

The 'Early State' and Its Main Characteristics

Tsvetelin Stepanov

Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

Abstract: This article presents some of the most essential characteristics of the so-called early state, a concept that has been actively promoted in the last 50-60 years by cultural anthropology and ethnology to describe a form of politico-social structure in the post-**chiefdom** era. In order to avoid the "traps" of the so-called linear perspective in humans' development, the author considers it more acceptable in each particular study one to look for the intersections between history, with its tendency to focus on changes, and anthropology and ethnology, which have a greater affinity for stable structures.

Keywords: statehood, chiefdom, administration, rulership, anthropology, state apparatus.

Ключови думи: държавност, чийфдъм, администрация, власт, антропология, държавен апарат



Professor Tsvetelin Stepanov, DSc, teaches at Department History and Theory of Culture, St Kliment Ohridski University, Sofia; a mediaevalist, working in the fields of history and culture of Bulgaria, Byzantium, the so-called Steppe empire, and Western Europe.

E-mail: stepanov64@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-3915-2821

Over the past few decades, key concepts in anthropology, such as 'chiefdom' and 'early state', have shown their heuristic potential and gradually established themselves in the social studies and suffice it to point to the names of E. Service, H. J. M. Claessen, P. Skalník, T. Earle, A. Khazanov, N. Kradin, L. Grinin, and A. Korotayev, to mention a few, to illustrate the rise of the above trend. At the same time, there are also authors such as N. Yoffee or D. Sneath, who, on different grounds and to different degrees (of rejecting), question validity of the above-mentioned theoretical constructs. Joffee, for instance, is very keen on contextuality in any attempt to categorize an *early* state, and not just in the relevant political formation one to look for and find some predetermined markers of early statehood.

The above concepts came to replace – especially in both the former USSR and the socialist states in Eastern Europe dominated before 1989 by that same USSR – similar but outdated mental constructs often voluntaristically imposed by the so-called historical materialism which was quite typical (and almost obligatory) for the ex-Soviet Union. Even in the USSR, however, some scholars saw the inconsistency of the established linear and evolutionist scheme used to explain the transition from one formation to another, namely a *slavery*→*military democracy*→*feudalism*→*capitalism*, which subse-

quently passed into *socialism* and, finally, into a classless society called *communism*.

The problem is that anthropology- and ethnology-influenced specialists, trying to impose new concepts such as *chiefdom* and *early state*, along with the well-known *bands* and *tribes*, often pointed to a similar linear evolution, expressing it through the transitional scheme *tribe*→*chiefdom*→*early state* to complete the evolution through the *mature* state. Thus, once again, scholarship on man and society and their evolution, as well as that of the socio-political forms in which he/she resides with other people, faced the serious question of how to combine the ideal types (mental constructs) with empirical data, at the same time making these ideal types applicable for analysis within a given area (region, territory) and chronological frameworks, so as not to be only, or mostly, mere abstractions, even if they are created on the basis of specific historical data. It is in this direction that the opponents of the so-called Neo-evolutionism are thinking of.

It has long been the opinion in scholarship that the creation of a *state* is actually a process and not a separate act¹, i.e. the state is as a rule “in motion-and-development”. And one more important feature on which to focus our attention: there is no common and compulsory reason for all individual state-cases to which the emergence of a state is due.

According to the great connoisseur of early statehood, H. Claessen, the use of the term *early state* was suggested to him already in the 1970s by another expert in the field from the former Czechoslovakia, P. Skalník². The essential thing in this case is that both scholars – Claessen and Skalník – published in 1978 one of the most influential books in the field of *early state* studies³, thus paving the way for rapid research and clarification of theories, paradigmatic examples, and concepts in the field of early statehood. They would go on to produce another volume on

this subject matter in 1981⁴. In his views at the time, Claessen attached great importance to the figure of the “sacred/divine king” when speaking of the early state⁵. He believed that the existence of such an institution was among the typical characteristics of early statehood, since this “king” became an important instrument for the consolidation of society, acting as an intermediary between his subjects and their protecting deities. With the accumulation of empirical data, however, it became clear that the figure of the “sacred king” was not always so decisive for the various early types of states. Within the next few decades, it has become evident that the development of an *early state* is anything but simple, linear, and one-dimensional. On the contrary, in quite a few cases the processes were uneven and protracted, with consequences that were not always clear, which is why in some individual cases some of these states could simply disappear from the political scene⁶.

After these introductory words, let me outline some of the most general characteristics of the so-called *early state* that are developed in scholarship so that one can still see what is most important for this *ideal* type.

By the beginning of the 21st century, a far more modern version of the definition of the *early state* concept could be found in the works of Claessen. After a long correspondence with Korotayev in September 2006, the two scholars agreed on several important features of the *early state*: that it is, 1) an independent centralized socio-political organization for the regulation of social relations in a given complex and stratified society, divided into at least two main strata, or social classes, that are somewhat clearly defined, i.e. into those who rule and those who are ruled, whose relations are characterized by the political dominance of the former and, accordingly, by the obligation to pay taxes on the part of the latter; and, 2) that this organization is legitimized by a common ideology in which

¹ Claessen, Skalník 1978: 637-650.

² Claessen 2008: 4-18, esp. 6.

³ Claessen, Skalník 1978.

⁴ Claessen, Skalník 1981.

⁵ Claessen 1978: 533-596. See also a detailed commentary in Kradin 1995: 47.

⁶ Claessen 2008: 11. On the emergence of alternative forms, cf. Bondarenko, Grinin, Korotayev 2002.

reciprocity is a fundamental principle⁷.

However, Yoffee presents a counterpoint to the claims given above: the relationships in these kinds of formations, says Yoffee, is not to be represented solely as repressions and exploitation on behalf of those who were in power. According to him, in the earliest states we have variations of both social systems and the style of management, and not some "unilinearity" in development, and hence – uniformity; therefore, there were also a variety of development trajectories at the level of social evolution; consequently, there have been different trajectories for development in the field of social evolution⁸. Here, in my opinion, again we come to the serious and most burning question of how useful in science is a totalizing concept and, accordingly, generalization.

No doubt, one of the essential characteristics of this type of state is not only the ability of a given ruler and his entourage to control certain resources (human, natural, etc., as well as those of a symbolic nature), but also to practice of gift-giving on a large scale. In his book "The Gift", M. Mauss has long explained several specific manifestations of this phenomenon⁹, which is why there is no need to go into great detail here. So, I shall point out only the most important aspects of this phenomenon, which have had enormous influence among early human societies. For them, the so-called reciprocity of giving allowed both parties in this regard to feel that they were on the same level, at least by definition. One of the essential functions of whoever held supreme power in a given community was generosity in giving to those below them. Such generosity was perceived as an obligation of the position, not of the specific individual¹⁰. As a rule, chieftains in Euro-Asia gave weapons, horses, and gold as gifts, and that this phenomenon was related to a constant attribute of theirs – generosity¹¹. It was usually

displayed in public, at feasts or celebrations of important events, as well as during the observance of annual festivals. Underlying all this are typologically similar notions, and scholars have long established their connection with concepts such as the Iranian *hvarēnah/hvarnah/farn*, the Turkic *qut*, or the Slavic *slava*. Behind them were intentions such as "good fate/good luck/happiness" that underlay the aristocratic ethos of pre-modern human beings¹². Through such ideas, pre-modern men recognize the significance of a semantic chain of divine emanations such as *light, brilliance, glory, charisma, good fortune, abundance*, etc.

In contrast to the *chiefdom*, the *early state* had coercive institutions, although the separation of rulers and the ruled was still incomplete. The hierarchical principle formed the basis of both authority and governmental organization. At the same time, the gender/age division (of duties, of labor, etc.) continued to dominate at the lower levels of the hierarchy, as in previous periods.

One of the main features of the *early state* in comparison with the *chiefdom* is the emergence of bureaucracy (or, better, administrative apparatus)¹³. According to Grinin, the governmental apparatus of the *early state* is usually of an unsystematic nature. It uses or reconstructs previous forms of government and is formed completely anew only in important directions (or areas). As a result, in its entirety, it is a motley mixture of old and new. In general, however, *early states* have a much more complex and developed system of government¹⁴.

Among the important characteristics of the *early state* should also be mentioned, 1) that the kingship there by definition is not hereditary, but rather has features of duality, i.e. it is both elective and hereditary; 2) that there is a functional dependence between the elective/hereditary character of the kingship and the pres-

⁷ Claessen 2008: 13.

⁸ Yoffee 2005: 2, 6.

⁹ Mauss 1950.

¹⁰ Kochakova 1995: 160.

¹¹ Cardini 1987: 142.

¹² Among the numerous titles on this topic see, for instance, Golden 1980: 192-196; Golden 1992: 147, 169.

¹³ Kochakova 1995: 158. See the seminal works of Max Weber, as well as Wittfogel 1957.

¹⁴ Grinin 2012: 54.

ence in the *early state* apparatus of a council of nobles, whose functions included the election of a “king”¹⁵.

In the *early states*, the ruler’s clan began to play a new role, that of the highest echelon of power, whose members were often “scattered” in all corners of the state. The supreme authority became capable of effectively influencing both the appointment of the most important posts and the appointment of middle-ranking administrative cadres, if not in all, then at least in some of the key executive bodies and institutions of the state (e.g., those of the army, the courts, etc.). Also, such a state was characterized by greater social mobility among the subjects who performed governmental functions. In addition, *early states* had much greater opportunities to rotate members of the state apparatus if any of them performed their duties inadequately and/or unsuccessfully. Thus began the gradual professionalization of government, although “professional” is a broad enough term¹⁶.

The *early states* also had a considerable number of hereditary and clan professionals from which state officials were selected; they held their position or office independently of the center. But gradually the new type of state officials began to play an increasingly important role. Firstly, the number and role of functionaries among them increased significantly¹⁷. Since the chieftain possessed authority in all its fullness, the people appointed (approved) by the center often had only limited powers. Secondly, the body of officials became sufficiently diverse, since their rights to a given position were different. Among the new types of officials, a special mention should be made of the appointees, i.e. those who were appointed to certain positions or offices and were dependent on the ruler. This group was also quite mixed. It should be noted that rulers strove to select their people, both in their retinue and in the state ap-

paratus, according to the principle of (personal) loyalty. In this sense, people without kin, slaves and servants, or people from other tribes were particularly convenient to the authorities. In some states of this type, special knowledge was also required of those appointed to govern, and thus, in a purely evolutionary way, prospective groups of specialized managers (including scribes) were created. Foreign advisers could also play an important role in the governance of *early states*¹⁸. In this way, more and more people entered the political and administrative sphere – people who lived off the remuneration/income from performing their functions and were directly dependent on the “government” of the respective state. Of course, they did not yet constitute a whole, complete system, but the further an *early state* progressed in its development, the more the conflict between professionals “by right” and professionals “by appointment” became apparent¹⁹.

Grinin formulates four specific criteria for distinguishing the *early state*: 1) special properties of the supreme authority; 2) new principles of government; 3) unconventional and new forms of regulation of social life; and 4) redistribution of power. He also offers a number of important preliminary clarifications to this scheme: a) these features form a system; each one of them largely complements the others; b) each feature must be present in each *early state*; but the presence of only some of them is not a 100 % criterion for an *early state*; c) these features are sufficiently broad in their content, which is evident from their very names (new principles, new forms, etc.). In the present case, Grinin argues, such broad generalizations are most productive for the following reasons: they reflect the fact that in each *early state* certain narrower tendencies within the above features prevailed; it was clearly not possible for all of the new principles and forms to suddenly appear in an *early state* – only some of them could²⁰.

¹⁵ Kochakova 1995: 161.

¹⁶ Grinin 2012: 54-55.

¹⁷ On their classification, see Claessen 1978: 576.

¹⁸ On the examples of the Sogdians in the Turkic early medieval khaganates that are truly paradigmatic, see Hayashi 2004: 117-134; Stepanov 2010: 20, 28-29, 31.

¹⁹ Grinin 2012: 55-57.

²⁰ Grinin 2012: 45 f.

Another important question is what were the main dimensions of power in the earliest states? I will briefly point to the answers of Yoffee and Grinin. The first author emphasizes that they must be present and act together and are as follows: 1) control over the sources and distribution of wealth and resources; 2) maintaining the symbols of social integration and inclusion; 3) have ability to impose power by force, both at the level of central government and on the ground among local groups. These are, in fact, dimensions of the types of power – both political, social and economic, considered in their relationship, which means that they all had to be available at the same time²¹.

Of interest as well are Grinin's reflections on the supreme authority's special characteristics²². He mentions the long-held thesis that the presence of a single center is a particularly significant feature of a state²³. Indeed, for the study of the process of state formation, the analysis of its su-

preme (central) authority is of the utmost importance. It is precisely as a result of the interaction.

In recent years, Kradin has returned yet again to the important problem of the *early state's* involvement not only in class formation, but also in the existence of writing systems (including written laws), as well as a certain degree of urbanization within it. One of his meaningful conclusions is that there are states, cities and class societies even without writing systems; but where writing appeared, so did the state, classes, and urbanization²⁴.

To conclude, against the backdrop of all these tensions in historiography, I regard as more consistent the approach which tries to combine both the achievements of ethnology and cultural anthropology and those of the typical historical research, since the latter considers fluctuations, dynamic changes and sometimes even strange trajectories in the development of one or another *early* state.

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²¹ Yoffee 2005: 34-35.

²² Grinin 2012: 46-49.

²³ Claessen 1978: 586-588.

²⁴ Kradin 2013: 45.

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„Ранната държава“ и нейните основни характеристики

Цветелин Степанов

Развитието на социално-политическите системи в предмодерните времена преминава през различни етапи и един от тях културната антропология и етнологията маркират чрез термина „ранна държава“. По правило той се явява след т.нар. чийфдъм и предшества зрялата държава. На основата на различни изследвания са проследени редица съществени характеристики на този тип държавност. В него се откриват и някои от по-старите (характерни за чийфдъма) форми на организация и власт, но са открити и редица от типичните за ранната държава специфики: ясно отграничим център на власт; наличие на административен апарат; способност да се налага чрез легитимно насилие определена политика от центъра към перифериите; поддържане от центъра на баланс между аристократи „по рождение“ и такива „по заслуги“ и т.н. Вzeti в целостта си, всички те придават по-голяма стабилност и трайност на този тип политическо организиране.
