of this self-validating system. Because ritual requires paraphernalia, costumes, pigments, and musical instruments, and because it must be performed over and over again, it leaves archaeological traces. We have seen them already in our discussion of the Ice Age.

In recent years we have heard several prominent Western scientists argue that religion could be dispensed with. Rappaport, however, points out that any institution as universal as religion must have contributed to the survival of human groups, otherwise it would long since have disappeared or been replaced by something else. Without acknowledgment of the sacred, there would be nothing to give the ultimate propositions the *gravitas* they need to generate the first principles of social logic.

What appears to bother Western scientists the most is that religion so often seems at loggerheads with science and social progress. This situation conflicts with the widespread assumption that humans are rational thinkers.

Part of the problem, we suspect, is that many scientists are wrong about why humans have language and intelligence in the first place. Because those human attributes originated in the context of foraging, they assume that the purpose of language and intelligence was to make us better at hunting and gathering. After all, our ancestors learned to classify hundreds of plants and animals, shout instructions to each other during hunts, and create technologies to convert superficially unappetizing plants into meals.

The trouble with this assumption is that our earliest ancestors shared the African savanna with animals that could hunt game and convert plants into meals more efficiently than humans ever could. So let us suggest an alternative scenario: human language and intelligence evolved not to make us better at foraging but to make us better at social networking.

If our ancestors had been as pragmatic as some scientists believe, there would have been no need for a concept of the sacred. But in addition to being verbal and intelligent, our ancestors were arguably the most emotional, moralistic, superstitious, and (sometimes) irrational creatures on earth.

To be sure, our ancestors had an incredible knowledge of plants and animals, but their most important intelligence was social intelligence. Their classifications often include not only every living human they come into contact with but every ancestor, including some who were supernatural. The result is that foragers can create larger societies, larger networks of sharing and cooperating individuals, than those of any of their primate relatives. [...]

# Parte II - Balancing Prestige and Equality [Clan societies without rank]

## 7. The Ritual Buildings of Achievement-Based Societies

Foragers often create ritual space by arranging their shelters in an oval. The enclosed area can then be used for feasting or dancing, sometimes around a communal hearth.

Farming villages, for their part, often formalize ritual space by creating a building to house it. In aboriginal North America that building could be a sweat house, a kiva, or a ceremonial lodge. We will see examples of those buildings in the chapters that follow. In other regions the ritual building might be a men’s house. [...] In this chapter we look at three different types of men’s houses used by Old World societies. Each of these buildings reflects a slightly different route to achieved inequality. Each type of men’s house is also potentially identifiable in the archaeological record. Its presence can therefore provide a date for some of the world’s first achievement-based societies. [...]

Let us close with the limitations of leadership in this chapter’s three societies. Their leaders had prestige but no actual political power. They could pay people to build men’s houses but not order them to do so. Most importantly, they could not pass on their prestige to their sons. The latter were forced to earn it on their own.

## 8. [The Prehistory of the Ritual House](file:///C:\Users\Particular\AppData\Local\Temp\xthcuytp.vmi\text\part0004.html#toc-ch8)

At the start of the twentieth century, village societies with achievement-based leadership were among the most common in the world. They were remarkably stable societies, made up of descent groups that exchanged brides and gifts, honored their ancestors, considered everyone equal at birth, yet threw their support behind gifted kinsmen who sought to achieve renown.

Such societies were also widespread in prehistory; we probably all have ancestors who lived in one. Once you know what to look for, you can identify them in the archaeological records of the Near East, Egypt, Central and South America, North America, and Africa. Achievement-based societies became common as soon as each of those regions had adopted agriculture and village life.

When did the first achievement-based village societies appear? Perhaps 10,000 years ago in the Near East, 4,500 years ago in the Andes, and 3,500 years ago in Mexico. No two of these regions were exactly alike, but all three had a series of recognizable behaviors in common. One of those behaviors was the building of ritual venues, some of which were almost certainly men’s houses. [...]

### The Spread of Achievement-Based Villages and Ancestor Ritual

Ten thousand years ago, from the Bay of Haifa to the Tigris River in Iraq, at least three major processes were under way. One process was the emergence of domestic races of wheat and barley, mutant strains that left the cereals with no seed-dispersal system but made them easier for humans to harvest and thresh.

This first process led to a second: the gradual conversion of long-term camps into permanent, multigenerational villages. In the course of this transformation, circular huts were replaced by larger rectangular houses. Some of the latter had their own storage rooms and, if the walls could bear the weight, even a second story.

As life became sedentary, it facilitated a third process: the hunting of herd animals with drive fences and corrals, followed by the penning, imprinting, and raising of their young. Small numbers of goats, sheep, and pigs gradually became residents of the village. Wild cattle were bigger and more dangerous animals, but under domestication even they became smaller and more docile.

During the course of all three processes, ancestor ritual escalated, and men’s houses became increasingly well built and decorated. [...]

## 9. [Prestige and Equality in Four Native American Societies](file:///C:\Users\Particular\AppData\Local\Temp\xthcuytp.vmi\text\part0004.html#toc-ch9)

The early village societies of Mexico, Peru, and the Near East went on to develop hereditary rank and never looked back.

Not every society with achievement-based leadership, however, underwent such a transformation. Many agricultural village societies resisted every attempt to increase inequality. They found a way to let talented people rise to positions of prominence while still preventing the establishment of a hereditary elite. The balance they struck between personal ambition and the public good allowed their way of life to endure for centuries. […]

In many parts of the ancient world, archaeologists can point to periods when society remained remarkably stable for hundreds upon hundreds of years. Often, following further investigation, that stability turns out to have been the product of achievement-based, politically autonomous village societies.

A group’s initial attempts to create hereditary nobility, on the other hand, could bring on great instability. The contradictions in social logic between privilege and equality could result in years of oscillation and even bloodshed, as we will see in the next chapter

## Part. III - Societies That Made Inequality Hereditary [Rank societies]

## 10. The Rise and Fall of Hereditary Inequality in Farming Societies

Leadership in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and in the Southwestern pueblos and Plains villages of North America was traditionally based on achievement. Those societies had no hereditary aristocracy. [...]

The archaeological record tells us that at various times in the past, a number of achievement-based societies must have altered their social logic to allow for hereditary privilege. Unfortunately, archaeology shows us the results but not the logic itself; to reconstruct the latter, we must turn to studies of living societies. In this chapter we begin with a village that shows us how one ambitious subclan tried to become its society’s hereditary elite. To do so, it had to convince rival subclans of its right to intellectual property that had previously been shared. [...]

THE KACHIN OF HIGHLAND BURMA

[...] Naga and Kachin are generic terms for diverse groups of societies, some of which had hereditary rank and some of which did not. To complicate matters further, some Kachin societies had a history of shifting back and forth between hereditary privilege and equality. Archaeologists refer to such repeated shifts as “cycling.” [...]

The Kachin themselves used the term *gumlao* to refer to societies in which all social units were considered equal. When such units became ranked relative to one another, they used the term *gumsa.*

The key unit involved was one that reckoned descent in the father’s line. The Kachin themselves called this unit a *htinggaw,* meaning “of one household.” Leach refers to it as a lineage. [...] The contrast between gumlao and gumsa leaders was great. Under gumlao, each village was autonomous. Some gumsa chiefs, on the other hand, oversaw more than 60 villages at a time. They could ill afford to forget, however, that it was the chief’s entire lineage that enjoyed high rank, not the chief alone. This led to a complex dynamic among brothers. [...]

[L]et us now consider the logical premises of gumlao and gumsa society. Our goal will be to determine the ways in which an egalitarian, achievement-based society had to change in order to produce a society with ranked lineages. The premises of gumlao society, according to Leach, were as follows:

1. All lineages are considered equal.
2. All villages in a territory are politically autonomous.
3. Each village has a headman, to whom no tribute is owed.
4. Debts require modest repayment, with what we would call interest. (We discuss this in detail later.)
5. The price for all brides is the same.
6. Men of lineage A marry women of lineage B. Men of lineage B marry women of lineage C. Men of lineage C marry women of lineage A. [Thus no lineage was ever left in a permanently inferior position.]
7. All siblings are equal. It makes no difference whether one is born first or last.
8. When a lineage grows and divides, there is no senior or junior division; both are equal.
9. One’s loyalty is to the place where one lives.
10. Each headman is to be advised by a council of elders.
11. Land is controlled by all the lineages that originally entered the region. Late arrivals must negotiate for land.
12. Everyone makes sacrifices to his or her household ancestors, to one of the lesser sky spirits, and to one of the lesser earth spirits.
13. The head of each lineage does the above and also makes sacrifices to a regional spirit, to a sky spirit other than the supreme spirit Madai, and to an earth spirit other than the supreme spirit Shadip.

In contrast, the premises of gumsa society were as follows:

1. All lineages are ranked relative to one another.
2. Villages are no longer autonomous; all settlements within a territory are controlled by a single chief.
3. Everyone who does not belong to the chief’s lineage must pay him tribute, usually in the form of a thigh from every animal sacrificed.
4. Individuals of high hereditary rank must pay more compensation (interest) for their debts.
5. Families of elite brides can request a higher bride-price.
6. The giver of the bride is considered superior to the recipient.
7. To encourage older sons to leave home and found a new lineage elsewhere, all property is left to the youngest son.
8. Any lineage that grows and splits results in senior and junior lineages, with the former dominant.
9. One’s loyalty is to one’s lineage rather than to a place.
10. The hereditary chief is to be advised by a council of lineage heads.
11. All land is controlled by the chief’s lineage.
12. Lower-ranking people continue to make sacrifices to their household ancestors, and to lesser sky and earth spirits. Chiefs alone make sacrifices to the regional spirit of their lineage, as well as to the supreme sky spirit Madai, his daughter Hpraw Nga, and the supreme earth spirit Shadip. Chiefs are allowed to sacrifice to the highest spirits of earth and sky, because those spirits are now considered remote ancestors of the chief’s lineage.

**Explaining the Shift from Achievement-Based Leadership to Hereditary Rank**

[...] Friedman’s scenario begins with a society whose lineages are equal in rank, like the gumlao version of Kachin society. Each local lineage has its own set of ancestor spirits, arranged in short genealogies of three or four generations. There is also a village nat whose domain is the local territory. On a higher plane lie the earth nats and sky nats which, in the egalitarian mode of Kachin society, can receive sacrifices from any lineage through the intervention of its ancestral spirits.

In Friedman’s scenario the creation of hereditary rank takes place when one lineage convinces all the others that the village nat is its ancestor. That move converts one Kachin social unit into a chiefly lineage, descended from the nat who rules the whole territory. […]

In Kachin society the lineages that worked the hardest and produced the greatest surplus could sponsor the most prestigious sacrifices and feed the most visitors. Their fellow Kachin, however, did not attribute such success to hard work; they believed that one only obtained good harvests through proper sacrifices to the nats. Wealth was seen not so much as the product of labor (and control over others’ labor) as the result of pleasing the appropriate celestial spirits. The key shift in social logic was therefore from “They must have pleased the nats” to “They must be descended from higher nats than we are.”

Once one lineage was seen as having descended from the nats that ruled a region, it made sense that that lineage should control the region’s lands. It was also entitled to receive tribute from other lineages, because it alone could intercede on society’s behalf with the highest nats. [...]

**THE CREATION OF HEREDITARY RANK**

[H]ereditary inequality is not something that appears spontaneously once population has increased, or agriculture has produced a surplus, or people have accumulated lots of shells and pigs. Inequality is orchestrated. At the same time, it is not enough for one segment of society to demand privileges for itself and its heirs. Would-be nobles need leverage, an advantage of some kind, or their privileges will be taken back by the rest of society. That is presumably why so many societies remained achievement-based for thousands of years.

When did evidence of hereditary rank first appear in prehistoric farming societies? This is a difficult question for archaeologists to answer, since they rely on inference rather than direct observation. Making their task more difficult is the fact that many prehistoric societies combined both inherited and achieved inequality. This fact forces archaeologists to ask whether the unequal treatment they detect could have resulted from a lifetime of accomplishment or was more likely someone’s birthright.

That said, we believe that we can see signs of hereditary rank in Mesopotamia between 7,300 and 7,000 years ago, and in Peru and Mexico between 3,200 and 3,000 years ago. We shall present the evidence later in this book.

We have used the building of men’s houses as an indicator of village societies where leadership was based on achievement. This enables us to use the decline of the men’s house and the rise of the temple as an indicator of societies with some degree of hereditary leadership. In the societies we have examined, the transition from the men’s house to the temple seems to have been associated with the decreasing importance of ordinary people’s ancestors and the increasing importance of the celestial spirits in the chief’s genealogy.

**11. Three Sources of Power in Chiefly Societies**

We have seen that agricultural villagers do not surrender their equality without a fight. No sooner does one social segment achieve elite status than its privilege is challenged, forcing it to resume its quest for supremacy. Cycling between ranked and unranked was probably common in the preindustrial world. Eventually, however, the leadership roles in some societies became hereditary in perpetuity.

One part of the world where hereditary rank flourished was the South Pacific. […] The central concept of chiefly power was a life force the Polynesians called *mana.* Goldman defines mana as an odorless, colorless, invisible, supernatural energy that pervades people and things. To be sure, all the societies we have examined so far believed in a life force and had ways of accumulating or losing it. In Polynesia, however, people of high rank were automatically born with more mana.

The person with the largest supply of mana was the chief. He had so much life force that he was described as *tapu,* a term from which we get the English word “taboo.” Anyone or anything tapu was approached with extreme caution. Some Polynesian chiefs had so much mana that by touching them inappropriately, one could receive a jolt akin to being Tasered.

A second source of power in Polynesia was *tohunga,* a term usually translated as “expertise.” Tohunga could refer to administrative or diplomatic skill, ritual skill, or craftsmanship. While innate talent was certainly involved, individuals could increase their expertise through education, training, or apprenticeship. Sometimes a chief would provide incentives to the craftsmen who produced his sumptuary goods.

The third of Goldman’s sources of power was *toa.* While toa referred to a durable tree known as “ironwood,” it was also a metaphor for bravery and toughness. Toa was applied to warriors in general, and especially to those who distinguished themselves in battle. A key aspect of toa was that it allowed for a certain degree of social mobility. A warrior of humble birth could rise in prominence to the point where he had to be taken seriously, even by chiefly individuals. For his part, a chief who fought bravely became a legend.

All chiefly Polynesian societies relied on a combination of mana, toa, and tohunga. The emphasis, however, was different from island to island. In the case of the Maori and Tikopians, chiefs relied on a combination of sacred authority and genealogical seniority. On Samoa and on Easter Island, chiefs relied more heavily on political expertise and military force. In Tonga and Hawaii, which had the highest levels of social inequality, chiefly families utilized the entire playbook: sacred authority, genealogical seniority, military force, and political and economic expertise.

Polynesian societies did not oscillate between ranked and unranked, as the Kachin and Konyak Naga did. The island societies, however, had their own form of cycling: status rivalry. Polygamous chiefly families produced brothers, half brothers, and first cousins who were almost equal in rank. Sometimes the heir to a chiefly office did not control as many warriors as his ambitious junior rival. In such cases assassination, overthrow, and usurpation could cause one chiefly lineage to collapse while another rose.

All three of Goldman’s principles, of course, had antecedents in earlier, achievement-based societies. They had been transformed by changes in social logic, as follows:

1. Achievement-based groups pursued their own versions of life force. The Naga obtained it from the heads of their enemies. The Mandan obtained it from self-induced suffering. Chiefly Polynesians, however, possessed it from birth and could increase it or lose it depending on their own behavior.
2. Leaders in achievement-based societies had expertise of various kinds. They could memorize thousands of sacred names, like the villagers of Avatip, or develop skills at moka, like the people of Mt. Hagen. They could master ivory carving or eagle trapping. In the chiefly societies of Polynesia, however, certain craftsmen were more respected than others, for example, the makers of war canoes, purveyors of sumptuary goods, or carvers of giant statues such as those on Easter Island.
3. In achievement-based societies, bravery in war was already a path to renown. Chiefly societies converted war to a strategy of territorial expansion. Tired of negotiating for the products of a neighboring region, chiefs might just subjugate the region and demand its products as tribute. This enhanced the value of military prowess.

In this chapter we look at three societies with hereditary rank. In the first, sacred authority was paramount. In the second, war was endemic and a chief’s patronage of the crafts enhanced his prestige. In the third, a chief’s mana, toa, and tohunga made him almost as powerful as a king.

We also take note of a change that accompanied the rise of many rank societies: men’s houses were replaced by temples. This change reflects an important social and political transition. Men’s houses were built by clans or Big Men and tended to be places where men sat around communing with their ancestors. Temples tended to be places where actual deities lived on a full-time or part-time basis. Temples were staffed not by initiated clansmen but by people trained as priests. Often the construction of a temple was directed by the chief because, after all, there were supernatural spirits in his ancestry. […]

**[Chiefdom as a 3 level rank society]**

The territory controlled by the chitimukulu [Bemba paramount chief] would be described by anthropologists as a paramount chiefdom. This term refers to the territory of a rank society with a three-level political hierarchy. At the top level was the paramount chief, who lived in a large permanent village. At the second level of the hierarchy were the mfumus, who commanded entire icalos. At the third level were the subchiefs, who commanded the smaller villages and hamlets that shifted around within each district. Tribute flowed upward from the subchief, to the district chief, to the paramount chief. Orders and policies flowed down the same chain of command. […]

1. **Aristocracy without Chiefs**

**The Nature of Apa Tani Inequality**

Kachin society had thigh-eating chiefs. Konyak Naga society had great Angs. The Apa Tani had hereditary rank and wealth, but no chiefs at all. They present us with an alternative form of rank society, one that may well have existed in prehistory but would be very hard to detect archaeologically.

The Apa Tani had a hereditary aristocracy that provided all community leaders. That leadership, however, was exercised by a council rather than by a powerful individual. As we saw earlier, the ancient Greeks referred to such a system as oligarchy, or rule by a privileged few. […]

**Part IV – Inequality in Kindoms and Empires**

**17. How to Create a Kingdom**

We come now to a multigenerational process that changed Hawai’i forever. Beginning at least 800 or 700 years ago, certain Big Island chiefs began trying to expand their territories to include other islands. The earliest attempts rarely succeeded, but later chiefs kept trying. [...]

[The] legend of ‘Umi [...] shows us many premises that the Hawai’ians themselves considered important. For example:

1. Chiefly half brothers were destined to become rivals.
2. If the senior heir was a despot, his overthrow by a junior heir was justified.
3. Even a junior son with a commoner mother, assuming that he was popular, could usurp the senior son’s position.
4. However, the usurper should then marry the most highly ranked woman available and demonstrate high levels of achievement.
5. Conquering a neighboring chief’s territory, and then incorporating it into one’s own chiefdom, was considered an achievement.
6. The greater the territory he conquered and incorporated, the greater the renown of a chief.
7. Both usurpation and conquest required the support of lesser chiefs, priests, warriors, and loyal commoners. It was acceptable to reward their loyalty with land grants, even when they did not have the genealogical credentials to deserve garden land.

Might these premises have relevance beyond Hawai’i? Yes indeed; and in the pages that follow, we will see that many of the first kingdoms created in other parts of the world were also the handiwork of usurpers. [...]

**Kamehameha’s Kingdom**

[After a war where he conquered all Hawaiian islands] Kamehameha now found himself in charge of a territory that was too large to be administered like a chiefdom. Paramount chiefs on the Big Island, as we have seen, had traditionally moved from district to district during the year. These moves distributed the burden of support among all the chief’s subjects while making him intimately familiar with each district.

Frequent rebellions against past chiefs, however, show us that it was not always easy to control the 4,028-square-mile Big Island. Now Kamehameha needed to control an archipelago 1,500 miles long, with 6,423 square miles of dry land and big stretches of ocean. He would have to appoint a governor for each island, someone loyal to him rather than to the natives of the island. [...]

It is significant that the archipelago now had a political hierarchy of four administrative levels. In olden days each island had been ruled by a paramount chief (Level 1), below whom there were subchiefs (Level 2), who in turn supervised minor nobles (Level 3). Now Kamehameha was all alone in Level 1; the governors of each island occupied Level 2; the subchiefs occupied Level 3; and minor nobles occupied Level 4.

Ali’i-ai-moku was no longer an adequate title for Kamehameha. If his unification of Hawai’i had occurred in the absence of Euro-American visitors, he might have created a new Hawai’ian term for his office. Owing to his extensive contact with English speakers, however, he decided to call himself King Kamehameha I.

We have described the unification of Hawai’i at length for a reason: even though Polynesian in its details, it is an example of a widespread process by which monarchies were created from smaller-scale societies. We use the term “process” because it often took a succession of leaders to complete the transition. Rarely were the efforts of one ruler sufficient. In the case of Hawai’i important roles were played by ‘Umi, Alapai, Kalaniopu’u, and Kamehameha. Opinions differ on the exact moment in this sequence when a kingdom existed. As we shall see later, similar disagreements apply to the rise of monarchy on the coast of Peru.

We also will see, in this and later chapters, that among the Zulu of southern Africa, the Asante of west Africa, the Merina of Madagascar, and the Hunza of the Pakistani-Kashmir borderlands, indigenous kingdoms arose in the context of elite rivalry. For a substantial period of time—centuries, in some cases—a series of rival rank societies competed with one other. Despite moments of political unification, the long-term outcome was a stalemate. Eventually the aggressive leader of one rank society (often a highly motivated usurper) gained an unforeseen advantage over his neighbors. He pressed his advantage relentlessly until he had subdued all his rivals. He turned their chiefdoms into the provinces of a society larger than any previously seen in the region. To consolidate power, he broke down the old loyalties of each province and replaced them with an ideology stressing loyalty to him. He rewarded priests who were willing to verify his genealogical credentials and revise his group’s cosmology, ensuring his divine right to rule. [...]

**THE PROBLEMS OF BEING THE FIRST**

The creation of all four of the kingdoms discussed in this chapter required the consolidation of formerly independent societies by force. But was force always required?

We have seen that several of the largest chiefly societies in the southeastern United States, such as the Coosa, were voluntary confederacies. Might not some early kingdoms have formed voluntarily as well?

Without closing the door to that possibility, we doubt it. […] Archaeologist Charles Spencer has presented mathematical support for the idea that the first state to form in a region will likely require the kind of territorial expansion we saw among the Hawai’ians, Zulu, Hunza, and Merina. Since a kingdom is one kind of state (almost certainly the earliest kind, with military dictatorships and parliamentary democracies arising later), Spencer’s work is worth discussing here. We will, however, leave out the mathematical details.

Borrowing an equation from the zoological literature on predator-prey relations, Spencer demonstrates that as a chief reaches the limit of the resources he can extract from his followers, and the growth curve of his society goes from steeply rising to horizontal, one of three things must happen. Such chiefs must either:

1. Step up demand for resources from their own subjects, which may lead to revolt.
2. Intensify production through technological improvement, which will likely increase wealth but not necessarily sociopolitical complexity.
3. Expand the territory from which they get their resources, which will probably require the subjugation of neighbors.

When alternative 3 is chosen, and the expanded territory grows beyond the limits that a chief can administer through the usual methods, he is compelled to make changes in administration and political ideology, and a state begins to form. That change is less likely with alternatives 1 and 2.

The reason military force so often seems to be involved in the creation of the first kingdoms is because rival chiefs are unwilling to surrender their territory and independence voluntarily. In the four cases we saw in this chapter, state formation involved thousands of deaths, and thousands of other people were converted to slaves.

Sorry, but no one said that creating the first kingdoms would be pretty.

**The Unanswered Question**

[...] Was there a logical connection between a particular type of monarchy and the chiefly societies out of which it was created? Did divine monarchs result from the unification of rank societies in which religious authority was paramount? Did secular kings result from the unification of largely militaristic rank societies, where religious specialists were little more than witch doctors? Or could any type of monarchy be created by uniting rank societies of any type?

We have no answer to this question, because social anthropologists and archaeologists are not working on it. But they should be.

**18. Three of the New World’s First-Generation Kingdoms**

**SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NEW WORLD’S FIRST-GENERATION KINGDOMS**

The Zapotec, the Moche, and the Maya all created monarchies out of rank societies. They did so in the absence of European visitors and without any template for what a monarchy should look like. It is therefore significant that these ancient societies did it much the way that the Hawai’ians, Zulu, Hunza, and Merina did it: by forcibly uniting a group of rival societies.

All these cases began with societies that already possessed a degree of hereditary inequality. The engine that drove kingdom formation was competitive interaction among multiple elite actors. The balance was tipped when one of the actors achieved a competitive advantage. Whether set in the temperate highlands, the coastal desert, or the tropical forest, the process was similar. It was independent of environment or ethnic group.

Our three New World monarchies had something else in common. Once having created the apparatus of a kingdom, they expanded against neighboring groups. Expansion was facilitated by the fact that many groups could not defend themselves against the centralized control and military strategy of a newly formed monarchy. [...]

**THE CHANGING LOGIC OF POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION**

The Egyptians were not aware that the kingdom in which they lived had developed from earlier rank societies. They believed that the institution of kingship was as old as Earth. This view fit with a cosmology in which the universe was unchanging, a view to which we will return in our discussion of Egyptian religion.

For most of the societies we have seen so far, the alphas in the dominance hierarchy were supernatural spirits or deities; the betas were ancestors; and the most highly ranked living humans were gammas. The Egyptian monarchy is the first we know of in which the ruler was, in effect, one of the supernatural alphas. [...]

**21. The Nursery of Civilization**

Of all the world’s first-generation states, none were earlier than those of the Near East. They formed at a time when it was still not certain that Hierakonpolis would emerge triumphant in Upper Egypt. They formed at a time when permanent villages had yet to appear in Mexico and Peru.

Thirty years ago, Southern Mesopotamia was considered “the cradle of civilization.” Today we know that proto-states were also forming in Northern Mesopotamia and southwest Iran at about the same time. These three regions were all in contact with each other, providing us with another example of a chain reaction: the rise of multiple early states in response to the first aggressive one. The title of this chapter reflects our belief that when you have three cradles, it is a nursery.

The ‘Ubaid 4 period ended about 5,700 years ago. During the subsequent Uruk period, 5,700 to 5,200 years ago, states formed in both Iran and Iraq. The first political hierarchy with four administrative levels may have appeared in Iran, but the early state in Iraq was larger. Our use of the generic term “state” reflects the fact that some of these societies were more oligarchy than monarchy.

**[...] WHY CLUSTER TOGETHER IN CITIES?**

Some 5,000 to 4,750 years ago, as pointed out by Guillermo Algaze, none of the surviving settlements in Northern Mesopotamia were large enough to be called cities. Some archaeologists take this as a sign of promise unfulfilled, as if the creation of cities was a lofty goal to which all societies should aspire. We cannot agree.

Our earliest ancestors lived in small-scale societies where everyone knew his or her relationship to everyone else. Nothing could be further from Rousseau’s State of Nature than a city. Short of living in a space station, one could hardly imagine a more artificially created environment.

Why, then, would people cluster together in cities? We favor Robert McC. Adams’s explanation of urbanization in Susiana, which involves “the drawing together of the population into larger, more defensible political units.” […] The rulers of emerging cities were evidently willing to accept as many refugees as they could get. The larger their labor pool and military force, the grander their buildings and the smaller the likelihood that they would lose their autonomy to another urban society. […]

The fact is that there is nothing inherently superior about urbanization. In Mesopotamia it was all about power building and responding to real or perceived threats. […] Competitive interaction is one of the most important forces driving social and biological evolution. […]

Whatever its timing, we doubt that city life began at one community and spread like an oil slick. It likely grew out of long-term competitive interaction, not only between neighbors such as Susa and Chogha Mish but among regions such as Susiana, Southern Mesopotamia, and Northern Mesopotamia. Competitive interaction drives ambitious leaders to take unprecedented measures. In addition to transforming whole societies, of course, it produces winners and losers. We flock to the winners like paparazzi, forgetting that the competition itself was the real engine of change.

**Part IV – Inequality in Kindoms and Empires**

**THE BUREAUCRATIC STATE**

While the Sumerians are usually credited with creating the first bureaucratic state, a great deal of the groundwork was laid by their Late Uruk/Jemdet Nasr ancestors. [...]

Many early states had strong, highly centralized governments with a professional ruling class. Politically based social units began to replace the clans and ancestor-based descent groups of earlier societies. One can still detect clanlike units in Sumerian society, but many people in the cities were beginning to live in residential wards based on shared occupation or social class.

One of the most dramatic innovations of states is that the central government monopolizes the use of force, dispensing justice according to rules of law. Achievement-based and rank societies tended to respond to theft or assault at the level of the individual, family, clan, or village. For the Sumerians, most crimes were treated as crimes against the state. It then became the state’s responsibility to implement one of a series of punishments, which were codified in order to give the appearance of fairness. This required a system of judges and bailiffs, who were also called upon to decide disputes.

While individuals in Sumerian society were constrained from violence and revenge, the state had the right to draft soldiers and wage war. During the Early Dynastic period, commoners were rounded up to serve as foot soldiers when needed. [...]

Bureaucracies are expensive to maintain, and one Sumerian solution was to levy taxes. Every official transaction had to be witnessed and archived, and an official took his cut. [...]

Finally, the Sumerian state supported what amounted to an official religion. Each city had a patron deity whose temple was larger than that of any other. Temple activities and staff were supported by an estate on which crops were grown, livestock was raised, and artisans labored. The wealth of the largest estates was staggering. [...]

**COSMOLOGY**

Obedience was a prime Sumerian virtue. The human ruler obeyed his city’s patron deity. [...]. The rest of human society obeyed the ruler. Only a ruler was powerful enough to have a direct relationship with his city’s patron deity. A commoner interacted only with his tutelary god, a lesser deity who had taken an interest in him. [...]

**RULES, ORDER, AND RITUAL PURITY**

In the language of every society there are abstract terms that underlie many of the logical premises. The Polynesians had mana, the Merina hasina, and the Egyptians ma’at. For their part, the Sumerians had *me* and *nam.*

Me, sometimes translated as “order,” referred to the rules that the gods had established so that society would run smoothly. In the words of epigrapher Benno Landsberger, me “emanated from gods and temples in a mystic manner, was imagined as a substance, was symbolized by emblems, and could be transferred from one god to another.” The task of a human ruler was to make sure that the rules of his city’s god were obediently carried out, and that the society he commanded was sufficiently orderly. Much of the order was achieved by appointing overseers for every activity and keeping extensive written documents.

*Nam* has been translated as “fate,” but its meaning was more subtle than that. In earlier chapters we learned that names could be magic. In Sumer, Landsberger explains, the name defining the essence of a thing determined its life trajectory and destiny. Temples, people, animals, plants, and bodies of water had names and, ultimately, fates pronounced by the gods.

In contrast to Egypt, where rulers were divine, the Early Dynastic ruler was essentially an aristocratic mortal who did his god’s bidding. [...]

**CYCLING IN MESOPOTAMIAN STATES**

The dynasty established by Sargon of Akkad lasted nearly 200 years. [...] If the states created in the Late Uruk period were first-generation states, any new state of the Early Dynastic period could be considered a second-generation state, making Sargon’s empire a third-generation state. Sargon’s realm differed from a first-generation state in that it was created not from a group of rank societies but from a group of preexisting kingdoms [...] . And there would be a fourth-generation state: [...] a Sumerian-speaking ruler named Ur-Nammu would rise to power in 2112 B.C. His state, modeled on those of earlier rulers, would be known as the Third Dynasty of Ur. Unfortunately, this fourth-generation state would suffer a fate similar to that of its predecessor: its later kings would have trouble hanging on to the territory put together by Ur-Nammu. [...]

The collapse of Ur was followed by a fifth-generation state, led by the cities of Isin and Larsa. The sixth-generation state for the region would be the one created by Hammurabi of Babylon (1792–1750 B.C.). The latter was an empire virtually as large as Sargon’s, and by that time, Sumerian was well on its way to becoming a dead language.

Some authors choose to portray Mesopotamia as a land of petty kingdoms or “city-states,” only briefly consolidated into expansionist states or empires. Other authors, including Postgate, portray that part of the world as going through repetitive cycles of strong centralization, separated by political breakdown and regional autonomy.

We find the latter portrayal more convincing. Rather than making Mesopotamia unique, it makes it comparable both to Egypt (with its cycles of centralized Kingdoms and decentralized Intermediate periods) and to ancient Mexico and Peru (whose cycles we describe later in this book). At the heart of all these cycles is a principle with which we are already familiar: For every leader seeking greater territory and power, there are others seeking to bring him down.

**23. How New Empires Learn from Old**

**THE LEGACY OF EARLIER KINGDOMS AND EMPIRES**

There is a reason we have emphasized the generation to which each kingdom or empire belonged. Fourth- and fifth-generation kingdoms were not created in the same way as first-generation kingdoms. All later generations of kingdoms and empires were able to borrow strategies and institutions from their predecessors.

The creators of first-generation kingdoms had no template to follow. They did not know that they were creating a new type of society; they simply thought that they were eliminating rivals and adding subordinates. Only later did they discover that they had created a realm so large that they would need new ways to administer it.

**Part V – Resisting Inequality**

**UPDATING ROUSSEAU**

Rousseau held that our ancestors were born without sovereign masters, governments, or laws, and that the only differences among them lay in their strength, agility, and intelligence. Those inequalities were authorized by Natural Law. Most later inequalities resulted not from nature but from the actions of society itself.

Today we suspect that our Ice Age forebears were not wholly without masters or laws. They almost certainly believed themselves to have been the creations of celestial spirits, powerful masters who gave men laws of social behavior. Most likely our ancestors also believed that the first humans had abilities beyond ours. Those “old ones” had taken on the role of betas in society’s dominance hierarchy and, when treated properly, would intercede on their descendants’ behalf with the alphas of the spirit world.

Ice Age people lived on foods whose pursuit tended to keep societies small and mobile. Because fluctuations in the food supply might force some families to forage in the territories of others, our ancestors could not afford to have hostile neighbors. Foragers, we have seen, are not only diplomatic, but actually make neighbors into honorary kinsmen. They do this by creating partners with whom they exchange such things as magical names, food, or gifts. Such partnerships allow one family to host another in times of need, just as if they had been related by blood or marriage. […]

In parts of the Ice Age world foragers went beyond exchange and food sharing. The archaeological evidence suggests that some of them created large, permanent groups of people who considered themselves related, whether it was true or not. [...] Most clanless foragers worked hard to treat everyone as equals. This ethic usually persisted within one’s clan but did not always extend to other clans. [...]

[T]he “us versus them” mentality of clans justified raiding. The principle of social substitutability meant that anyone from another group was fair game. Some raiding parties returned with trophy heads. Others returned with captive women and children, turning them into slaves. The groundwork had been laid for larger-scale war.

What clues lead archaeologists to suspect that a prehistoric society possessed clans or ancestor-based descent groups? The clues are multigenerational cemeteries, wooden palisades or masonry defensive walls, men’s houses, charnel houses, trophy heads, the saving of skulls from burials, and an increase in the circulation of valuables such as those used in bride-price exchange. [...]

We cannot assume, however, that clanless foragers represent some kind of “original” society. There are hints that some clanless foragers (the Basarwa, for example) may have had descent groups or clans in the past, only to lose them when they were driven into marginal environments. At the same time, societies such as that of the Andaman Islanders show us that even if a group lives in a relatively lush environment, there is no guarantee that it will develop clans. For all these reasons we should probably view clans or descent groups as one of several alternative social networking strategies rather than as an inevitable second stage of foraging society.

**BALANCING PERSONAL AMBITION AND THE PUBLIC GOOD**

Rousseau considered the replacement of self-respect with self-love an important moment in the creation of inequality. It now seems obvious, however, that both self-respect and self-love were there from the beginning. The tug-of-war between them may have been one of Ice Age society’s most significant logical contradictions.

With the rise of agricultural villages 9,000 years ago in the Near East, 7,000 years ago in Egypt, and 4,000 years ago in Mexico, the environment for self-love had improved. In many parts of the world, however, the adoption of agriculture did not lead immediately to inequality. Lots of societies struck a balance between personal ambition and the public good, and in some regions that balance lasted well into the twentieth century. There are archaeological hints, to be sure, that many of today’s achievement-based societies once flirted with greater inequality. Most of those flirtations, however, ended with a return to egalitarian behavior.

What achievement-based societies excelled at was providing ambitious individuals (those who, in Rousseau’s words, “desired to be thought of as superior”) with acceptable ways of increasing their prestige. Those ways included prowess in raiding or head-taking, skill in entrepreneurial exchange, or sponsorship of increasingly important rituals. While all these paths could lead to renown, prominent individuals were not allowed to become a hereditary elite. They could serve as role models for their children but could not guarantee them the same prestige.

[...] Many Americans will find familiar the logic of achievement-based societies. All men are created equal. Work hard, play by the rules, and anyone can grow up to be prominent. [...] The difference is this: the United States had to fight a Revolutionary War to get rid of hereditary aristocracy and never did figure out how to reduce disparities in wealth. Achievement-based societies, on the other hand, usually pressured all of their members to give away the valuables they had accumulated.

By what date did societies first show signs of achievement-based leadership? Perhaps 9,000 years ago in the Near East, 4,000 years ago in the Andes, and 3,500 years ago in Mexico. And what would be some of the clues? Archaeologists look for the building of men’s houses, either the larger and more inclusive type or the smaller and more exclusive type. They also look for accumulations of trade items that might be used in entrepreneurial exchange. They analyze residences and burials carefully, and unless they find convincing evidence that certain families’ children were entitled to sumptuary goods, they are likely to conclude that any obvious differences in prestige were achieved, not inherited.

Archaeologists examine as many of a society’s villages as they can, looking for any evidence that hamlets were obliged to contribute tribute or labor to a larger village nearby. When no such evidence appears, an achievement-based society is indicated. Archaeologists also try to evaluate any evidence for monument building, with the caveat that an occasional plaza, stone monument, or massive slit-gong might be evidence for achievement rather than hereditary leadership.

How did the old hunter-gatherer logic come to be changed, creating routes to renown? Even foragers considered some individuals more virtuous than others and believed that one could increase one’s virtue over a lifetime. […] Achievement-based societies had great stability. At various times and places in the ancient world, however, self-love persisted until a hereditary elite arose. We have seen that this phenomenon was not the inevitable outcome of population growth, intensive agriculture, or climatic improvement, even though all those factors could create a favorable environment for inequality. The key process involved one group of human agents battling for greater privilege, while other agents resisted with all the strength they could muster.

Even when one segment of society succeeded in achieving elite status, the struggle was not necessarily over. Some societies, such as the Kachin and the Konyak Naga, cycled between hereditary rank and achievement-based society for decades.

Archaeologists have proposed several scenarios for the creation of hereditary rank. Most take as their starting point a society that already had a history of achieved inequality, but we do not consider this a prerequisite. At least a few societies might have gone from egalitarian to ranked through the use of debt slavery, without spending much time in a phase of achievement-based villages. If that is the case, it will one day be confirmed by archaeologists.

In those cases where rank society did develop out of achievement-based society, there were many preexisting inequities that could serve as raw material. Included were the differences in prestige between Big Men and rubbish men; between people who had climbed the ritual ladder and those who had not; between the clan that arrived first and everyone else; and between the man chosen for success by a demon and lesser men.

Another strategy for achieving rank was the aforementioned use of debt, which turned needy clan members into servants and neighbors into slaves. Debt could result from exorbitant bride-price, loans to aspiring Big Men, excessive war reparations, or the desperate cries of impoverished kinsmen. It was a route built on the principle that failure to repay a gift or loan made one less virtuous.

One of the interesting facts of hereditary rank was that it could be created even by hunters and gatherers such as the Nootka. Neither slavery nor aristocracy, in other words, had to wait until agriculture had arisen.

What are the archaeological clues for the appearance of rank society? That is not as easy a question as it sounds, because rank came in so many forms. One clan might be ranked above others. One lineage within each clan might be considered a chiefly lineage. There might be a continuum of rank, based on genealogical distance from the chief. There might be stepwise gradations of nobility, a landed gentry, and commoners. And, as if this diversity were not enough, there is also Renfrew’s continuum from individualizing to group-oriented rank societies.

Archaeologists should thank their lucky stars for individualizing rank societies, the ones in which the children of the elite get buried with sumptuary goods, and the chief’s corpse gets bundled, smoked, or surrounded by sacrificed servants. They should also be grateful for all the symbolically charged pottery, goldwork, and jade exchanged by noble families. At the regional level, they should be thankful for archaeological evidence that chiefly centers grew by attracting new followers, or were surrounded by satellite villages to whom they sent brides.

In rank societies, temples dedicated to celestial spirits often replaced the men’s house. Even in group-oriented rank societies, where elites generally refrained from flamboyant displays, chiefly families often lived in bigger houses with greater storage facilities and more evidence of trade goods.

Rank clearly represents a loss of equality, but let us play the devil’s advocate. Was rank really such a bad thing? Don’t lots of species have a dominance hierarchy, and doesn’t it provide stability to their society? In fact, don’t our closest primate relatives have pecking orders?

They do, but with an important difference. It is not predestined from the moment of birth that a given chimpanzee will become an alpha or a beta. Having an alpha parent may increase the likelihood, but in the end an individual’s position in the hierarchy is the result of his or her interactions with other individuals. And any chimp’s position can rise or fall over time.

Human rank societies are different. The child of great Ang parents is born to be a great Ang, no matter how short of talent he or she may be. The child of commoner parents will never become a great Ang, no matter how clever he or she is. The ability to negotiate one’s position in rank society is much more limited than in a chimpanzee troop.

There are confrontational interactions in rank society, to be sure, but they are usually between rivals of high rank. Chiefly polygamy leads to situations in which a number of heirs have roughly similar ranks. Some of the bitterest competition is between noble siblings, half siblings, and first cousins.

Another set of violent confrontations involves territorial expansion. Both chimpanzee troops and chiefly human societies like to take territory away from their neighbors. Both also prefer ambushes and numerical superiority. Some aggressive chiefs, however, dare to take on larger enemy forces if they feel that their military tactics are superior. A number of Shaka’s greatest victories came when his troops were outnumbered.

Among rank societies, war became a tool for chiefly aggrandizement. When that aggrandizement simply meant the acquisition of titles (as in parts of Samoa), it did not necessarily change the basic principles of society. When aggrandizement meant the acquisition of land (as in Madagascar and Hawai’i), it could produce territories too large for the management principles of rank society. That set the stage for the political hierarchy characteristic of kingdoms.

Many of the earliest kings, in the course of changing the way they administered their territories, created new strategies. Instead of continuing to move his residence so that all provinces could share in his support, the Hawai’ian king appointed a trusted governor for each province. Instead of letting each ethnic group provide its own age regiments, Shaka created state-level regiments that were loyal only to him. Instead of appointing their brothers to administer parts of their realm, some Egyptian kings chose talented commoners who were less likely to usurp the throne.

The first kingdoms or oligarchic states appeared 5,000 years ago in Egypt and Mesopotamia and 2,000 years ago in Mexico and Peru. We find it hard to date the moment of state formation, because the creation of a state often required several generations of aggressive rulers. And despite all the similarities we have seen in first-generation states, they were neither common nor inevitable. As late as the twentieth century, many parts of the world still displayed nothing more complex than rank societies.

What are the clues that a kingdom has been created? At the regional scale, archaeologists look for signs that the political hierarchy had at least four levels, the upper three of which featured administrators. They look for the standardized temples of a state religion, as well as for secular buildings whose ground plans reflect councils or assemblies. At the capital they look for palaces built by corvée labor and tombs with sumptuary goods appropriate for royalty. At Level 2 administrative centers there may be smaller versions of such residences and tombs, often displaying the standardized architecture of a top-down administration. Another clue would be workers’ receipt of rations doled out with standardized bowls, griddles, or redeemable tokens. Sometimes the archaeologist’s task is made easier by a kingdom’s use of writing or art to convey the agenda of its leaders.

Few of the rulers who created kingdoms were content with the territories they controlled. Whenever a new state was surrounded by weaker neighbors, the temptation to expand was great. Sometimes, as in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, this expansion set off a chain reaction that created multiple fortified kingdoms. In other cases, as on the north coast of Peru, expansion created a multiethnic empire. The key to expansion lay in knowing which neighbors were vulnerable and which were best left alone.

Who created the world’s first empire? While many archaeologists would point to Sargon of Akkad, he may have received more credit than he deserves. An earlier king, Lugal-zagesi, claims to have held sway from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. And even before Lugal-zagesi rose to power, some Egyptian kings may have subjugated the whole region from Nubia to the Southern Levant.

Empires, in other words, are probably more than 4,300 years old. And along with empires came ethnic stereotyping, an escalation of simpler societies’ long-standing ethnocentrism. The precedent for racial, religious, and ethnic intolerance had been set.

Early kingdoms and empires did more than this, of course. Many state regimes took away whatever vestiges of equality the individual commoner had left. In the Aztec state, even commoners who cultivated cotton were forbidden to wear cotton mantles. Sumerian law restricted commoner marriage to one man and one woman, giving later societies the impression that monogamy was a divinely sanctioned norm. The Sumerians also strengthened economic inequality among commoners, increasing the likelihood that it would endure even if hereditary privilege were to disappear.

Finally, empires took away the freedom of other societies by turning them into subject colonies. To be sure, the commoners in those societies had been treated as an underclass even before they were colonized; it was their elite who wound up losing the most. Sometimes conquered leaders were mollified with gifts, or they were allowed to participate in the joint rule of their former territories. [...]

**INEQUALITY AND RESISTANCE**

There can be no more exciting story for an archaeologist than the way new societies were created from old. A system based on arbitrary premises, in theory, has the potential to give rise to thousands of different societies, and so it did. As we have seen, however, five or six ways of organizing people work so well that strikingly similar societies have appeared in different regions of the world. We recognize those societies in the archaeological record, whether they arose in Africa, Asia, or the Americas.

The similarities among societies in different parts of the world were not lost on early anthropologists. Some even assumed that those societies constituted an inevitable sequence of stages, through which all human groups had passed on their way from foraging to civilization. No one believes such a thing today. In fact, some of today’s anthropologists would even deny that recognizable types of societies exist. Such denials are every bit as misguided as our predecessors’ belief in a monolithic sequence of stages.

Today we know that even when two regions happened to go through similar stages, their social history did not proceed at the same rate. Just look, for example, at the Near East and Mexico. Both regions began to domesticate plants at the end of the Ice Age, perhaps 10,000 years ago. The Near East gave rise to villages with ritual houses 9,000 years ago. The process took longer in Mexico, in part because early corn was not as productive as wheat and barley. There the first villages with ritual houses did not appear until 3,500 years ago.

Once Mexico had developed achievement-based village societies, however, the transition to stratified societies and kingdoms was much more rapid. The first monarchies or oligarchic states in Mesopotamia arose between 5,500 and 5,000 years ago, some 4,000 to 3,500 years after the first villages. The first monarchies or oligarchic states in Mexico arose 2,000 years ago, barely 1,500 years after the first villages.

Why did it take states more than twice as long to develop in the Near East? Did military force play a greater role in Mexico, hastening the shift from “traditional” to “stratified” society in Goldman’s terms? Were the efforts to preserve a level playing field more successful in Southern Mesopotamia, prolonging the period of achievement-based leadership? What roles did sacred authority, expertise, and military prowess play in speeding or slowing social change? Were societies with exclusionary ritual houses more likely to give rise to hereditary elites than those whose ritual houses were open to all?

Archaeologists will not be able to answer these questions until they have better ways of reconstructing the logic of ancient societies. We would like to be able to work out scenarios for a wide variety of societies, providing plausible explanations for why certain varieties appeared so frequently and lasted so long. We suspect, for example, that complex societies could only arise after changes in logic had reduced the pressure to suppress self-interest. Some families or descent groups were then free to place their less successful neighbors in a position of disadvantage. They justified their superiority by claiming special relationships with the very beings who had given humans their laws of behavior in the first place.

We are struck, however, by the fact that each escalation of inequality required the overcoming of resistance. There seems to have been an ongoing struggle between those who desired to be superior and those who objected. That is undoubtedly why some of our most complex and stratified societies formed in a crucible of intense competition among clans, chiefly lineages, and ethnic groups.

Man is born free, Rousseau declared, yet we see him everywhere in chains. We have our ancestors to thank for that. They had dozens of chances to resist inequality, but they did not always have the resolve. We can forgive them for admiring virtue, entrepreneurial skill, and bravery. We simply wish they had not accepted the idea that those qualities were hereditary.