

Ancient Egypt

A Monolithic State in a Polytheistic Market Economy

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Introduction

Some goods have prices; others are priceless or worthless. The object here is to address the question of value as part of the relationship between religion and economy with the specific case of markets and ancient Egypt. We will assume that the international market system was as relevant to ancient Egypt as Egypt was to the international political system. But we also argue that the ideological base of Egyptian civilisation was essential for the very market system in which that state participated. At the same time, our concern will be to examine the origins of religion and the contribution of ancient Egypt, aside from trying to throw some light on the relationship between markets and religion.¹

To approach this project, we will be obliged to state our basic premises about the economy of the ancient Near East and the economy of ancient Egypt, as well as being obliged to discuss the origins of the state and values. Here, our focus will be on values as the key to understanding the links between the two worlds. Among other places, values are found in (1) religion, (2) politics, and (3) markets, where we have in (1) the absolutely vague (divinities and the like) which is infinitely distant, in (2) relative principles (justice & legitimacy) which are less distant, and in (3) unprincipled equivalencies (commodities & prices) which are painfully close. At some point, certain materials – gold, lapis lazuli, turquoise, etc. – touch all three systems, being linked to divinities, and power, and market prices.

¹ References have been kept to a minimum in this essay. For the economic and political issues, readers are referred to Warburton 1991, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b. For the social, cognitive and religious questions, some has been presented at conferences (among students of religion and archaeologists, rather than Egyptologists), and some is in press, but the details have not yet been entirely published; readers are provisionally referred to Warburton 2003c, 2004, 2005c, 2006.

From there, we can move on to the questions of what distinguishes an economic system from a political system and a religious system. One of our principal concerns will be the importance of the various types of control exercised in ancient Egypt. We will argue that the situation of ancient Egypt allows us to approach the importance of religious power in an economic domain where the economic power was subordinated to the religious and political power without the necessity of controlling the economy, precisely because the market economy facilitated the dominion of the religious and political system.

Paramount in the understanding of this system is recognizing (a) the character of state involvement in the economy and (b) the links between the religions, the people, the state and the bureaucracy. Of equal importance, in the eyes of the current author, is the necessity of distinguishing between origins and later developments. We will argue that the origins are in some ways quite different from the subsequent developments.

The systems

Power appears in two forms in such a system, as the personal political power of specific individuals, and as the impersonal power of market forces. To some extent, political power can be viewed as the apex, core or framework of the system. To some extent the market price can be viewed as an element, a foundation or a symptom. The just price could be viewed as the pivot upon which a social equilibrium depends, or as a supernatural entity. Crucial to all of the following argument is that neither prices nor markets can function outside of a political system with laws; however, even if themselves products of the system, the markets can push prices which determine certain elements of the system. Thus political power must come to terms with market power.

Yet, as stated, it is the political power which is decisive for the very existence of human civilizations. Political power in human civilizations depends upon cultural and social relations which produce a basis for legitimacy. The difference between politically organized societies and all others depends upon the means by which cultural support for legitimacy is created.

In this sense, politically organized human societies are highly complex – stretching far beyond social and cultural relations. Social relations exist where members interact socially. Society is a simple matter of related individuals sharing the same space: although one tends to think of fish or ants, there is probably no insuperable argument against identifying societies of ferns or pine trees. Cultural relations are more complex, as they rely on signalling devices (words in language or physical artefacts) which convey some kind of meaning: both to those who share the use of the object and to those who do not. Political relations depend upon anchoring social hierarchies into a cultural framework.

The means by which economic systems are integrated into society depends upon the existence of political frameworks, as these provide the cradle from which specialization, production and exchange can flourish. In this sense, economic relations are a further step along the ladder which moves from the social to the cultural to the political to the economic. None of these can exist without the continuing existence of the others: an economy cannot exist without a political system, and a political system cannot exist without a cultural system, and a cultural system cannot exist without a social system.

Among humans, values appear in the social, cultural, political and economic systems. Since other animals do not enjoy the cultural and political systems shared by humanity, it is evident that they do not suffer either from the existence of economic values independent of society, nor of potential conflicts arising from contradictory value systems when social, cultural, political and economic values provide different guidelines to social behaviour.

In most cases (whether pine trees or baboons) simple biological superiority should suffice to provide pre-eminence. Among many animals (and particularly primates), the sheer biological superiority is insufficient to achieve superiority, and leadership must be won through combat and negotiation. In

any case, social relations among members of the animal kingdom are more complex in that they depend upon hierarchies which are not only established but also recognized and accepted. Therefore, an animal society depends upon the acquiescence of the various members to accept the social relations. In any such society, social relations are power relations, in which certain members exercise power and others accept this (or defer contesting the power until a propitious moment).

Among humans (as opposed to, e.g., fish, dolphins and baboons), aside from the capacity to exert force, political power is also frequently associated with wealth or moral superiority. Prestige can come from wealth or from moral superiority – and can aid in power struggles. Force can be expressed through violence or leverage (influence, pressure, threats) – but, among humans, force alone cannot be transformed into political power in the sense of institutionalized power as expressed in states. To be recognized requires moral superiority. Moral superiority depends upon social and cultural signals. Thus, in states, power must be negotiated as well as maintained, and the basis of the maintenance lies in the mastery of the basic social and cultural skills.

Moral superiority associated with an individual can assure power, but moral superiority associated with a family or kinship group can provide legitimacy, and legitimacy can assure the maintenance of power beyond the biological lifetime of the original legitimate ruler. Legitimacy aids in supporting claims to power, and must be viewed as the key to state formation. Legitimacy comes from moral superiority. Obviously, without power, moral superiority cannot dominate, and without legitimacy, force cannot be transformed into social power. The combination of power and moral superiority is the only basis for a state, as the state is fundamentally the creation of legitimate social power. Real power is military power. Commercial power is always obliged to bow to military power, and commercial values are always at the mercy of ideological values, since the market value depends upon the security of the state. By contrast, without commercial wealth states have little power. Thus states must have legitimacy, military power and wealth. The power of the ideological states depends upon legitimacy, military might, and wealth. The commercial states did not exercise power directly, but merely endeavoured to maintain

their own autonomy either through independence or through negotiations.

In the Ancient Near Eastern political system, there were several different kinds of states, with two extreme examples being the ideological power of Ancient Egypt contrasted with the commercial city of Ugarit. The one was a territorial nation state based upon ideology and military power, viewing the world as an object which it could define, classify, and dominate, based upon its own values. The other was a commercial city-state whose existence depended upon both trade as such, but above all on the existence of competing ideological states, as only their competition could guarantee both its independence and its markets. Without the Egyptian and Mesopotamian markets, Cypriot copper was useless and Ugarit without customers. By contrast, Egypt and Mesopotamia could live without Ugarit as its place could be taken by Byblos or another city.

The case of the great ideological powers was quite different. Mesopotamia had no need for Egypt, and Egypt no need for Mesopotamia. The core powers of Babylon and Egypt never came into direct conflict during the Bronze Age, whereas each of these found itself enmeshed in constant conflict with its neighbours. And these neighbours not only came into contact with the other core powers, but also with the commercial states.

More importantly, the exchange systems linked all of these states into a single unit, from the Aegean to the Indus, from the Black Sea to the Arabian Sea. In this world, there were two parallel sets of values, one linked specifically to the ideological states, and one linked to the commercial states. The ideological states were defined in terms of power, and the commercial states in terms of money.

That the legitimacy of the ancient major ideological states rested on divine rule, either through patron divinities or through divine kingship hardly requires a discussion. But that does not deal with the matter of the other pillars of power, nor of the importance of the economic and military power in inter-state relations. This means that the role of the state and its origins and relationship to religion and economy must be confronted. But also of the relations with other states.

Warfare determined the relations between these states. The economic links were independent of the warfare. We thus have three or four systems.

Firstly is an evolutionary ladder involving social,

cultural, political and economic relations. We can assume that all of the major state entities of the Near East (e.g., Egypt, Ugarit, Assur, Emar) will have possessed all four of these types of relations.

Secondly is the system of political and economic relations which existed within each polity. As noted, the political and economic systems will have differed in the various states, given the basic character of those states.

Thirdly was a system of military relations based upon the capacity to project or to deflect power. The capacity to project power was limited to the major ideological states (e.g., Egypt, Babylon, Elam), the capacity to deflect power was the obligation of the minor commercial states (e.g., Byblos, Emar).

Fourthly was an international market system which actually affected regions in the periphery which had not developed stable political systems but were themselves also beyond the reach of the military capacities of the major ideological powers. These regions were incorporated into the economic relations, but not the political scheme (e.g., parts of the Aegean, Central Asia, Cyprus, Bahrain, Oman).

Over the course of time, it was possible that states could emerge or change (e.g., Assur changed from a commercial state to an ideological state; Bahrain developed into a state at times).

Values formed the foundation of these societies. As noted above, legitimacy in political systems depends upon moral superiority, which is an attribute of value, but values also appear in economic systems. The political values of Egypt were not the same as the commercial values of Ugarit, and even within human societies, economic, political, cultural and social values can come into conflict.

Before they could come into conflict – as happened in the societies of the Bronze Age Near East – the values had to appear.

Significantly, therefore, the political and economic history of the Ancient Near East can be used to argue four fundamental aspects of political and economic history.

(1) The emergence of values was an attribute of the earliest pre-state societies, and a necessary condition for the emergence of state systems with legitimate systems of government. These systems of values were originally political, becoming religious and economic. These ideological underpinnings were essential, but not sufficient.

Because, (2) the emergence of states can be directly related to military capacity and conflict. This is true both in the sense that the ideological states depended upon the military coercive apparatus, but also in the sense that those peripheral groupings which were not threatened by the military action of the major ideological states did not form states – even when their economic development was directly linked to the economies created by the ideological states. Except when threatened or influenced by the military action of the major ideological states.

Thus (3) – although the economic systems were originally created by the ideological states, and a result of the emergence of these states (and therefore did not exist before these states) – when the economies of the ideological states began to interact with the peripheral entities, the economies of these entities were able to make a leap to an economic level which would have been impossible without the economies of the ideological states. This created the basis for the peripheral commercial states (when subjected to military influence).

(4) This economic system created a different international system than that of the warfare dominated by the ideological states, and it also laid the basis for purely economic values as we know them.

The Origins of States

Thus, in the economies of the Near East since the second millennium BC, we can recognize two fundamentally different types of states, the commercial states and the ideological states. We assign Egypt and Babylonian Mesopotamia to the latter, and such phenomena as the cities of Bahrain, Ugarit, Cyprus, and Emar to the former. Cities such as Assyria shifted from commercial to ideological centres. In some regions, the societies did not coalesce into states, and in some regions, the states collapsed without a trace.

The origins of this situation lie in the fourth and third millennia, where the picture is evidently far more complicated. The growth of the Uruk trading system led to the establishment of colonies and outposts in Syria, Anatolia and Iran. Obviously, these were established to deal with independent urban settlements which eventually depended upon the trade relations with the south.

The collapse of this system can be temporally linked to the establishment of enduring trade routes leading east, through the Diyala, and the growth of these new trade routes can be linked to the growth of independent cities (such as Shahr-i Sokhta and Mundigak) and independent states (such as Anshan). In Anatolia, the cities collapsed when the south Mesopotamian system changed its orientation. In Oman the commercial societies do seem to have adopted a means of coordinating their export-based industries, but their societies fragmented when the trade routes shifted probably without ever having reached statehood. The collapse of the Anatolia cities and the growth of Central Asian and Iranian cities can also be related to the trade routes. Thus, the economic impact of these ideological states was decisive for the other states.

The origins of value, economic and ideological

At the heart of these systems is “value”. On the economic level, we argue that all forms of value are created by the state and imposed on society and commodities. In an open market economy the market can determine the precise level of prices and salaries by exploiting any differences between market value and imposed value. This capacity of the market depends, however, on the previous existence of the imposed values. We argue that imposed values were still powerful during the third millennium B.C. (the age of the ideological states), but that these had been eclipsed by market values from the early second millennium (the beginning of the age of the commercial states).

Commercial behaviour will obviously have played a role in the third millennium, as prices gradually became a reality, and state activity still played a role after the third millennium even after the state imposed values ceased to exist. Thus, we recognize that the market had and has an impact on both market values and social behaviour, but stress that as long as political power based on authority and legitimacy can maintain social systems, this power sets limits on the impact of the markets. These limits have two completely separate origins.

The first (1) is the fact that since the productive capacity of any economy (agricultural or industrial) exceeds its capacity for consumption, supply and

demand are only relevant in certain restricted circumstances and thus by themselves assign the state a key economic role, both in economic activity, and at the origins of economics and of values. The second (2) is that the impact of markets on prices and wages can actually elevate the legitimacy of the state authorities by allowing them a protective role, which can enhance the power of the state when exploited both for the benefit of the poor and the increase in centralized political power.

Despite this seemingly cynical appraisal, we will contend that, combined with markets, religion and state power actually do provide viable systems of values, and actually do assure the material interests of citizens and subjects far more than could either just distribution and just prices or unleashed markets.

Our argument thus comes into conflict with a number of interpretations, not only those of the adherents of Polanyi and neo-evolutionary approaches to state formation frequently used in archaeological studies, but also the teachings of the Neo-Classical synthesis, as well as Karl Marx and Max Weber.

Prices

We therefore begin with prices. During the third millennium, there was a wide range of copper prices in terms of silver, and the value of grain in terms of silver corresponded to a state ideal. Thus, the concept of equivalencies and the means of measurement were still in the course of development and discovery. In the second millennium, the range of copper prices was rapidly reduced, and the value of grain increased with respect to silver. These developments reveal that abstract prices are an historical product of the Bronze Age. They are not part of our inherent intellectual capacities.

In fact, Powell, Steinkeller, Warburton and others have demonstrated that markets played a decisive role in the economies of the ancient Near East. In the case of Egypt, Grimal has noted that the actual evidence for state control does not seem to be more than ephemeral. Yet, all observers concur in accepting long term price stability, and so the search for price fluctuations remains as elusive as ever. Thus throwing off the yoke of economic control and the recognition of markets has produced an even greater mystery, since prices appear everywhere and yet

they do not appear to fluctuate, after the fundamental changes in the proportions in the late third millennium

The arbitrary prices of the third millennium were impossible to maintain in the second millennium reality, and the evidence suggests that these second millennium prices determined investment in exports, both in the textile industries of the core and the raw material suppliers of the periphery. The exchanges were based upon price differentials, and thus the prices determined on the market determined investment and supply strategies. In this fashion, commercial activity can be grasped as the primary means of distributing goods, used by private individuals and merchants as well as household or state institutions.

Values

Thus, during the second and third millennia BC, the market gradually established market-prices for gold, lapis lazuli, and other materials which were considered to be the attributes of royalty and divinity. The earliest appearance of gold and lapis lazuli (and the silver used to estimate their prices) in the archaeological record of the Near East belong to the Pottery Neolithic, appearing gradually from the end of the sixth millennium, becoming abundant from the end of the third millennium onwards.

These and similar highly prized materials become the hall-marks of the earliest elite tombs in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and later become the means of distinguishing royalty and divinity. This created a demand which did not exist before. There were three responses in the market place: (1) the appearance of market prices and markets for these articles; (2) an increase in supplies from the middle of the third millennium; and (3) the creation of cheaper imitations in glass and faience.

Significantly, the sources of these materials lay in Afghanistan (lapis lazuli), Nubia (gold) and Anatolia (and the Aegean, silver). Thus the sources of lapis lazuli and silver lay in regions which had not yet established states, and which themselves lay beyond the reach of the arms of the ideological states (Naram-Sin exceptionally reaching the region of the silver mountains in Anatolia, but certainly his empire did not extend this far) while gold was eventually under the control of the Egyptian military.

Thus the flow of lapis lazuli and silver into the ideological states was the result of the markets. The

emergence of the commercial states in the Levant and in the Gulf was the result of the trade resulting from the interest in these materials. The ideological states sought to acquire the materials, and the peripheral agents desired to sell them. The intermediaries in the Levant and the Gulf will thus have come into contact with the military power of the ideological states, and state formation there been partially a result of this tendency.

Significantly, however, the earliest symbolic material was not exploited in the states of the Near East. From the end of the fifth millennium onwards, axes made of jadeite appear in Europe and in Asia. There are only a few thousand of these axes in real jadeite, although there are copies in "greenstone" which are far more abundant. The "meaning" of these axes is not strictly evident, but axes later became symbols of power, and were rapidly adopted as such in China. Certainly in Europe, they are found in "sacral" contexts, such as tombs or religious-type architecture.

Jadeite axes never became a symbol of power in the Near East. Instead, it was lapis lazuli, and usually in the form of jewellery. Curiously, a greenstone axe – typical of the imitations which appear throughout Neolithic Europe – does appear at Bouqras in Syria at a very early date, perhaps even older than the earliest jade axes in Europe or China. And the Treasure L at late Early Bronze Age Troy does include an axe of lapis lazuli, made in Central Asian style (like the three others in jadeite and nephrite). But in the Near East and Egypt, it was the beads of lapis lazuli which became the symbol of power.

And significantly, lapis lazuli becomes more abundant from the late third millennium at the same time that silver production increases in Anatolia. The earliest lapis lazuli prices come from Ebla but one also finds records in Mari. Thus, from the third millennium BC, the palaces of the Near East were purchasing lapis lazuli on the market. Early in the second millennium BC, an Assyrian family operated a export franchise in Anatolia based on lapis lazuli (rather than the tin and textiles favoured by the other families).

Thus, to summarize, the appearance of beads of lapis lazuli and axes of jade begins in the Neolithic, and in the Bronze Age Near East lapis lazuli is associated with power and divinity, whereas in Bronze Age China, jade takes this role. Although one can-

not legitimately assert that it is absolutely certain that jade and lapis lazuli had such a symbolic role before the emergence of the first states, it is evident that they assumed this role. It is also evident that they assumed this role in the context of ideological states based on military power.

Warfare

The concept of warfare is based upon the exploitation of violence with political intent. Obviously, ascribing political intent to the use of force and violence before the emergence of political societies is impossible. Thus warfare can be distinguished from violence – even group violence – by the political intent, and is therefore a prerogative of states.

The earliest states appeared within two millennia of the appearance of gold and lapis lazuli in Egypt and the Near East. From the outset, the symbolism of weapons and warfare played a role in the expression of these societies. Obviously, the concept of coercion is basic.

States are primarily about political power, expressed in terms of a military capacity to secure and/or expand the borders, as well as an internal security system to assure that laws are observed and taxes paid. That this happens is a miracle, since it is very difficult to get people to agree to cooperate on anything, and to carry out such an organization at the level of a state requires the recognition of legitimacy and the acceptance of the value of the system.

Suffice it to say that in the Bronze Age, Egypt established the only lasting territorial nation state, and itself participated in a complex international environment competing against both wily vassals and menacing foes. Egypt's most intense involvement in this system took place during the New Kingdom, more than a millennium after the borders had been established.

During this period, the Egyptian armies held off their foes in Mitanni and Hatti by securing a buffer zone along the coast and in the Orontes Valley. During this period, the vassal states between these two power centers (Ugarit, Amurru, Kadesh, Qatna, Haleb) were able to play the various powers off against one another.

Treaties and borders corresponded to the results on the battlefield.

The Economic Basis of the Earliest Civilizations

Clearly the economic basis of the earliest major civilizations lay in their agricultural capacity. Obviously the difficulty of producing a surplus for the elite and the military depended upon the social institutions and their legitimacy as well as the capacity for physical force. Obviously, it is only through the institutions that an agricultural surplus could be transformed into power.

However urban, the great civilizations of the ancient Near East were inextricably linked to the exploitation of rural agricultural wealth. But they were also dependent upon imports of raw materials, and the price of grain in the local markets was calculated in silver which was itself an import. Thus, the importance of agricultural wealth and imported raw materials will necessarily have had an impact on both the rural hinterland and on distant trading partners.

Based upon harvest yields, etc., the current writer estimates that agricultural employment of well under ca. 10-15% of the population will have been sufficient to feed the entire population of ancient Egypt. An incomparably smaller proportion will have been required in the textile industry, and an equal number in the mortuary industry.² Since there was little other employment in the ancient Near East, it may be assumed that underemployment or unemployment affected around at least 75% of the population (at a conservative estimate).

Under these circumstances, it is highly important that the prices in silver dictated by the international markets pushed down wage rates in the urban regions of the near East, and pushed up production in the peripheral regions. Therefore the agricultural surpluses and their utilization were decisive for economic development — but because of prices and imports, and their impact on stifling wage growth: not because of the subsistence requirements.

² Englund (1998: 151 note) has 15,000 workers in southern Iraq producing more than ten times the quantities of textiles required by the entire population. Waetzoldt (1972) notes that these second rate textiles were for the export market. It must be stressed that this might have been a high proportion of the local population. By comparison with this, Lehner's estimate that an active work force of 30,000 workers (working for 20 years) will have sufficed to build the largest of the pyramids means that a virtually insignificant fraction of the population will have been required for the largest of projects.

Rather than stressing the agricultural economy, we must turn to the fashion in which the states participated in the economy. Institutionally manufactured textiles were exported from Mesopotamia to Anatolia, Syria and the Indus (cf. Veenhof 2004, Waetzoldt 1972, Michel 2005). The industries for the production of copper in Oman, Anatolia and Cyprus were based on the production of a product which was produced for export, and merchants used prices to determine the most profitable pattern of distribution.

The main point is that subsistence income was not the problem. The fact of the matter was that—aside from making lapis lazuli beads or faience imitations or pyramids, there was not a lot to do in these ancient agricultural economies.

From a theoretical and practical standpoint, it is relatively evident that the institution of political power based upon force and legitimacy was the only means of imposing the requisite taxes required for household or state institutions, and that both taxes and salaries required measures. That this was initiated in Mesopotamia is evident to the current writer. The details of the development are clearly presented by Englund (e.g., 1998); there is not the slightest trace of the gradual evolution of the state or the bureaucratic procedures in Egypt, but writing and basic arithmetic were certainly adopted in Egypt only shortly after their invention, as can be seen in that the system of measures was soon applied to the sale and purchase of land by the elites in Egypt (Roccati 1982: 86-87) and in Mesopotamia (Gelb et al. 1991).

This implies that private property was among the first elements recognized in the process of the creation of institutional power. It was, therefore, possible for the elites to define the various aspects of the transaction, and to provide a legal basis for the exchange. However, once established, these equivalencies permitted a means of comparison, and this comparison was expressed in terms of prices largely determined by market forces, and the changes started from the end of the third millennium BC, not long after the initial concepts of exchange values denominated in silver began to be wisely accepted. The changes are visible in the value of grain (Zaccagnini 1997: 367), copper (Reiter 1997:132*-137*), and labour (Farber 1978; Powell 1990), as expressed in silver.

For this reason, we have argued that the value of land and property was the result of the developments

in the third millennium BC. Before that time, none of those conventional factors of production (land, labour, capital) had any role. And ever since the second millennium BC access to land has become a legal and social issue, touched by market forces, but generally settled outside the market system.

Legitimacy & Religion

What is quite apparent from the archaeological material is that there are two entirely different social systems which converged in the state: the system of belief linked to legitimacy and the system of warfare based upon force. In the ideological states, these two converged to form the basis of a powerful political system. The commercial states adopted some of the ideological trappings of the great powers, but never established the same types of power structures without actually adopting the entire system, as was the case with Assur. Assur thus abandoned its fundamentally commercial role. Fundamental to the transformation was the establishment of the ideological religious model.

Needless to say, this model was then adopted by one of the most insignificant states, Israel, and because of historical developments, the model of this state and its religion then formed the model of what was understood to be religion when *Religionswissenschaft* was invented. The complementary data from Greece and Rome provided a sufficient basis for a comparative approach, but the model of "belief" remained in place. It was the ideology which gave the military its power.

We argue that the transformation leading to a state depends upon the cooperation of the entire society, including, hunters, warriors, peasants, savants, artisans and merchants. The only means of creating a state depended upon the acquiescence of these various members of the society to both recognize a leadership group and to continue with the necessary cooperation until it was too late.

Once the legitimacy (in the sense of a legitimate sequence of succession, or an elite which had the prerogative of determining succession) was established, it was difficult to displace. This type of political organization distinguishes humans from all other groups – but it is not an attribute of humanity. It is an attribute of civilization, created by the first sta-

tes, and shortly after the first symbols of power – the axes of jadeite – appeared. Its foundations in the sense of social organization are, however, unrelated to the later forms, for the later forms are mere imitations of the earlier invention, which was itself a quantum leap separating the first states from all other forms of social organization that had ever existed. The basis was the creation of the concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy confers power in a fashion comparable to no other form of power.

And indeed, the attempts to displace one form of legitimate government or one form of religion with another usually rely on the same fundamental forms of appeal and the same exploitation of force. The modern versions benefit from hindsight as they can improve the product when proposing a new version. It is thus hardly surprising that new religions bear a remarkable resemblance to older religions, just as new states bear a remarkable resemblance to earlier states.

We argue that the only means of approaching this issue is in developing an understanding of the social role of religion. Today, in the West, religion is viewed as a system of belief, independent of political ideological and economic material constraints. It is viewed as a private matter of conscience and belief, understood in terms of textual expression. It is assumed that the conceptual approaches upon which religion is based can be traced back to the human central nervous system, and thus projected back beyond the states of the Bronze Age, and further back beyond the Neolithic to the Palaeolithic. It thus follows that when the first states were created, religion already existed in a fashion which had some resemblance to the religions which have existed ever since. In this conceptual framework, religion is not a social phenomenon, and not an intellectual one, but rather simply a spiritual aspect of the human being.

Crucial to this argument is the concept that the creation of cities and the invention of writing had no impact on the social role and character of religion. It follows that those things which we consider to be either human or religious can be traced back to an earlier age.

We will just note that the Prehistoric Cognitive Archaeologists Ian Hodder and Steve Mithen believe that myths can be traced back to the Upper Palaeolithic, and the Cognitive Historian of Religion Pascal Boyer has implicitly bought this argument in

suggesting that archaeologists have found that humans have always been as they are now.

By contrast, Schott and Kees believed that the Egyptian myths were formed during the first dynasties, whereas Assmann assigns the appearance of myth as such to the Middle Kingdom (cf. Brunner-Traut, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* IV: 279). In fact, Assmann specifies that the Osiris myth was the earliest and only myth, making Egypt a “monomythic” society and itself hardly formulated before the end of the third millennium, and that the written form had a decisive influence on the evolution of myth, and the discussion about god which led into theology (Assmann 1991, *passim*; esp. 117, 150, 222).

There can be no question that the myths of the Near East are all based on an urban environment. The earliest recorded examples can be traced back to ED III, but these appear to be little more than fragments of “religious compositions about” the gods and the “primeval time” (Heimpel *Reallexikon* VIII: 543). More significantly, Heimpel (*Reallexikon* VIII: 546) remarks that “the ease with which most [Mesopotamian] mythological content divides into” ... the categories of “the great stages of life, birth, love, and death, and the most important factors of its preservation and destruction, social order and war” ... “goes a long way in assuring us that” there is not much of a “cultural gap between Babylonia and the modern interpreter”.

Thus, the earliest known myths cannot be extrapolated back to a pre-urban environment, whereas they are readily comprehensible to us. In those societies where writing was invented or developed, myth-making is only registered centuries after the first appearance of writing, and changes fundamentally towards the end of the third millennium B.C.

It is only by comparison with the myths of modern hunter-gatherers and farmers that a conceptual means can be found to argue that there were myths before the first states. This is based on the evolutionary assumption that these peoples were pristine peoples who never evolved to the urban level, and that they thus maintained the earlier traditions that were lost. This approach suffers from two fundamental problems.

The first is that it necessarily neglects the possibility that these peoples were influenced by interaction in the last few thousand years. We have tried to show that it was precisely the ideological require-

ments of the ancient Near Eastern states which produced the demand for lapis lazuli which thus had an impact on distant Afghanistan. The people of these distant regions may not have known the purpose of the lapis lazuli, but the concept of the use in the Near East had an impact on the economy of Afghanistan. In addition, the concept of the Neolithic jadeite axes spread all across the world, stretching not only from Ireland to China, but from Scandinavia to Australia (aside from Mesoamerica, which need not concern us here). And thus there was communication among the peoples of the world in the millennia following the birth of the Neolithic.

The second is that it is now recognized by anthropologists that these peoples have had their own histories in the last few millennia, and thus they cannot be viewed as specimens of what humanity was like thousands of years ago.

Of equal significance is, however, the claim that the myth and ritual school of *Religionswissenschaft* was actually based on the diffusion of the Egyptian system of myth to other lands. This would imply that (at least according to an enlightened interpretation of this system) that Assmann’s monomythic Egypt produced the base for the polymythic societies which appeared elsewhere. If one were to argue based on the preserved evidence, then the implications would be that the invention of writing had a decisive impact on myth. If one were to draw a conclusion based on the content of the earliest preserved myths, it can be assumed that these are intimately related to life and to social order.

However, approaching religion from this empirical standpoint is impossible for the simple reason that there are no unequivocal sources which could actually tell us anything about what happened in the history of religion before the invention of writing and the state. At this point, we can do no more than summarize some observations which we believe to be crucial.

(1) Once hominids stopped moving around in small groups and settled down into larger villages, rules of social behaviour had to be invented. These will have touched everything from theft and vandalism to pregnancy and inheritance, since possessions and houses will have changed conceptions of property and prestige: the changes will have been significant. It demanded rules of behaviour which were later expressed in law codes and morals. These

frequently invoke divine injunctions (as is obvious from the Declaration of Innocence in *Book of the Dead* 125, quite aside from the Ten Commandments).

(2) Equally significant is the concept of monumental architecture which in some way came to represent either the community or some part of it. Such monumental architecture will have required the cooperation of society, quite aside from having either consciously or subconsciously determined behaviour patterns. The most spectacular case known up to present is that at Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia. These megalithic structures built either at the end of the Palaeolithic or the beginning of the Neolithic represent an extraordinary social investment for a group of people who cannot – in terms of economic evolution – have been very far from the Palaeolithic, meaning that the capacity for construction – known from Stonehenge, etc. – can be traced back to the beginning of the Holocene, millennia before the first Near Eastern myths or the earliest states.

Such architectural phenomena indicate potential which was not realized in the form of states.

Obviously, whatever the origins of religion (in the remarkable capacities of the human central nervous system) and in the social pressures of Neolithic villages, these coalesced into the basis for the legitimation of the transmission of power in the cities and states of the third and second millennia. It would appear that Assmann is probably correct in suggesting that what we understand as religion in terms of a theological discourse will have had its origins in the period after the formation of myth. This type of religious discourse can be separated from a state, and forms the basis for a system of belief and values and social norms linked to divine inspiration – independent of the political system. However, in order for this type of religious thought to appear, it had to proceed through the transformation of the state-based theological structures. Thus, the states will have been catalysts in the creation of religion as we understand it, and as it became expressed in Ancient Egypt.

(3) However, for our present discussion, the most important element will be those materials which had a clearly identifiable prestige value and a price and which were linked to the divine and the royal. Among the most important were gold, jade and lapis lazuli. As a rule gold and jade played a crucial role in China, gold, lapis lazuli and carnelian in the ancient Near

East and gold, lapis lazuli and turquoise in ancient Egypt. Needless to say, they all had equivalents in silver.

During the Bronze Age, there was a divide whereby Eurasia celebrated jade while Egypt and the Near East celebrated lapis lazuli as the symbol of the divine. Crucial is that the use of jade axes and celts, and greenstone imitations was a widespread phenomenon in Europe before they became typical in China. Equally crucial is that the jade axes of Europe were definitely used to express some kind of symbolic power long before there were any states in the Near East. It was in China that the jade axe became a symbol of power, and it was in the Near East that ornaments of lapis lazuli became the dominion of princes and deities.

Thus, systems of power and prestige were linked to market prices. But they owed their origins to this changing world of the Holocene. And the original bearers were not able to exploit the conceptual development of both monumental architecture and high value objects into actual social power. This transformation took place in the Neolithic villages of the Near East. And again, it did not take place in the original cradle of sedentism, but rather in Southern Iraq.

In southern Iraq we can follow a long development from the end of the seventh millennium BC when the PPNB villages were abandoned and the first Ubaid villages established.

In Egypt, the development only takes off in the fourth millennium, and the power structures of the earliest dynasties contrasted significantly with those of Mesopotamia.

It was Mesopotamia which gave birth to writing, monumental architecture and stratified social orders based on agricultural society. Yet it was Egypt which gave birth to the nation state, the concept of the deathless soul, and the legitimate transmission of power. It was Egypt which gave birth to myth and theology.

Once consolidated in the form of monuments and jewellery, the symbolism came to share forms known from other cultures when it was given written form.

This transformation of religion created religion as we know it, in the form of a system of belief based upon textual expression. Today, it is frequently assumed that monuments and artefacts should be understood as having some concealed meaning which could once be expressed in verbal form. At heart

the idea is that of reading the art of the era before 1000 BC as if it were a Gothic cathedral in which each and every detail of the architecture and decoration actually had an expressed verbal meaning which remained to be discovered.

Such an approach cannot possibly cross the boundary to a time before what we understand to be symbols had a verbal meaning. That verbal meaning had to be brought into existence. This step occurred for the first time in the urban civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and probably in the third millennium BC.

That verbal urban meaning was incorporated into a world with the social values to be found in villages and the prerogatives of power to be found in cities and states. Significantly, however, among the forms of expression which traversed the frontier were materials such as lapis lazuli and jade. Equally significantly, the market produced values for these materials—and they then became fixed at the apex of the religious and economic systems, representing the social values of an urban society, as expressed in the form of a state.

Markets, Ideology & Religion

Thus, we can close our survey of these various interactions by suggesting that market values determined prices from the middle of the second millennium B.C. These prices had a decisive impact on the value of land and labour. These prices and wages determined by market competition had their origins in the arbitrary equivalencies of the third and fourth millennia. These arbitrary equivalencies were based on legal and/or administrative systems developed by the states, but in the transformed world of the second millennium BC, prices were beyond the control of princes. The demand created by the wealth of the core civilizations (Egypt and Mesopotamia) pushed on the export industries of the periphery (from Greece to Central Asia). The commercial cities exploited the necessity of way stations along the emerging trade routes, and they also exploited the competition between the various major states.

The origins of these states lay in creating a legitimate power which provided itself with both military force and economic wealth. The force lay in armed bands and the wealth lay in the tax income

which they were able to collect. Ultimately, such collection would result in both the recognition of property and in the concept of the sale and inheritance of land—quite aside from the awesome tax burdens which would characterise the later imperial forms. Initially, however, the payments could have been conceived of as “contributions” or even as “token payments”.

The formation of the earliest ideological states will have depended upon symbolic forms of expression which would lead to the existence of mythologies and cosmologies. In their earliest forms, however, physical symbolic objects and monuments will have performed a role in transmitting messages. The transformation of such physical messages into a written form took place in the later third millennium in Egypt and Mesopotamia, whereas the written form of communication served other purposes for the first part of the third millennium.

However, given the wealth of these new states, the use of precious objects, monuments and other forms of symbolic representation took on a dimension which bore no relation to what had happened before, nor to what was happening in those regions which were outside state control.

Over the course of the following thousand years, the markets had an impact on regulating the prices of this paraphernalia of power.

Over time, religious thought would gradually be separated from political legitimacy, and the market appeared as an independent entity in the gap, with a decisive influence on both values and human behaviour, aside from investment patterns.

The Tomb-Robberies of the Ramesside Period

Thus, we have reviewed the various developments in a general fashion, trying to link the various trends visible from the sixth through the second millennia BC in the Near East. Rather than trying to explain how all this worked in detail, we will simply skip forward to the famous tomb-robberies at the end of the second millennium BC. We have some documentation for some trials, but in principle, we can only state with certainty that the most important and wealthiest tombs in the Necropolis of the Valley of the Kings will have been emptied of their valuable contents before the end of the Ramesside Era.

The basic preconditions for this procedure were (a) the existence of a market where gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, etc. could be bought and sold, and (b) the existence of the tombs and their treasures themselves. It can be assumed that these conditions were already fulfilled since the end of the third millennium BC, and thus that there was intrinsically nothing new about the fact that ideologically laden goods could be sold on the market in the Ramesside period.

Although the practice of placing goods in tombs is of extraordinary antiquity, it is only since the late Neolithic that objects of great value were placed in tombs, and tombs with this kind of wealth were not known before the third millennium: it is only with the tombs at Abydos and Saqqara, Ur and Agade that we encounter such extraordinary wealth. As a rule, the evidence suggests that the most valuable objects were usually placed in the tombs of the highest members of the elite in the Ancient Near East and elsewhere. Archaeologists usually use the distribution of offerings as an indicator of prestige and social standing. In the case of Egypt, it is clear that the wealthiest and most politically important members of the community had the most valuable offerings, while the poorest and least important had few or none.

Thus the value of the offerings corresponded to the social standing in this world. And these offerings also had corresponding market prices. As noted, among these items were the objects of turquoise, lapis lazuli and gold which were also associated with divinity and royalty (carnelian, lapis and gold in Mesopotamia; jade, turquoise and gold in China). As noted, these were probably the earliest symbols of power before there were any states – and before there were any market prices in the sense of those which emerged during the third millennium.

When the cemeteries were looted at the end of the Old Kingdom, the state was re-established, and when the cemeteries were looted at the end of the Middle Kingdom the state was re-established. However, the looting of the cemeteries at the end of the New Kingdom introduced Egypt to a period of civil war and foreign occupation which would last for thousands of years. The tombs of the later pharaohs are at the most pathetic imitations.

We can note that developments in Egypt were far from universal: treasures continued to be placed in tombs from Mesoamerica to China and Europe. From

the standpoint of the history of religion one can note that one of the key features of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and the one atheistic religion (Buddhism) is that tomb offerings of high value were renounced. Thus, by the beginning of our era, a new set of values had appeared which renounced tomb offerings, and the concept of material wealth being linked to prestige in the Beyond was abandoned. By contrast, the custom of including objects of value in tombs is one of those features shared among humans since the end of the Neolithic – to the extent that the *Aufgabe der Beigabensitte* in the Medieval graves of Germany is a sure indication of the Germanic tribes adopting the Christian religion. Thus in terms of religion, one can note that the abandonment of the custom of tomb offerings is an indicator of the death of religion as an attribute of power, and the birth of religion as a democratic faith.

Conclusions

The economy and the values (including the market prices) of the Bronze Age Near East were largely the creations of the ideology of the Egyptian state.

In Egypt, the gradual impoverishment of royalty had already begun before the Ramesside era actually came to an end. The thefts from the cemeteries were not the result of the collapse of power, but rather the power of the kingship had already evaporated before the pillaging of the necropoleis. In most of the known cases, the necropoleis were either robbed at a time of instability or after the fall of a dynasty. This makes the case of Egypt unique in world history.

In Egypt, from the early New Kingdom, the royal funerary temple was separated from the tomb and the royal funerary temples gradually integrated into the Estate of Amun. In this fashion, the offerings in the tombs were separated from the temple, but most importantly, it enhanced the importance of the temples – and particularly that of Amun – in a fashion which transformed the nature of the Egyptian temple, at the same time that royalty was laid low. Henceforth in Egypt, the most monumental structures would be dedicated to the gods rather than the kings: monumental architecture had become the attribute of the divine.

At the same time, the immortality which had been a prerogative of Egyptians since the Predynastic period took on a new significance in an era when the material offerings accompanying the kings into the Beyond were gradually diminished. As a result, the temples acquired a totally new significance in religious terms, in fact allowing the adoration of the gods to become the major form of religion, as became the norm in the West. (Obviously, the ancestor cults continued to play a major role in the religions of China and Japan).

In Egypt, these tendencies were accompanied by major transfers of wealth from the state and the royal family to the temples (from the Ramesside era onwards), which not only had an impact on royal wealth, but also on the economy as such. Far more important, however, were the theological consequences as the Egyptian temples had been accustomed to being the beneficiaries of royal largesse, and were not theologically prepared to become independent institutions.

Thus what we have in Egypt is the creation of the preconditions for religion as we understand it, but a theological system in which the economic parts of the system were anchored in the origins of the Egyptian state based on royal power, divinely sanctioned, and expressed in both economic and political power. Paradoxically, therefore, the Egyptian gods could not escape from their pact with royalty, while the royal family was unable to face the economically powerful temples.

Egypt was the world's first ideological, territorial nation state, and it was the most successful state of the Bronze Age, insofar as no other state maintained historical and geographical continuity for a comparable period of time. (It is worth noting that the period from the creation of the unified state ca. 3000 BC until the collapse of the last Ramesside encompasses almost 20 centuries, which is not far from the period since the unification of China under the Qin Dynasty little more than 22 centuries ago).

However, the elitist state-oriented values expressed in terms of gold, turquoise and lapis lazuli were unable to compete when faced with the market forces which insisted on exact prices for these objects, rather than allowing them to escape precision in the vague world of the divine. Thus, the market values proved to have more appeal as the state collapsed.

By contrast, the market forces were never able to provide an alternative means of organising society.

It had been the Egyptian state which had created the wealth and has steered that wealth into the necropolis. The market could draw the wealth out of the necropolis just as surely as it had drawn the lapis lazuli out of the inaccessible mines at Sar-i Sang – but the values of the market could not create a new economy.

The increased importance of market forces since the end of the Ramessides (because the state abdicated its economic responsibility) is symptomatic of developments in other forms of social organization elsewhere. The alternative set of values posited by the market without the participation of the state doubtless contributed to the growth of religion as an independent phenomenon – which results in the dichotomy proposed in the title of our workshop.

Also liegen die Ursprünge von Warenpreise in der Ideologie vom altägyptischen Staat, der sowohl die Vorsetzungen für Preise und Löhne, als auch die für die Wirtschaft schlechthin erschuf. Damals ging es um Herrschaft und Legitimität und dementsprechend bekamen Religion und Wirtschaft nur geringe Rollen zugeteilt. Obwohl Religion als ein unabhängiges Phänomen nur aus den Trümmern dessen Zerfalls entstanden ist, ist der ägyptische Staat sehr wahrscheinlich auch maßgebend gewesen für die Schöpfung von dem was nachher Religion geworden ist.

Dementsprechend können weder Märkte noch Religion – geschweige denn Warenpreise oder das Heilige – getrennt von diesem Staat untersucht werden. Dieser Staat ist hingegen auch nicht fähig gewesen deren Herrn zu werden. In diesem Sinn müsste Religion von dem Staat befreit werden, während die Märkte an dessen Untergang beteiligt waren. Ob der seitherige Erfolg von Religion auch ebenfalls dem Erfolg des Markts in der Zwischenzeit schuldig ist, bleibe dahin gestellt.

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In ancient Egyptian mythology, one of the first steps in navigating the underworld was to weigh a person's deeds against the feather of Maat. If the person had committed a great deal of wrongdoing, the person's heart would be heavier than the feather and the person's soul would be obliterated. On the other hand, if their deeds were generally good, they passed forward and had the opportunity to successfully navigate the underworld. After Akhenaten's death his son, Tutankhamun, denounced him and returned Egypt to its previous polytheistic religion. When Egypt came under Greek and Roman rule, their gods and goddesses were incorporated into Egyptian religion. Another major change occurred after the first century A.D. when Christianity spread throughout Egypt.