



ANCIENT STATES AND INFRASTRUCTURAL POWER

Europe, Asia, and America

Edited by
Clifford Ando and Seth Richardson

Ancient States and Infrastructural Power

EMPIRE AND AFTER

Clifford Ando, Series Editor

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Introduction: States and State Power in Antiquity

CLIFFORD ANDO

This volume seeks to assess the power—the reach, if you will—of ancient states. Its method is historical and comparative rather than ideal-typical. That is to say, the project does not commence from an idealist understanding of states and state power, according to which states occupy bounded territories whose space and population they both know and control and within which they exercise a monopoly on fiscal matters and the authorization of the use of violence, as well as law-making and law-applying institutions.¹ The choice of method does not arise from an objection to ideal-typical or more broadly sociological analyses of the state as such.² It is rather that contemporary ideals of the state and state power are—as has long been recognized—historically contingent. This applies very precisely to notions of territoriality, the control and knowledge of persons, and the generation of norms.³ The study of ancient states in the light of modern idealist literatures therefore always risks a double fault, of becoming at once little more than a portrait of deficiency, on the one hand, while premodern states and their aspirations to power become mere way stations on the way to ourselves, on the other.

The volume is historical insofar as the chapters take a strictly empiricist approach to the questions posed by its project, which include: What powers did ancient states claim for themselves? What capacity did they have or develop to actualize such claims? What spaces and social fields existed outside the state, and what was their relation to state authority? What possibilities for

cooptation or resistance existed between non-statal resources and systems of social dependency and state elites? It is historical also in respecting the evidentiary regimes and traditions of interpretation that exist within the separate fields and disciplines on which it draws: the authors work in departments of anthropology, art history, classics, history, and Near Eastern studies.

The volume is comparative in the double sense that, despite their different points of disciplinary origin and the varied empirical objects of their investigations, the authors shared not only a set of motivating questions but also a reading list of theoretical and historical studies. These included Seth Richardson's "Early Mesopotamia: The Presumptive State," a study of the relationship between claims to powers and the actuality and efficacy of those powers on the part of states of the ancient Near East; William Novak's "The Myth of the Weak American State," which employs Michael Mann's notion of infrastructural power in order to surmount an ideological distinction in American politics between federal, state, and local governments; Mann's own essay "The Autonomous Power of the State"; and James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, which was intended to provoke thoughts not simply about the relationship between knowledge, power, and state institutions but also about the relationship between forms of power and forms of resistance. What is more, both Richardson's essay and Scott's volume reflect explicitly on the limits of state power—which is to say, on the weakness of the state—and how we might theorize that weakness in itself, as well as the gap between claims to power and the ability of states to actualize those claims.⁴ (I will have more to say about the contribution that these readings made to the project below.)

Beyond the sharing of questions and readings, the papers were delivered and drafts circulated among the authors prior to preparation of the final publication. In this way, one might say, the authors were also invited to think *beyond* the evidentiary regimes or traditions of interpretation of their respective fields, which are, after all, shaped *also* by ideological considerations, alongside other historical forces. This is a principal mechanism by which comparative conversation enriches the imagination: one's models of historical reality—of both causation and social action—become more complex, as gaps and elisions in our information and understanding are conjecturally mapped by analogical and comparative reasoning. It should therefore be clear that our object was not to situate the societies under study in relation to each other along one or another index of *Staatlichkeit*, but rather to further inquiry by specialists into their own contexts through engagement with the creative responses of others to the evidentiary regimes within which we each work.

In what follows, I first survey select trends in the study of ancient states as these bear on this project, particularly in light of late twentieth-century studies of the (legitimate) powers of modern (national) states—modern nation-states being the context of contemporary theory, whatever its content and however much it claims disinterest for itself. I then attempt to draw out some themes of the current project, in order to indicate some ways of reading the present volume.

Ancient States in Modern Perspective

Contemporary literature on ancient states has tended to focus on empires.⁵ This is particularly true of comparativist projects with roots in the ancient Mediterranean. To a point this is both intelligible and easily justified, and, indeed, this volume might be said to follow in this trend. However, it does so with a skeptical eye, and to appreciate why and how this is so, it might be useful to reflect on some of the normative and theoretical commitments that have inflected analysis of this kind in the past. I do so in two parts, focusing first on the bracketing of the city-states of the classical Mediterranean from inquiry in this field and next on recent literature on ancient empires.

The focus on empires amounts to an affirmation of several interrelated and often unarticulated claims about power relations in the varied political forms of ancient life. At an empirical level, the overwhelming majority of translocal and transregional powers in the premodern world were empires, just as a startling number of purely local powers nurtured imperial ambitions.⁶ This empirical pattern may lie behind a common, often unstated normative assumption to the effect that premodern forms of political or statal domination are those exercised by one people over another. In part, this focus on empires also issues from the success enjoyed by ancient city-state elites in naturalizing the power relations inherent in their notionally democratic and republican orders. To the extent that scholars in the modern West have understood their own political systems to operate in succession to Greece and Rome, they have had an interest in collaborating in this project. As a result, literature on the Greek polis, for example, has tended to privilege concepts such as social co-operation and coordination within the population that elite Greek males defined as fully human and therefore worthy of citizenship; correlatively, it has tended to neglect slavery, domination, and predation as key to understanding their developed political economies, even as literature on the emergence of the

polis has indexed its history to the development of monumentalized public spaces.⁷ The result, and perhaps the point, of these choices has been to index “our” histories of Greek politics to “their” definitions of who counts as political, what counts as political action, and where legitimate politics takes place. This identification of empires as states but cities and villages as communal, egalitarian, and democratic has had at least one further consequence of relevance to this project: it has required that one efface from study the relations of domination exercised by city-based elites over populations in their hinterland specifically and the rural economy more generally.⁸

For their part, ancient empires have not lacked for attention or, indeed, admiration—a consequence of the fetishization of despotic over infrastructural power, as well as the identification of despotic power with monarchy, and states with empire. Their extraordinary self-confidence (witness the valediction of Sargon II in select correspondence, which might be paraphrased, “Obey or die! Yours, Sargon”); the seeming stability of the rule of law that they claimed to impose (a confusion of enactment with efficacy, and a modern privileging of positive law over all other forms of norms, have led some to argue that ancient law sought the selfsame goods as law ever has: protecting private property, reducing risk, and promoting predictability and efficiency in exchange); the vastness of their suzerainty; and the firmness of the peace they imposed, being proportionate to the strife we perceive as otherwise endemic to worlds of sub-political ethnicities and religious groups: these aspects of ancient imperial power contributed to an early modern fetishization of empires as loci of sovereignty and practitioners of *étatisme* avant la lettre. As a circular matter, the sense that ancient states had wielded such power amplified and legitimated early modern longings for robust realizations of state control. Indeed, despite the collapse of such views of ancient government along many fronts, nostalgia for empire continues to animate political theory and public argument across many spheres.

But collapse those views did. The diminution in late twentieth-century esteem for ancient imperial states took place under pressure from theoretical and empirical advances in numerous domains, of which several have special relevance to this project. First, continental social theorists in the third quarter of the twentieth century attended with remarkable empiricism and critical insight to the break that (supposedly) differentiated modernity from what came before. Much of this work focused on the aspirations of early modern government to know and hence to interpellate individual subjects of rule and

to police social and economic conduct; much stress was also laid on the communicative technology regimes and revolutions in knowledge that subtended these developments. An important if often unstated implication of this work was the relegation of premodern government to the status of primitive.⁹

Second, historians working on ancient contexts themselves came to question the actuality of governmental power on the ground. In Roman history, Fergus Millar's splendid essay "The World of the Golden Ass" may stand as emblematic of this work (Millar 1981). Reading the novel of Apuleius, written at the height of Roman power, Millar posed the question of why representatives of imperial government were so absent from the provincial landscape traversed by the characters. The answer, he suggested, was an actual absence of direct representatives of Rome from the provincial imaginary, which he took to be a proxy for the light footprint of Roman power in the lived realities of the ancient Mediterranean. As brilliant and helpful as his observations were, Roman historians generally failed to respond with any theorization or comparative assessment of Roman state power: how might one assess or qualify Millar's observations? Do they have implications for a history of governmentality or the intensity or penetration of state power? Is the implication that the Roman state was weak in general, or infrastructurally weak? If so, was it weak in the same way, or along the same axes of analysis, that second millennium B.C.E. Near Eastern states were weak?

A third area of research that contributed to contemporary negative assessments of state power in antiquity concerns the character or, if you will, the ambitions of ancient government. In the case of the ancient Mediterranean, a significant percentage of the evidence for actions of ancient government derives from correspondence between the governed (whether individuals or communities) and the central power; and a significant portion of that material was inscribed locally, rather than in the metropole. Formal qualities of this material have been interpreted to suggest that the character of ancient government was fundamentally reactionary.¹⁰ Far from having any interest in proactive policy or imposing norms, ancient rulers and officials adjudged only what others brought before them. Governmental knowledge was thus highly contingent, and norms spread in large measure through citation and interpretation by interested lay parties. Likewise, a vast number of the preserved wood and bamboo legal documents of Qin and Han period China are in fact formularies: they therefore attest a metropolitan desire to render local legal and social relations—and, indeed, the operations of their own functionaries—legible, in

Scott's terms, but whether they can attest to more than the aspirations of the central power is a historical question that the formal qualities of the formularies cannot by their very nature answer (Korol'kov 2011; 2016).

In a fourth move, scholars influenced by postcolonial epistemologies and analysis—and, indeed, modern theories of political communication—have directed attention to the political and interpretive agency exercised by subjects of imperial power, who might formerly have been taken merely as its addressees. In one tradition, vastly greater agency is now accorded to the collaborative work of ruler and ruled in the sustaining of order. This is true of the articulation and vindication of validity claims as regards legitimacy of rule, as well as the constitution of local social orders and matters of civil law and procedure.¹¹ At the same time, modern students of governmental power have been forewarned against processualist readings of public speech in authorized fora: forms of power produce their own forms of knowing resistance, particularly but not exclusively at the vanguard of politicization.¹²

As a related matter, over the past two generations a great deal of truly excellent historical scholarship has focused on local or regional experience. At times, this has occurred because of methodological or epistemic commitments of the discipline, as when the particularities of epigraphic and archaeological evidence are first interpreted in light of their immediate context. Nor can there be any doubt that the dynamics of daily life often exhibit little of the tidiness of metropolitan knowledge or, for that matter, modern analytic frameworks.

Finally, considerable theoretical energy has been expended in recent years on empire as a political form, distinguishing ancient and modern; monarchic and aristocratic; sea-, land- and steppe-based empires; commercial and colonial; and primary and shadow empires, to name only some of the most relevant distinctions.¹³ What is more, an important foil in all such work has been modern theories of the state.¹⁴ Hence, where modern states develop and propagate institutions to extend state power and cultivate a national culture uniformly throughout their territory, and likewise insist that they alone can authorize the use of violence and generate laws within that territory, macro- and trans-regional governments in the ancient world governed through the cultivation and management of difference: they devolved considerable authority to local institutions, which betimes operated according to norms avowedly generated locally, in large measure in (rational) response to material constraints on the power of the notional hegemon.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, in consequence of pressure from very similar trends in postmodern critique, recent decades have witnessed massive shifts in perspec-

tive in the study of the post-Westphalian state. Sovereignty is dead; constitutional history as a history of legislators and black-robed judges has yielded to new and exciting forms of legal history; legal history itself has given way to greatly enriched perspectives on the sources and contestation of normative orders; and understandings of the space and scope of political deliberation have become vastly more capacious. Power is more pervasive, but neither power nor politics are limited to spaces, instruments, and authorities commanded by state ideologies. In consequence, statal orders are no longer granted the ontological security that they claim for themselves, but are understood as requiring continuous renewal and reconstitution. A philologist might well say that the origins of “state” in Latin *statio* are at last revealed. *Statio*, meaning “position” or “condition,” itself derived from a perfective passive participle: a *statio* is not a fact about a thing or the world, but something established through agential action. Statal orders are not historical givens, but forever captured *in statu nascendi*.

Infrastructural Power in Ancient States

These new critical approaches to sovereignty are now spurring important reflection among historians of antiquity, as well as anthropologists and social theorists inquiring into the history of the state. Some have argued that, far from resting on an uncontested lodging of power in monarchic points of singularity, the legitimacy and stability of ancient states were secured discursively.¹⁶ To the extent that this is so, a window is opened onto other areas, not least the historical problematics of subjectivity and governmentality, that remain insufficiently explored.¹⁷ In other words, we need to investigate not simply Sargon’s valediction, but the anticipation of his power by those subordinates who offered to die if they should fail the king. More seriously, we need proper histories of the processes charted in this volume and elsewhere by Seth Richardson, in which the presumptive claiming by states of certain powers leads historically not simply to later states also claiming those powers, but also to the surrender to those claims by civil society, in Mann’s terms, which concedes something like monopoly authority in those domains to the state.

Among ancient historians, these trends have issued in several projects with broad empirical range and considerable theoretical heterogeneity. Thus, Peter Bang and Walter Scheidel’s *Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near*

East and Mediterranean (2013) observes a loosely developmental framework, from the “origins” to “the end” of the ancient state, but the individual chapters declare affiliation to a great variety of conceptions of both the state and social power. Scheidel’s pathbreaking projects on Rome and China, by contrast, sharpen the apparent cogency of the comparative enterprise by adopting highly formalist or narrowly quantitative lenses upon their material (2009, 2015). The “Imperium et Officium” project of the Austrian Wissenschaftsfonds is something of a hybrid. On the one hand, its stated ambition is to assess each of the societies under study in light of Weberian theories of bureaucratic rationality (notwithstanding the fact that its primary form of evidence, archived correspondence from within administrative apparatus, will tend to exhibit formal qualities easily interpreted as rationalist). On the other, many of the participants in the project are editors of documentary sources, with all the respect for particularist historicism that this entails. In addition, a number of projects have sought to devise or adopt quantitative indices by which to assess the actual reach and penetration of state power and bypass the hermeneutic problems that inhere in evaluating the efficacy of any given discursive claim to power.¹⁸

The present volume makes a distinctive contribution to this literature and responds to the larger trends outlined above. Its distinctiveness rests in part on its effort to address a number of theoretical issues. First, we seek to bridge the divide between metropolitan discourse and the historical materiality of practice. Sophisticated studies of imperial ideology abound, of course, as do treatments of government or law on the ground. The existence of these separate fields derives in large measure from their attestation in very different bodies of evidence, even if participants in one or the other tradition advance political or even moral claims for their perspective. Contributors were invited to consider one recent effort to surmount this split, through reflection on Seth Richardson’s recent study of what he terms “the presumptive state” (2012). Richardson documents both the grandiose claims to authority, power, and efficacy made by second-millennium Near Eastern polities, as well as the reasons regularly advanced to withhold credence in respect of them. Viewing his objects of study against the backdrop of developmental histories of state power, Richardson not only poses the question of whether modern scholars have been seduced by the self-representations of ancient states into attributing to them capacities they did not have; he also wonders whether claiming those capacities was not a principal mechanism of bringing them into being. Richardson then suggests that, over time, states’ awareness of themselves as his-