

P A R T I



THE EARLY COMPLEX SOCIETIES, 3500 TO 500 B.C.E.

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For thousands of years after the emergence of the human species, human beings lived in tiny communities with no permanent home. They formed small, mobile societies, each consisting of a few dozen people, and they traveled regularly in pursuit of game and edible plants. From the vantage point of the fast-moving present, that long first stage of human experience on the earth might seem slow paced and almost changeless. Yet intelligence set human beings apart from the other members of the animal kingdom and enabled human groups to invent tools and techniques that enhanced their ability to exploit the natural environment. Human beings gradually emerged as the most dynamic species of the animal kingdom, and even in remote prehistoric times they altered the face of the earth to suit their needs.

Yet humans' early exploitation of the earth's resources was only a prologue to the extraordinary developments that followed the introduction of agriculture. About twelve thousand years ago human groups began to experiment with agriculture, and it soon became clear that cultivation provided a larger and more reliable food supply than did foraging. Groups that turned to agriculture experienced rapid population growth, and they settled in permanent communities. The world's first cities, which appeared about six

thousand years ago, quickly came to dominate political and economic affairs in their respective regions. Indeed, since the appearance of cities, the earth and its creatures have fallen progressively under the influence of complex societies organized around cities.

The term *complex society* refers to a form of large-scale social organization that emerged in several parts of the ancient world. Early complex societies all depended on robust agricultural economies in which cultivators produced more food than they needed for their own subsistence. This agricultural surplus enabled many individuals to congregate in urban settlements, where they devoted their time and energy to specialized tasks other than food production. Political authorities, government officials, military experts, priests, artisans, craftsmen, and merchants all lived off this surplus agricultural production. Through their organization of political, economic, social, and cultural affairs, complex societies had the capacity to shape the lives of large populations over extensive territories.

During the centuries from 3500 to 500 B.C.E., complex societies arose independently in several widely scattered regions of the world, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, northern India, China, Mesoamerica, and the central Andean region of South America. Most complex societies sprang from small

agricultural communities situated either in river valleys or near sources of water that cultivators could tap to irrigate their crops. All established political authorities, built states with formal governmental institutions, collected surplus agricultural production in the form of taxes or tribute, and distributed it to those who worked at tasks other than agriculture. Complex societies traded enthusiastically with peoples who had access to scarce resources, and in an effort to ensure stability and economic productivity in neighboring regions, they often sought to extend their authority to surrounding territories.

Complex societies generated much more wealth than did hunting and gathering groups or small agricultural communities. Because of their high levels of organization, they also were able to preserve wealth and pass it along to their heirs. Some individuals and families accumulated great personal wealth, which enhanced their social status. When bequeathed to heirs and held within particular families, this accumulated wealth became the foundation for social distinctions. These societies developed different kinds of social distinctions, but all recognized several classes of people, including ruling elites, common people, and slaves. Some societies also recognized distinct classes of aristocrats, priests, merchants, artisans, free peasants, and semifree peasants.

All complex societies required cultivators and individuals of lower classes to support the more privileged members of society by paying taxes or tribute (often in the form of surplus agricultural production) and also by providing labor and military service. Cultivators often worked not only their own lands but also those belonging to the privileged classes. Individuals from the lower classes made up the bulk of their societies' armies and contributed the labor for large construction projects such as city walls, irrigation and water control systems, roads, temples, palaces, pyramids, and royal tombs.

The early complex societies also created sophisticated cultural traditions. Most of them either invented or borrowed a system of writing that made it possible to record information and store it for later use. They first used writing to keep political, administrative, and business records, but they soon expanded on these utilitarian applications and used writing to construct traditions of literature, learning, and reflection.

Cultural traditions took different forms in different complex societies. Some societies devoted resources to organized religions that sought to mediate between human communities and the gods, whereas others left religious observances largely in the hands of individual family groups. All of them paid close attention to the heavens, however, since they needed to gear their agricultural labors to the changing seasons.

All the complex societies organized systems of formal education that introduced intellectual elites to skills such as writing and astronomical observation deemed necessary for their societies' survival. In many cases reflective individuals also produced works that explored the nature of humanity and the relationship between human beings, the world, and the gods. Some of these works inspired religious and philosophical traditions for two millennia and more.

Complex society was not the only form of social organization that early human groups constructed, but it was an unusually important and influential type of society. Complex societies produced much more wealth and harnessed human resources on a much larger scale than did bands of hunting and gathering peoples, small agricultural communities, or nomadic groups that herded domesticated animals. As a result, complex societies deployed their power, pursued their interests, and promoted their values over much larger regions than did smaller societies. Indeed, most of the world's peoples have led their lives under the influence of complex societies.