

## Some Characteristics of States:

- Cities
- Complex Social Structures
- Hereditary Dynasties
- Writing
- Recordkeeping
- Complex Political Organization

## First States

States are a complex kind of human institution. People built states at various times in different places, but not every historian agrees about the details or the reasons why. In this video, two historians talk about what states are, where they emerged, and the reasons for their development.



00:01

*Trevor Getz, PhD, San Francisco State University*

Hello, my name is Trevor Getz. I'm a professor of history at San Francisco State University and I am here with two leading world historians to talk about the development of the early state in world history.

00:30

*Merry Wiesner-Hanks, PhD, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee*

So, let's begin with a simple question that's maybe quite complex. What is a state? What are the characteristics of those societies that we call states?

WIESNER-HANKS: A state is a complex political, social, economic, and everything structure that developed in world history relatively recently in the grand scheme of world history, meaning 5,000 years ago or so. Developed first in southern Mesopotamia, usually people think of the first states around a city. States usually have cities although not always.

00:55

*Urmi Engineer Willoughby, PhD*

WILLOUGHBY: Some historians define states as having certain features, like writing and monumental architecture, and hereditary monarchy. But I think if we were to define states in that manner, then we don't really have the ability to think of alternatives to states, alternative forms of social organization.

*An artifact inscribed with an ancient language and symbols*

*Merry Wiesner-Hanks*

WIESNER-HANKS: So there are many things that states usually have although not every single one of them has it. Cities is one of them. They have more complex social structures. Almost all of the states of the world, until very recently, have been ruled by heredity dynasties. Some states have writing and most of them have other forms of recordkeeping. So they're are a larger and more complex form of political and social organization than cities or other kinds of things that preceded them, but they build on those earlier forms.

01:45

*Trevor Getz*

*Map shows city-state of Sumer; a photo of a Sumerian desert fortress*

GETZ: I know that historians specialize, and you're both specialists. Can you give an example from your area of specialization of a community that you think was one of the first states in that region? What made it a state, to your mind?

WIESNER-HANKS: Well, I think most world historians would say the very first state in the world, which we might call a city-state— in other words, it's a small state around a city— is in Sumer. So what is southern Mesopotamia, the southern Tigris and Euphrates valley, the city-state of Sumer— it's a city, it has large-scale irrigation. And gradually it took over through military conquest and through just sort of people moving in and out, it took over the surrounding countryside.

02:24

*Photo of Moundville, featuring a single house on the top of a small hill*

*A photo of Cahokia features a staircase going up a grassy hillside; A drawing of the flat-top pyramid structures that were built in Cahokia*

WILLOUGHBY: My area of study is the Gulf South and the Mississippi Valley. And states emerged in that region in a different time period than some of the earliest states in Mesopotamia, or South Asia or even South America. So, in the Mississippi Valley, it was about 1,000 years ago, or so that the earliest states developed. The Mississippian peoples, two of the main cities were Moundville, in what's now Alabama, close to Tuscaloosa, and then there's Cahokia in Illinois. And these were Native American states. They built huge flat-top pyramids, ceremonial structures. They had complex trade relationships, extending from the Great Lakes region all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, to the eastern United States to even a little bit west of the Mississippi River. They had a very complex economy. Moundville, for example, there was a community of 10,000 people, about a 1,000 people living within the city center, within the walled city, but it was based on all of the agricultural and other artisanal work of people that lived outside of the city proper.

**03:30**

*Trevor Getz*

GETZ: In general, political scientists have two theories about the rise of the state. The first is coercive theories that say that people are generally forced into joining states. And the other is integrative theories that suggest that people worked together to build states. Which model makes more sense to you?

**03:50**

*Text bubble: Were the first states coercive or integrative  
Drawings of monarchs ruling over peoples or subjects; sculpted scene of one man committing violence against others*

WILLOUGHBY: I think it's important to keep both models in mind. Societies had different paths towards urbanization. And some states emerged out of a collective necessity, some sort of, maybe drought, or food shortage that might have led to the need for a strong leader who could consolidate labor and solve those kinds of problems. So there could be a communal aspect in that way, but usually states devolve into being more coercive, as the generations of hereditary monarchs, some of them are more generous and competent and others really are coercive and maintain their power through enslaving people and threatening people with violence or taxes.

**04:33**

*Text bubble: How does collective imagination make states possible?*

*Painting of a teacher and his students in what looks to be a history or geography course;  
A cartoon representing the colonial union in America states "Join or Die."*

GETZ: Now, there's a professor named Yuval Harari who argues that something called collective imagination is the basis of the birth of the state. Harari even writes that states are mass cooperation networks. What does he mean by collective imagination?

WILLOUGHBY: People need to buy into the idea of the state in order for it to work. So, to imagine that in a state people are connected to one another, that they have some sort of shared culture, and perhaps a shared history, a shared language, shared cultural activities. Perhaps that would create this imagined idea of connectivity. So, in that way, I think Harari is right, that without this level of buying in and this acceptance of the idea of the state by the majority of the population kind of succumbing to the state and agreeing to follow the laws and pay the taxes required, I think that that's definitely a necessary component in order to have an effective functioning state.

**05:36**

*Pictures of a lawn mower;  
a snow shovel*

WIESNER-HANKS: It might simply be, "I'm going to do this because I think... "because my neighbors will think it's a good idea. "And I kind of like my neighbors or I'm afraid of my neighbors or I want their respect, so I will do this." And this, again, this is something that has enormous power right now. We do things, certain things, not because someone is standing over us to force us to do them, but because we don't want our neighbors to think badly of us. So, we mow our lawn even if we don't really feel like mowing our lawn. Or we do something, like where we shovel our walks, or we do certain kinds of things... we keep our houses up. It's a good idea to do this, but also we don't want to lose face and status with people around us, because we want to kind of get along with them. So I think that that's... and sort of what, I think, he means by that.

**06:19**

GETZ: Thanks for joining me to talk about the origins of states in world history. I think this was a really incredible discussion.