

# Kingship

# Kingship

The Politics of Enchantment

*Francis Oakley*

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Publishing

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To Will, Charlotte, Ryann,  
Kevin, Erin, Joslyn

# Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Series Editor's Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Prologue: Matters of Perspective	1
1 Gate of the Gods: Archaic and Global Patterns of Cosmic Kingship	10
2 Royal Saviors and Shepherds: Hellenistic, Roman, Biblical, and Islamic Views of Kingship	44
3 The Eusebian Accommodation: Christian Rulership in Imperial Rome, Byzantium, and Russia	68
4 The Carolingian Accommodation: Christian Rulership in the Germanic Successor Kingdoms of Western Europe	87
5 The Sacrality of Kingship in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Papal, Imperial, National	108
6 The Fading Nimbus: Modern Kingship and its Fate in a Disenchanted World	132
Epilogue: Survivals and Revivals	158
Notes	164
Suggestions for Further Reading	183
Index	186

# Illustrations

1	<i>Japan</i> Emperor Hirohito during his enthronement in 1928	21
2	<i>Africa</i> <i>Ndop</i> portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul; <i>ndop</i> carving of King Shyaam aMbul aNgoong	24
3	<i>Maya</i> Jupiter, Venus, and Mars align above Temple One at Tikal	30
4	<i>Egypt</i> The gold mask and trappings of the mummy of Tutankhamun	40
5	<i>Byzantium</i> The Virgin Mary and her child between the Emperors Constantine and Justinian	82
6	<i>The German Empire</i> The Emperor Otto III in majesty	102
7	<i>Great Britain</i> The Archbishop of Canterbury crowning Queen Elizabeth II, June, 1953	135
8	<i>The Papacy</i> Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani places the papal triple crown on the head of Pope Paul VI, 1963	162

# Series Editor's Preface

History is one of many fields of knowledge. Like other fields it has two elements: boundaries and contents. The boundaries of history first acquired their modern shape in early modern Europe. They include, among other things, such basic principles as the assumption that time is divisible into past, present, and future; that the past can be known by means of records and remainders surviving to the present; that culture can be distinguished from nature; that anachronism can be avoided; that subjects are different from objects; that human beings are capable of taking action; and that action is shaped by circumstance. Above all else, of course, they include the assumption that history does actually constitute a separate field of knowledge that is in fact divided from neighboring fields – not merely a hitherto neglected corner of some other field whose rightful owners ought ideally, and are expected eventually, to reclaim it from the squatters now dwelling there without authorization and cultivate it properly with the tools of, say, an improved theology or a more subtle natural science.

A prodigious harvest has been gathered from the field bounded by those assumptions. Making a tentative beginning with the humanist discovery of antiquity, gaining confidence with the enlightened critique of religion, and blossoming into full professionalization in the nineteenth century, modern historians have managed to turn their produce into an elementary ingredient in democratic education and a staple of cultural consumption. They have extracted mountains of evidence from archives and turned it into books whose truth can be assayed by anyone who cares to follow their instructions. They have dismantled ancient legends that had been handed down through the ages and laid them to rest in modern libraries. They have emancipated the study of the past from prophecy, apocalypticism, and other providential explications of the future. Pronouncements on the past command respect no

*Series Editor's Preface*

longer unless they have been authenticated by reference to documents. Myths and superstitions have given way to knowledge of unprecedented depth, precision, and extent. Compared to what we read in older books, the books of history today are veritable miracles of comprehension, exactitude, and impartiality.

Success, however, has its price. None of the assumptions defining the modern practices of history are self-evidently true. The more they are obeyed, the less it seems they can be trusted. Having probed the realm of culture to its frontiers, we cannot find the boundary by which it is supposed to be divided from the empire of nature. Having raised our standards of objectivity to glorious heights, we are afflicted with vertiginous attacks of relativity. Having mined the archives to rock bottom, we find that the ores turn out to yield no meaning without amalgamation. And having religiously observed the boundary between the present and the past, we find that the past does not live in the records but in our imagination. The boundaries of history have been worn down; the field is lying open to erosion.

The books in this series are meant to point a way out of that predicament. The authors come from different disciplines, all of them specialists in one subject or another. They do not proceed alike. Some deal with subjects straddling familiar boundaries – chronological, geographical, and conceptual. Some focus on the boundaries themselves. Some bring new subjects into view. Some view old subjects from a new perspective. But all of them share a concern that our present understanding of history needs to be reconfigured if it is not to turn into a mere product of the past that it is seeking to explain. They are convinced that the past does have a meaning for the present that transcends the interests of specialists. And they are determined to keep that meaning within reach by writing good short books for non-specialists and specialists alike.

Constantin Fasolt  
University of Chicago

# Acknowledgments

When writing a wide-ranging essay of this type one's indebtednesses tend inevitably to exceed one's ability to recognize, let alone acknowledge, them. But some debts are clear. Let me convey my appreciation, then, to the following: to Tessa Harvey, Blackwells Publisher, and Constantin Fasolt, general editor of the "New Perspectives on the Past" series, for inviting me to undertake the project and for their warm encouragement and support as I grappled with the challenges it entailed; to the generations of fine students whom I have been privileged to teach here at Williams College in my seminars and tutorials on medieval political thought, and whose insight, tenacity, and good cheer as they wrestled with Eusebius, Augustine, the canonists, John of Paris, the conciliarists, Marsiglio of Padua, and the like never failed to inspire me; to my colleagues Bill Darrow and Bill Wagner, of the Religion and History departments respectively, for their kindness in casting an expert eye on some of these pages, and to my other colleagues in the weekly fellows' seminar at the Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences with whom I was able to share drafts of some of the following chapters and who also aided me with their criticism and advice; finally, and yet once more, to Donna Chenail and her fine staff in our faculty secretarial office for their characteristically prompt and accurate work in preparing the manuscript for the press. It is to my grandchildren that the book is dedicated, and with much love. They bring joy to an old historian's heart.

F.O.  
Williamstown, Massachusetts  
July, 2005

# Prologue

## Matters of Perspective

To establish the connections, in principle and in detail, directly or mediately, between politics and eternity is a project that has never been without its followers. . . . Probably there has been no theory of the nature of the world, of the activity of man, of the destiny of mankind, no theology or cosmology, perhaps even no metaphysics, that has not sought a reflection of itself in the mirror of political philosophy, certainly there has been no fully considered politics that has not looked for its reflection in eternity.

Michael Oakeshott<sup>1</sup>

“That kings are sacred” has been said to be “an anthropological and historical truism,”<sup>2</sup> and kingship and its embedment in the sacred is unquestionably a topic that beguiles. But the enormity of the challenge involved in any attempt to come to terms with it on a global scale is not to be gainsaid. And especially so if one is trying to do so within the confines of a brief interpretative essay. For that is my endeavor. It calls, then, for a preliminary exercise in intellectual throat-clearing. Or, put differently, and imagining the topic as one riding elusively at anchor in a well-protected historiographic safe-harbor, it is not one to be approached without attempting first some methodological and metahistorical minesweeping, both definitional and perspectival.

So far as definitions go, the overlapping meanings of three words must be teased apart. The first, *monocracy*, not quite an archaism but rarely used today in English and (following here the *Oxford English Dictionary*) denoting simply “government by a single person” or “autocracy.” The second, *monarchy*, denoting “undivided rule by a single person, sole rule or sovereignty,” or, more narrowly (and more recently) rule by “a sovereign having the title of king, queen, emperor, or empress, or the equivalent of one of those.” The third, *kingship*, denoting “the office and dignity of a king . . . the rule of a king; monarchical government,” with a king being defined as a

“male sovereign ruler of an independent state, whose position is either purely hereditary, or hereditary under certain legal conditions, or, if elective, is considered to . . . [possess] . . . the same attributes and rank as those of a (purely or partly) hereditary ruler.”

It is possible, by assimilating *monarchy* to *monocracy*, to distinguish fairly sharply between monarchy and kingship. This is the tack taken by Roger Mousnier, who uses *monarch* to refer to “any man who exercises the supreme power of decision in its fullness . . . whatever his legal title may be.” He deploys it, therefore, as a category capable of embracing the “tyrants” of Greek antiquity (seventh–sixth century BCE), the “dictators” of republican Rome, the shoguns of Tokugawa Japan (despite the contemporaneous existence of an emperor), as well as such modern dictatorial leaders as Mussolini (despite the contemporaneous existence of an Italian king), Hitler, Stalin, and Franco, and even “at certain moments” the presidential leadership of Charles de Gaulle. Kingship (*royauté*) he treats as a distinct and less inclusive category on the grounds that the king, while “in principle a monarch,” “possesses a legitimate, reputable power instituted by consent, recognized by custom” and mediated by “organized dynastic inheritance.”<sup>3</sup>

That is not the definitional approach I propose to take. In contemporary English usage *monarch* has come, in effect, to be a synonym for *king* or regnant *queen* (it has the advantage of not being gender specific), and, that being so, Mousnier’s proposed distinction does more to confuse than to clarify. *Monarchy*, then, I will take to be a category identical with that of *kingship/queenship* and one, further, that embraces the office of those rulers of large territories or of a number of peoples or subordinate kingdoms whom we have been accustomed to calling *emperors*, or whose titles (Roman *imperator* from the time of Caesar Augustus, Byzantine *basileus*, Russian *tsar*, German *Kaiser*, Chinese *huang-di*, Japanese *tennō heika*) are customarily rendered in English as *emperor*.

It is not only definitional tactic, however, that calls for comment. So, too, does the very choice of devoting a book to kingship. After all, if we exclude from purview those contemporary African kings whose titles no longer confer upon them any formal political role or standing and who are, in effect and at law, private citizens of their respective states, and if we limit our focus to the 191 states around the world whose independent standing has been recognized by the extension to them of membership in the United Nations, only a mere handful today possess monarchical regimes of any sort. And most of the monarchs involved are constitutional monarchs, reigning rather than ruling, serving as essentially formal heads of state charged with representing the nation to the world at large and with the performance of ceremonial duties. Regimes in the bulk of the free-standing states of the early twenty-first

## *Prologue*

century range instead from the non-monarchical but authoritarian, via the non-democratic but still constitutionalist or quasi-constitutionalist, all the way to the liberal democratic forms pioneered in North America and north-west Europe. If one aspired to identify the constitutional wave of the future, kingship would hardly come to mind, whereas one might be able to mount a reasonably persuasive case for democracy. It is true that in 1970 there were probably no more than 30 democracies worldwide. By 2001, however, that number may even have quadrupled. As a result, we are beginning to encounter in the press the casual attribution of something approaching a manifest political destiny to the forms of liberal democracy that have triumphed in the West. We are also hearing expressions of hope that similar governmental forms might prevail even in societies still bereft of effective constitutional mechanisms capable of preventing the abuse of executive power by measures short of force. But if our ears now ring to the clamor of voices in high places calling for the planting of democratic ideals in new (and sometimes improbable) settings across the world, we would do well to bring to the evaluation of such calls the hard-won measure of perspective afforded by the tragic history of the past century, and, beyond that, by the longer course of world history.

In the first place, it is surely too soon to put out of mind the harsh lessons to be learned from the apocalyptic rigors of twentieth-century political life – not only in the world at large but also in old European countries which had already logged considerable mileage with liberal democratic institutions. At the start of that century it was easy enough for progressive historians to take it for granted that the established course of history would continue to move the world naturally towards the realization of a governmental norm that would be essentially constitutionalist. To their more chastened successors at the end of the century, however, that degree of confidence was no longer available. The flowering in the first half of the century, and in the very heartland of Europe, of totalitarian despotisms of the most squalid type, the later failure in so many parts of the decolonized world of the newly-minted, Western-style constitutional forms so breezily bequeathed to them by their erstwhile imperial masters, the mounting challenges confronted by the countries of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America as they attempted (with varying degrees of conviction) to consolidate liberal democratic regimes and to create the institutions and practices of a viable civil society – such bracing realities scarcely encourage one to take at all for granted the flowering on the world-historical scene of constitutionalism itself, let alone the growth of that more exotic plant that we call “liberal democracy.”

Moreover, invoking in the second place the longer world-historical record, it would appear to be the case that the classical republican tradition in

general, and the Athenian achievement of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE in particular, have together contrived to cast so long a shadow over our Western habits of thinking about the political past as almost to blind us to one fundamental and really quite startling fact. Namely, that for several millennia at least, it has been kingship and not more consensual governmental forms that has dominated the institutional landscape of what we today would call *political* life. For that certainly appears to have been the case from the time of the “Neolithic revolution” (c.8000–c.5000 BCE), marked by the rise to prominence of agricultural modes of food production, all the way down to the acceleration in the nineteenth century of the Industrial Revolution and the concomitant shift of a growing percentage of the world’s population into essentially urban modes of occupation.

“Tyranny is the normal pattern of human government,” Adlai Stevenson is reputed once to have said. And the claim is not an implausible one. But substitute for “tyranny” the words “kingship” or “monarchy” and the plausible hardens into the indubitable. In terms, that is to say, of its antiquity, its ubiquity, its wholly extraordinary staying power, the institution of kingship can lay strong claim to having been the most common form of government known, world-wide, to man. Consigned thereby to merely *provincial* status (world-historically speaking) are the consensual, representative, republican, and democratic forms that bulk so large on our contemporary political landscape, and to which those of us concerned with political philosophy and its history have tended to devote by far the greater part of our attention.

That being so, kingship and what it involved or presupposed, ideologically speaking, clearly deserves a far greater measure of attention than it has in fact received. Certainly, it warrants a degree of scrutiny at least commensurate with that lavished, since the Renaissance, so obsessively and misleadingly upon the classical *polis* or city-state. What should equally not be taken for granted, moreover, and what calls with equal urgency for historical illumination, is the eventual marginalization of kingship in the modern Western world, as well as its parallel decline in the world at large as that world has progressively been drawn into the disenchanting orbit described by the corrosive forces of Westernizing modernization. Nor should we ignore, even more fundamentally, the dramatic collapse of – or drainage of legitimacy from – the ideological pattern that in one form or another had for long millennia sustained that monarchical institution. For in terms at least of its ubiquity and longevity, that ideology can lay strong claim to having been nothing less than the *political commonsense* of humankind. And, like the institution of kingship itself, that commonsense turns out to have been deeply embedded in the sacred and thoroughly informed by it.

Such thoughts, I recognize, are fated to sit uneasily with what has long

## Prologue

since come to function, for those interested in political philosophy and its history, as a sort of constitutive narrative of the course of Western political thinking. No more than implicit, that narrative has served nonetheless to determine the periods to which most attention has characteristically been paid (classical Greece of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and Europe of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries), to foreground the texts on which students have habitually been encouraged to focus (Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli, the great contract theorists from Hobbes to Kant, the nineteenth-century Utilitarians, and so on), and to frame the interpretative perspective from which those texts have usually been understood.

In that formative narrative, it need hardly be emphasized, the institution of kingship and the element of sacrality attaching so persistently to it get pretty short shrift. For political philosophers at least, and the contributions of anthropologically and historically inclined specialists notwithstanding, late antique and medieval notions of sacral kingship have yet to find a place under the bright lights of center stage. Nor, until recent years, have the theories of divine right advanced in the seventeenth century by such thinkers as James I of England, Sir Robert Filmer, and Bishop Bossuet fared all that much better. So little so, indeed, that having cited the remark of a contemporary that “never has there been a doctrine better written *against* than the divine right of kings,” John Neville Figgis a century ago was moved tartly to observe that “those, who have exhausted their powers of satire in pouring scorn upon the theory, have commonly been at little pains to understand it.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons for this, I would suggest, is that we tend instinctively to take the predominantly *secular* nature of our modern political life as something *natural* to humankind, an unquestionable norm towards which all societies, whatever their history, may properly be expected to tend. From that point of view, of course, what constitutes grounds for puzzlement and calls for explanation, is not the emergence on the world-historical scene of that familiar secular norm, but rather the persistence on into the present of societies to which the distinction between the religious and the political has contrived somehow to remain stubbornly alien. And yet, as Giambattista Vico, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and J.S. Mill all famously suggested, and as the beleaguered Muslim world today continues plaintively to insist, it is not the interpenetration in public life of what we in the West have become accustomed to classify as the “political” and the “religious” that needs explaining, but, rather, the novel Western distinction between the two, and the concomitant insertion into public discourse of a political vocabulary that takes such a distinction simply for granted.

Unmoved, however, by such demurrals, and unmindful, it seems, of the findings of modern classicists, anthropologists, and students of archaic and

comparative religion, those whose interests focus tightly on political philosophy and its history still resonate, by and large, to older scholarly frequencies. In their writings, that is to say, one catches distinct echoes of the views so dear to the German and English Hellenists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Peering eagerly into the mists of the classical past, those pioneering Hellenists had been persistently prone, with a glad if often overhasty recognition, to discerning in the political life of the classical Greek *polis* and in the writings of the Greek political philosophers, the looming outlines of their own cherished ideals.<sup>5</sup> And, “modern political thought and anxieties . . . [being] . . . brought to bear on the Athenian democratic experience,” the political ideals the Hellenists believed themselves to have encountered in that experience understandably took on a predominantly secular cast.<sup>6</sup>

Hence the perspective so deeply encrypted in our histories of political thought as to have become almost subliminal. In accord with that perspective some sort of fundamental continuity is assumed to exist between the modes of political thinking characteristic of the modern and those characteristic of the classical world, both periods being taken to be committed to the sort of natural and secular modes of rational explanation appropriate to truly *political* thinking. In contrast, what is seen as standing out in the history of Western political thinking is the medieval period. It is seen, in effect, as constituting something of an exception, as a sacralizing deviation from the norm, a period during which the natural categories of political philosophy as we know it were pushed to one side by motifs of *supernatural* bent. Such, for example, was the perspective embedded in the late Walter Ullmann’s approach to the history of political thought, which was taken, accordingly, to possess a secular–religious–secular rhythm, with the medieval *religious* phase being the one that needed explaining.<sup>7</sup> Nor was Ullmann alone among historians of political thought in adhering to that point of view. Thus we hear about “the essentially *secular* unity of life in the classical age,” and (after its decline) “the Hellenistic propensity for *introducing* the supernatural into politics.” We are reminded that Christianity made “*purely political* thought impossible,” and that “the peculiar problem of Church and State,” which Christianity introduced, involved “the greatest perturbation which has ever drawn men’s thoughts about the state *out of their proper political orbit*.” We are even assured, long years of specialized work in other fields to the contrary, that “Medieval Europe offers *for the first time in history* the somewhat paradoxical spectacle of a society trying to organize itself politically on the basis of a spiritual framework,” or, again, that it was only with the collapse of the medieval “ideal of a Christian Commonwealth” that there occurred “*a return to a more purely political* conception of the State.”<sup>8</sup>

Clear enough, I suppose. But that perspective I have come over the years

## Prologue

to view as a fundamentally flawed one. The historical “rhythm” I detect in the ebb and flow of ideas is not a secular–religious–secular one, but, rather, religious–religious–secular. Almost a century and a half ago, writing even before anthropology and sociology had emerged as formal academic disciplines and in a compelling evocation of the centrality of religion to the life of the ancient city state, Greek no less than Roman, Fustel de Coulanges warned his own contemporaries of the ever-present danger of anachronism, of historical narcissism, of finding their own attitudes reflected all too readily in those of ancient peoples whose characteristic modes of thought were in reality fundamentally alien to theirs. Since he wrote, moreover, the findings of the classicists, the cultural anthropologists, the students of archaic and comparative religion have converged in such a way as to confirm the precocity of his vision and to make clear that the transition from the archaic and classical to the Christian outlook was a shift not so much from a secular to a religious viewpoint as from one ancient and widespread mode of religious consciousness to another and radically different one.<sup>9</sup> And, as we shall see, the same was to be true of the later transition in Western Europe from the world of Celtic and Germanic paganism to that of early medieval Christianity.

Once this is understood it is no longer, of course, the *religious* nature of medieval political thinking that cries out for explanation but, rather, the degree to which it called the age-old pattern of regal sacrality into question, as also the subsequent (if gradual) emergence in the modern era of the uniquely secularized political vision that has so succeeded in shaping the commonsense of the modern Western world that we are persistently tempted, even at the cost of rampant anachronism, to see it as something grounded in the very nature of humankind. But historians being, as Eric Hobsbawm once remarked, “the professional remembrancers of what their fellow citizens wish to forget,” it is properly their task to deliver us from such delusions. And I would suggest that an attempt to grasp the significance attaching to the early emergence, global reach, and extraordinary longevity of the institution of sacral kingship and of the ideological pattern that sustained it is not a bad place to make a start on that process of deliverance.

Kingship, as we shall see, emerged from an “archaic” mentality that appears to have been thoroughly monistic, to have perceived no impermeable barrier between the human and divine, to have intuited the divine as immanent in the cyclic rhythms of the natural world and civil society as somehow enmeshed in those natural processes, and to have viewed its primary function, therefore, as a fundamentally religious one, involving the preservation of the cosmic order and the “harmonious integration” of human beings with the natural world.

The ancient kings, as a result, and their analogues later on across the globe, were regarded as sacred figures – often priestly, sometimes divine – and forms

## Prologue

of sacral kingship, with all that they presupposed and entailed, have well been described as together constituting “the archetypal pattern of the archaic culture which underlies all the most ancient civilizations of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Nowhere were the lineaments of that archetypal pattern more strikingly evident than in ancient Egypt, where the Pharaoh was regarded as a god incarnate whose task it was to ensure the cyclic rhythm of the seasons, to guarantee the fertility of the land, and to secure the prevention of any disharmony between human society and what (reaching instinctively and misleadingly for a word that did not make its appearance until well into the Christian era) we are tempted to call the *supernatural* forces. Egypt was an extreme case, but similar prerogatives were claimed in greater or lesser degree by the other sacral monarchs of the ancient Near East. Via the Hellenistic Empire of Alexander the Great and its successor states, moreover, the ideology undergirding such monarchies was to exert a profound influence over the political thinking of the late classical world, Roman as well as Greek, and it was able to do so because it came not as an alien heterodoxy but as a return to a way of thinking whose ideologically underpinnings had survived the long centuries of republican rule and had never been fully dismantled.

If that dismantling was, indeed, eventually to take place, it was to do so much later, amid the religious and civil wars, political revolutions, scientific, commercial, and industrial developments that were to characterize the modern European centuries. Many complexly interrelated factors contributed, of course, to that destabilizing process – not least among them the undermining of the confessional state by the stubborn growth of religious pluralism, the secularizing thrust of scientific reason and technological progress, the powerfully transformative impact of economic and bureaucratic rationalization. But while in no way minimizing the importance of such developments it will be my purpose to focus on a factor that was more fundamental, more enduring, more gradual in its working and more corrosive in its ultimate impact. That factor constituted what amounted, in effect, to a necessary condition in the absence of which the contours of our political life today would have been unimaginably different. And what was it? Nothing other (perhaps counter-intuitively) than a *religious* one, the disturbing impact upon archaic and Hellenic modes of thought of the singular conception of the divine nature that was basic to Judaic, Christian, and Muslim belief.

Involved in that belief was a restriction of the meaning of the divine in a manner that would have been no less incomprehensible to the ancients than is the archaic pattern of thought to us. If we ourselves find that pattern so hard to grasp today, we would do well to remember that that is the case precisely because our very idea of what it is to be divine has been radically reshaped by long centuries of Judaic, Christian, and Muslim thinking with its obdurate

## Prologue

insistence on the unity, omnipotence, and transcendence of God, centuries during which the meanings ascribed to such words as *god*, *divine*, *religious* and so on have, by archaic standards, been narrowed down to a degree bordering on the eccentric. In shattering the archaic sense of the divine as a continuum running through the worlds of nature and society, the dominant belief patterns characteristic of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam undercut also (and therefore) the very ontological underpinnings for archaic and worldwide patterns of sacral kingship. In so doing, they exposed the very institution of kingship to a slow but persistent desacralizing, demystifying, and (ultimately) delegitimizing process, one that such later European attempts at accommodation with the past as the early modern divine-right theory proved powerless in the end to halt.

If these are admittedly large claims, they are not made without deliberation. They presuppose and stem from a bracing effort to approach and judge the European and Western political experience from the outside as well as from the inside, and to see it, especially, from the broader perspective afforded by a reflective encounter with the millennial unfolding of universal or world history. And that encounter, I should acknowledge, has been very much conditioned by one of the intuitions central to the comparative civilizational thinking of Max Weber, the great pioneer of historical sociology, as well as by the subsequent elaboration of that intuition by such others as Peter Berger, Marcel Gauchet, and Gianni Vattimo.<sup>11</sup> Our characteristically Western modes of life and thought, Weber repeatedly insisted, are not simply to be taken for granted. However numbingly familiar they may well be to us today, they are far from representing any *natural* or inevitable culmination towards which all civilizations strive or have striven. They represent, instead, only one very particular line of development, one possibility out of several radically different ones. To appreciate that crucial fact it is necessary for us to try to envisage them as they might appear to alien eyes. Once we make that effort, succeed in raising our heads high enough to be able to peer out over the parapet of our own particular cultural trench and to engage the multiple histories of the larger world that stretches out endlessly beyond, we are inevitably led with Weber to ponder the odd concatenation of circumstances that came to determine the civilizational trajectory that has made us what we are. To such an effort, then, focusing specifically on what we are accustomed to classifying under the category of the *political*, it is time now to turn.

# 1

## Gate of the Gods

### Archaic and Global Patterns of Cosmic Kingship

The roots of the institution of kingship reach so deeply into the past that they are lost to us in the shadows of prehistory. Historians have sometimes speculated that some of those roots might extend even into the hunting and gathering cultures of the late Paleolithic era, to the powers accruing over countless generations to wonder-working shamans and to the heads of clans or lineages. It is doubtless conceivable that such proto-royal figures may have emerged in the centuries prior to the Neolithic invention of agriculture. And it is certainly the case that a dwindling monarchical cohort has lingered on into the increasingly urbanized and industrialized world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But historiographic prudence suggests that one might be wise to rest content with the observation that kingship enjoyed what was to be its heyday during the long millennia stretching from “the Neolithic revolution” and the spread of pastoral and agrarian modes of subsistence around the eastern Mediterranean (c.8000–c.5000 BCE) down to the late eighteenth-century onset of the Industrial Revolution and the accelerating shift of a growing segment of the world’s population from the land and into essentially urbanized modes of occupation.

#### **Kingship: Ubiquity, Longevity, Sacrality**

Certainly, by the beginning of the third millennium BCE when, with the invention of writing, the historiographic shadows begin finally to lift, we find that kingship had already established itself in the ancient Near East. It had done so along the Nile valley in Egypt and in the Tigris and Euphrates basin in Mesopotamia, as well as in the flatlands that stretched between them. If in Egypt society appears always to have been organized along monarchical lines, in Mesopotamia the Sumerian kingship was preceded by more broadly partic-

ipatory forms of governance centered on temples and sanctuaries. But there, too, it soon became the universally dominant system of government. As such, it was to leave its imprint also on the modes of rulership characteristic elsewhere in the ancient Near East and in the lands bordering on the eastern Mediterranean – on the Syrian, Canaanite, and Minoan kingships of the mid-third to mid-second millennia BCE, as well as on the types of kingship to be found in Crete and Greece during the Mycenaean era (c.1600–c.1100 BCE). By the latter period, altogether independently and at the other end of the world, kingship had made its appearance on the Chinese mainland. It had done so with the establishment of the Shang dynasty (c.1500–1027 BCE), and it was destined to attain its classic shape a thousand years later during the Ch'in and Han periods (221 BCE–222 CE). The following centuries saw its appearance and consolidation also in Japan, Korea, Polynesia, and central, south, and south-east Asia, in most parts of which it was fated to persist down into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. During the same era, the same was to be true of the Christian kings of western, central, and eastern Europe, successors alike of the late Roman emperors and of the Celtic and Germanic kings of the pre-Christian era. And across the Atlantic, during the centuries traditionally labeled in Eurocentric historiography as late antique, medieval, and early modern, the lands of Mesoamerica and South America witnessed the wholly independent emergence of the extraordinary Olmec, Maya, Toltec, Aztec, and Inca monarchies. Similarly, the “medieval” and subsequent centuries down to the twentieth were punctuated in sub-Saharan Africa by the rise, persistence, or fall of a myriad of kingdoms, great and small, from that of the Shilluk in the north to that of Swaziland in the south, or those of Benin and Yorubaland in the west, to the kingdoms that flourished to the east in Tanzania and Uganda.

On the world-historical stage, then, the career of kingship as a form of government has certainly been characterized by ubiquity and longevity. But it has been distinguished also by its sheer variety. Variety, that is to say, both in the shapes it has assumed and in the functions and responsibilities with which it has characteristically been burdened. If in many instances, ranging from the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt or the Inca rulers of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Peru to the French and English monarchs of early modern Europe or some of the African rulers of the same period, kingship involved the full panoply of governing roles – administrative, military, judicial, economic, religious, in others the role was a much more limited, focused, or specialized one.

At one end of the spectrum, and reflecting the turbulent conditions prevailing in this or that region, the emphasis lay heavily on the king's military role as lord of hosts or leader in war. This was true of kings as far separated by