PATHWAYS TO POWER: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND HIERARCHY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

CONFERENCE HELD AT THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, NOVEMBER 4-5, 2011

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The conference Pathways to Power: Comparative Perspectives on the Emergence of Political Authority and Hierarchy in the Ancient Near East, co-organized by Gil J. Stein, Abbas Alizadeh, and Yorke Rowan, was held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago on November 4–5, 2011. Funding was provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Grant number Gr. CONF-551), the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and the Lichtstern Fund of the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.

The Pathways to Power conference brought together twenty leading international researchers to develop a theoretically grounded comparative synthesis of the development of incipient complex societies across the Near East, in Egypt, the southern Levant, Syria, Anatolia, the southern Caucasus, Mesopotamia, and Iran. Although much scholarly research has focused on the origins of the world's earliest known urbanism and state societies in southwest Asia in the fourth and third millennia BC, much less attention has been paid to the initial stages of this trajectory toward complexity in the sixth and fifth millennia.

Between 5500 and 4000 BC, a series of incipient complex societies developed in parallel across the Near East, diverging from their Neolithic village predecessors and laying the foundations for the first urbanized states in the fourth millennium. Despite its importance, the initial emergence of social complexity in the Near East remains poorly understood at every level — theoretical, processual, and empirical. Traditional models of "chiefdoms" do not seem to fit the Near Eastern data very well. At the same time, the tremendous range of variation in the incipient complex societies of the Near East — from Egypt to Iran — suggests that there were marked inter-regional differences in the processes and strategies through which leadership, hierarchy, and socioeconomic differentiation first emerged and were then formalized.

As a result, any attempt to develop a regional comparative synthesis of the earliest development of social complexity across the Near East must examine this process in a comparative framework to identify processual similarities between regions, while also recognizing multiple possible developmental pathways and the importance of historical contingency in each region. This was the charge given to the conference participants.

The conference took place in two parts. The first was organized to facilitate comparison of the key regions of the Near East in terms of (a) the archaeological evidence for the political, social, and economic organization of the incipient complex societies of each region; (b) the processes through which social complexity developed; and (c) the role of historically contingent aspects of each cultural tradition in affecting the developmental trajectory of each region. Papers for the conference were pre-circulated among all participants and to the

four discussants to facilitate discussions and to encourage participants to present their data with in comparative context with contemporaneous developments in other regions. The ten papers in the conference were grouped into three geographically oriented sessions comparing Iran and "Greater Mesopotamia"; the Caucasus, Anatolia, and the Levant; and Egypt.

The second part of the conference consisted of two sessions aimed at theoretical synthesis. The first was a roundtable discussion of the paper presenters, moderated by Gary Feinman, one of the leading experts on theories of emergent social complexity. In the final session of the conference, four leading researchers on social complexity and leadership each presented discussant's comments evaluating the conference papers in light of broader theory and data from their own research in the Old and New Worlds.

The papers, debates, and discussants' comments at the conference enabled us to improve our understanding of the key developmental pathways toward social complexity in the Near East while at the same time highlighting key areas of debate and areas where more theoretical and empirical research is necessary.

The regional syntheses make it clear that there were multiple pathways to power across the Near East in the fifth and fourth millennia BC. The predominant role of factors such as ritual, long-distance exchange, agro-pastoral surplus production, and (in the later stages) warfare varied by region. Over the course of the fifth millennium, the development of social complexity took place gradually and the power of emergent leaders shows a shift from formal but largely symbolic hierarchy to true hierarchy. In examining the economic correlates of these political changes, specialized production and surpluses seem to have developed early in the fifth millennium, but are not in and of themselves indicators of emerging hierarchy and formalized leadership. Only when specialized production becomes attached or controlled and surpluses are concentrated can we can talk of the emergence of true hierarchy.

The earliest leaders seem to have mobilized supporters and surpluses through persuasion and consensus, using existing community social structures such as kinship networks, patron-client relationships, feasts, and ritual. Ritual extended the sphere of influence for aspiring leaders far beyond the kinship system. Inter-regional comparison suggests that there was low-level conflict in the Near East but no large-scale organized warfare until about 4000 BC. There is a marked increase in organized warfare after this date in connection with the emergence of actual states in the mid-fourth millennium. There appears to have been a significant increase in the rate and scope of change in the fourth millennium. It is clear that full-blown states had emerged by the mid-late fourth millennium BC in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and southwestern Iran.

The conference identified several directions for future research. We still need to develop robust working definitions of problematic concepts such as "power," "hierarchy," and "formalized/institutionalized leadership." We also need to look much more closely at the community context within which leadership develops, especially ritual and other non-kin-based institutions that organize and integrate communities. Finally, we need to look more closely at the ways that control over labor or "wealth in people" can be converted into formalized power inequalities.

The conference papers are currently being revised for publication.

Pathways to Power conference participants (left to right): Front row: David Schloen, Mitchell Rothman, Marcella Frangipane, Catherine Marro, Salam al-Kuntar, Yorke Rowan; second row: Stan Hendrickx, Barbara Helwing, Gary Feinman, Rana Ozbal; third row: Khaled Jayyab, Christiana Kohler, Clemens Reichel, Abbas Alizadeh, Joan Oates; fourth row: Barbara Mills, Charles Stanish, Gil Stein, Roger Matthews; top row: Guillermo Algaze, Peter Akkermans