

norms, as well as to the reinforcement of the deities' monitoring and punitive features (cf. Pyysiäinen 2014, 638–39; Norenzayan 2013, 13–14).

I would suggest that deceased kin would make particularly fit candidates for such deity concepts, given the high salience of their existing social relationships with the living and the higher likelihood of the perception of their concern for the social well-being of the living (Barrett 2011, 103–04; cf. Pyysiäinen 2009, 68). As societies stratified and elite groups emerged, elevating their own deceased kin over the broader social group would initially grant them unique access to and control of cultic authorities. In this way, the framework of kinship would be maintained for elite groups while others would engage with a high deity that may or may not have been perceived as kin.

While prosocial behaviors in complex anonymous societies are not exclusively facilitated by the conceptualization of deities as socially concerned agents (Nichols et al. 2020), a strong correlation has been shown between socially concerned deities and prosocial behavior. This prosociality, however, is predominantly parochial, or “in-group” in orientation.⁹⁵ That is, the sociocultural mores and ritual practices established, promoted, and enforced by deities tend to benefit those within the boundaries of a given social group while increasing antisocial behavior towards out-groups. One review of studies found conflicting evidence for religious prosociality, but when the authors distinguished between “religious” principles (which they understood as relating to the broader “package” of practices and beliefs conventionally associated with a given community’s deities) and “supernatural” principles (understood as relating specifically to deity), the picture became clearer. They found that “religious” principles were associated with in-group-specific prosociality (i.e., protection of in-group values, antisocial behavior toward outgroup members), while the latter was associated with outgroup prosociality. They concluded that belief in an omniscient, omnipresent, and benevolent deity may promote inclusion of all peoples within the boundaries of the social group over which the deity is thought to preside (Preston, Ritter, and Hernandez 2010; Preston and Ritter 2013). Such deity profiles are quite complex philosophical elaborations, however, and though they are common today, they still manage to facilitate all kinds of identity politics. The story is much more nuanced for first millennium BCE Southwest Asia.

⁹⁵ Some of the criticism leveled at the theoretical model of Ara Norenzayan et al. is based precisely on the observation that the prosociality facilitated by “Big Gods” tends to be oriented exclusively in-group (Galen 2016; Hobson and Inzlicht 2016; McKay and Whitehouse 2016).