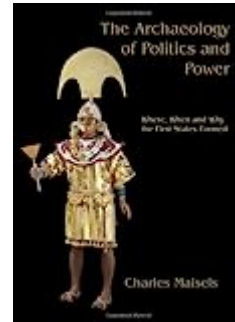


Charles Maisels. *The Archaeology of Politics and Power: Where, When, and Why the First States Formed.* Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010. Illustrations. 300 pp. \$60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84217-352-7.



Reviewed by Nayanjot Lahiri (Delhi University)

Published on H-Asia (August, 2011)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Emergence of States

This book offers a new interpretation of a much-discussed subject: the origin and evolution of early states. Challenging the prevailing assumption that the constellations of power that constitute these states are formed to “manage complexity by integrating proliferating sub-systems,” its author, Charles Maisels, argues that no early states “served the people” (p. xvi). On the contrary, they were primarily constituted to privilege the elites who controlled them. While Maisels, like James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), highlights the existence of societies outside state systems, unlike Scott, the focus of *The Archaeology of Politics and Power* is not on such societies but on early states. These are juxtaposed with one example, that of the Harappan civilization, through which the book seeks to demonstrate that complex societies need not necessarily be marked by the presence of the state.

The book’s geographical scale is impressively ambitious. Through case studies, Maisels examines the development and character of states in and across various regions from Egypt, the Levant, and Mesopotamia to north-

ern China and the Andes in South America. In each instance, Maisels discusses the early settlement patterns, the beginning and elaboration of farming, the formation of hierarchies, and the character of urban centers. While four chapters, two at the beginning and two at the end, deal with different elements in the mechanics of state formation in a general way, it is what the author calls the “evidence-based trajectories” that seem far more interesting, and this review is primarily concerned with them (p. xvii).

Chapters 4 to 7 examine state societies across a wide arc—from Mesopotamia to the Andes. Maisels describes in detail the transition from hunter-gatherer groups to the existence of multiple city states in Mesopotamia. Sargon of Agade’s attempt at unification of various entities into a single unitary state, Maisels states, had no ecological or economic rationale and was strongly resisted by the elite and by the citizens. In other words, the state that was created by this mighty ruler did not serve the interests of citizens but only fed “the ego and ambition of a king who would call himself ‘king of the universe’ ”

(p. 125). The book does not, however, try to engage with the absence of traits in the archaeological repertoire of Mesopotamia, which Maisels, in the case of the Harappan civilization, regards as marking a relatively egalitarian stateless society. The absence of palaces is one such trait. Interestingly, in the early city states of Mesopotamia, Norman Yoffee (*Myths of the Archaic State* [2005]) has pointed out that, as in the Harappan case, it is rather difficult to find palaces. Even later, "in the Third Dynasty of Ur at the end of the third millennium BC, there are magnificent temples and ziggurats, and we have a list of kings, but where is the palace?" (p. 228). While Maisels discusses the presence of a palace at Tell Mardikh, it may have also been useful to explain the absence of such residences in other places and what this implies for a model that considers this to be an important index of early states.

Egypt, the subject of chapter 5, unlike Mesopotamia did not see a prolonged evolution of village life, and, in fact, the speed of state formation there is notable, unfolding "in under two millennia of neolithisation (5th to end of the 4th), with kingship emerging ... around 3600 BC)" (p. 139). Maisels delineates the process, from farming villages to regional capitals, as well as the role of conquest, rather than of acculturation, in the unification of Egypt. Through the merging of ideology with power, the Egyptian pharaoh is imaged as a cosmic facilitator and guarantor of the farmers' efforts so that there would appear to be an "exchange of benefits" when the fruits of their labor were appropriated. Practically speaking, though, this extraction was made possible because of subjection and imposition.

In the case of China as well (chapter 6), where the earliest state-level society emerges only by circa 1800 BCE, a similar trajectory is envisaged. To begin with, Maisels explores the beginning of millet cultivation that dominated north China and rice cultivation that was the crop of the South. Each of these had their own consequences since "northern wheat/millet dry farmers," the chapter states, "were predominantly the owner-operators of their farms, while southern wet-field rice farmers tended to be tenants of landlords" (p. 178). The author masterfully sketches the emergence of stratification in Dawenkou and Longshan in the North and Liangzhu, which is south and east of them, as seen in a variety of indicators ranging from walled towns to elite tombs. Maisels, though, only devotes some three pages to the emergence and character of the earliest state in China, as seen at Erlitou culture sites, with Erlitou as its center, and instead, focuses on the Shang state and its capital district of Anyang. The

splendor of funerary riches, such as bronzes, jades, and even cowries, is strikingly captured. From the perspective of antiquarianism, the inventory of objects of the tomb of Fu Hao, the consort of one of the rulers, is specially fascinating in as much as it contained objects that, by then, were already a thousand years old and were derived from neolithic and chalcolithic cultures. Simultaneously, Maisels juxtaposes this luxury with terror and murder—in the form of the slaughter and sacrifice of human beings for burial in tombs. The average sacrifice had more than fifty human victims, mostly young adult males but also women and children, with beheading as the normal mode of sacrifice.

The final case study of this book concerns state formation in the New World Andean civilization whose agrarian basis was laid down in what is called the "Initial Period (1800-900 BC)" (p. 289). As in the case of Shang China, there is extensive presence of human sacrifice in the context of the first state, that of the northern Andes. In fact, as Maisels highlights, human sacrifice was an abiding theme in ritual iconography with artistic depictions of slashing the throats of captives to collect blood and is corroborated by the cut marks found on the anterior and lateral surfaces of the vertebrae on sacrificial victims at Huaca de la Luna. That the blood was actually drunk is also confirmed by residue analysis of goblets. Through such details and examples, the book tries to constantly reiterate that states did not emerge because they "answered the needs of society as a whole as it became more complex" but were created "due to the selfish human desire to privilege oneself" (pp. 352-353). To put it another way, states are not institutions that solve problems but form part of the problem since they are sustained at enormous cost to people and to the environment.

So far so good. But are there sophisticated urban cultures of complexity in the ancient world that existed outside state systems? Maisels seems to think that what he describes as the "Indus-Sarasvati Civilization" or the Harappan civilization is an example of a culture that is not state controlled. He sees this civilization as a kind of antithesis to other early states, since, in his opinion, this represented a sophisticated complex urban society that is marked by the absence of state formation. This short lived civilization (ca. 2600 -1900 BCE) is one that he considers as being "doubly remarkable, both because it was the only complex society either of antiquity or the modern world that operated without marked social stratification and the state; and, in what may be a related phenomenon, an agrarian society in which the villages were

not oppressed by the towns” (pp. 48-49).

For Maisels, what is crucial is that the cities are lacking palaces and temples and there are no major disparities of wealth, power, and even in comparative health indicators. The absence of a state is also manifest, he tells us, in the lack of an iconography of power unlike other early states where the ruler is strongly represented in situations of armed combat and in the world of ritual. Also, unlike other states, neither is there adequate evidence of Harappan soldiers, nor are there fortifications that were built as defensive revetments. In fact, the author does not consider the walls around Harappan settlements as fortifications. Such walls, he argues, “were often too flimsy and easily penetrated to resist serious attack” (p. 63).

Those who have studied the Harappan civilization will, however, be dissatisfied with Maisels’s marshalling of evidence and his arguments. For example, the chronology of 2500 to 1900 BCE that he suggests for the urban phase of the Harappan civilization is flawed. There are Harappan beads in the royal graves of Ur that date from circa 2600 BCE. Again, the occurrence of a typical Harappan rectangular seal in the Kassite level of the fourteenth century BCE at Nippur, as well as the presence of such seals in the same dynastic context in Bahrain and Failaka suggest a much later date than 1900 BCE. So, it seems that the Harappan civilization came into existence by circa 2600 BCE and some part of it still survived around 1400 BCE. Furthermore, the thickness of the fortifications at key sites—from Dholavira in Gujarat where it is 8.4 meters wide to Kalibangan in Rajasthan where it varies between 3 to 7 meters and Balu in Haryana where it is 12 meters wide—makes the defensive character of such features, which Maisels runs down, very hard to deny.

Most significant, Maisels has not carefully followed the debate on the political framework of the Harappan civilization, a debate that, it is necessary to underline,

is not confined to American scholars as his citations to Mark Kenoyer, Gregory Possehl, and Jim Shaffer suggest. His lack of engagement, for instance, with the work of Shereen Ratnagar who, two decades ago, published *Enquiries into the Political Organization of Harappan Society* (1991), in which she argued for the existence of not merely a state but an empire, is surprising. Similarly, some Indian scholars have pointed out that, like the Harappan phenomenon, later states including that headed by the third-century BCE Mauryan emperor Ashoka, also did not boast of the kind of iconography of power that is described in the book under review. Dilip Chakrabarti’s *The Archaeology of Ancient Indian Cities* notes that “an Egyptian or Mesopotamian type of kingship need not be envisaged in the Indus context. In later Indian history, the king, despite the occasional use of grandiloquent titles, was a much more humble figure without the tell-tale archaeological evidence of his existence. For one thing, he does not strut around sculptural reliefs towering above ordinary mortals and cutting the heads of his enemies, and for another, he functioned within the well-formulated concept of the royal duty of looking after the well-being of his subjects.”[1] Maisels is unlikely to agree with Chakrabarti’s observations or Ratnagar’s, monograph but surely he must engage with their arguments if he wants to convince his readers that the Harappan civilization was not state controlled.

There are many ideas in this book that scholars with an interest in the emergence of complex societies will find convincing. Its argument, though, that the urban Harappan civilization was not a state society in the ancient world of state systems, is not one of them.

Note

[1]. Dilip Chakrabarti, *The Archaeology of Ancient Indian Cities* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 123.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Nayanjot Lahiri. Review of Maisels, Charles, *The Archaeology of Politics and Power: Where, When, and Why the First States Formed*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30942>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.