

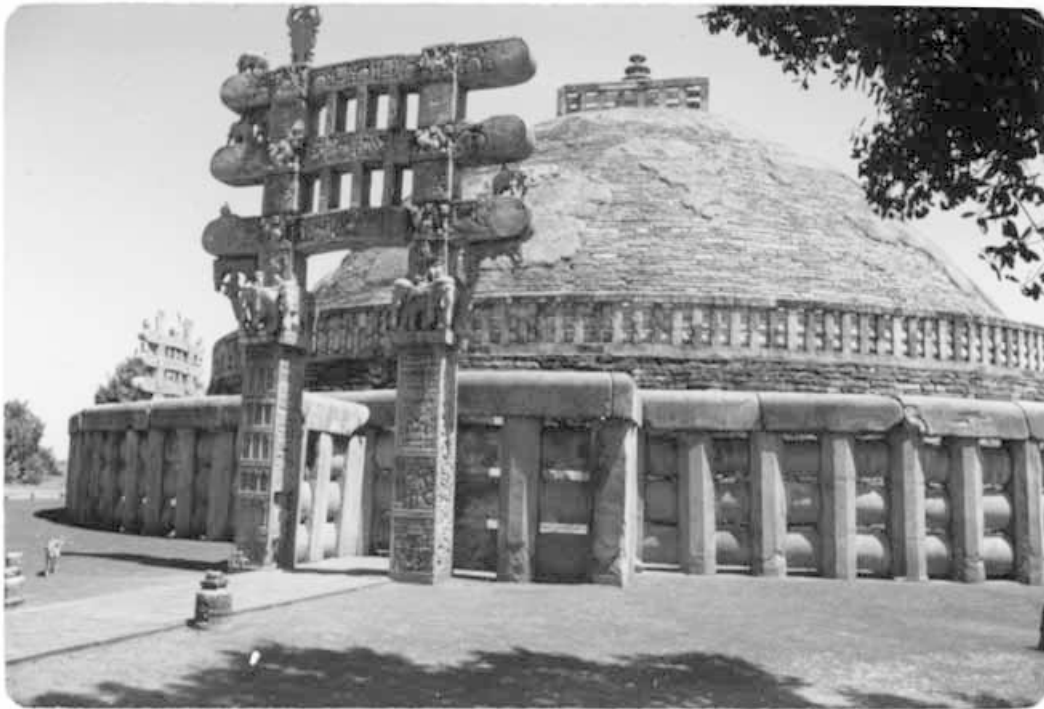
EMPEROR ASHOKA OF INDIA

WHAT MAKES A RULER LEGITIMATE?

A Unit of Study for Grades 7-12

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TEACHER'S BACKGROUND

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

During the age of agriculturally based empires, various conquerors from the western Mediterranean to East Asia brought large areas of populations under their own centralized authority. Gradually many of these conquerors came to realize that although military might was necessary to gain control over an area, sheer force of arms was not sufficient to govern effectively and ensure the loyalty and obedience of one's subjects. The Chinese would say: "You can win a kingdom from horseback, but you cannot rule from there." What strategies and policies besides raw force can leaders use to maintain their control and authority and ensure that people feel they have the right to rule and will obey their orders?

We will examine appeals for legitimacy, "the right to rule," based on such strategies as heredity, divinity, charisma, tolerance, law, and appeal to moral authority. After the rise of new religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and later Christianity and Islam, would-be emperors and kings had available a rich storehouse of ethical and religious symbols on which to draw to try to establish a more popular base for absolute rule. Newly victorious kings applied religious principles to support claims that they were legitimate, resting their authority on a moral basis, not merely on the exercise of military power and fear.

A brief introduction will show how ancient rulers typically rested their authority on military force. Then we will examine that model of kingly authority to the Mauryan empire in India (322–185 B.C.E.). We will compare the first Mauryan ruler's appreciation of the Indian ideal of *artha*, meaning the "science of survival," with the attempt of the Emperor Ashoka (273–232 B.C.E.) to legitimate his government. We shall look at both the historic Ashoka's strategy for ruling a pluralistic society and the legendary Ashoka who emerged in the succeeding centuries. We will also explore ways that rulers in both Southeast and the Sui dynasty in China tried to emulate both the historic and legendary Ashoka to support their claims of legitimacy. (Note that in some books Ashoka is spelled "Asoka.")

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit focuses on the how rulers establish legitimacy, that is, make their subjects believe they have the right to rule. The historic period covered runs from Alexander of Macedonia's consolidation of his conquests (later fourth-century B.C.E.) to the rise of China's Sui Dynasty (581-618 C.E.), which appropriated Buddhist values and laid conditions for their adaptation in Korea and Japan. Establishing legitimacy is a challenge for any leader or government. Therefore, the concepts examined here are applicable to many periods of history, as well as to civics or government courses.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

“Emperor Ashoka of India: What Makes a Ruler Legitimate?” provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, Basic Edition, (National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 1996), **World History, Era 3, Standard 2C** (Persian empire) and **2D** (Alexander of Macedonia); and **Standard 3C** (Unification of China) and **3D** (Mauryan empire). Also **Era 4, Standard 1D** (expansion of Hindu and Buddhist traditions), **3A** (Sui & Tang Dynasties), and **3B** (Chinese influence on Korea and Japan).

Because these lessons are organized around the thematic thread of political legitimization, teachers can use readings, activities, and insights from this unit as they examine examples of legitimization addressed in other sections of the National History Standards. The unit is also helpful in examining cultural diffusion and the spread of religious ideas.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the concept of political legitimacy, what makes people believe that the ruler has the right to rule, and that they should obey his or her commands.
2. To identify and understand some of the different bases of legitimacy such as power, heredity, the ballot, and moral force.
3. To identify and understand symbols of power such as a crown and other regalia.
4. To understand Ashoka's use of moral authority instead of military might as a basis for legitimacy.
5. To examine the meaning of the *stupa* and how it was associated with political power and legitimacy.
6. To investigate ways in which rulers in Southeast and East Asia adapted the Ashokan model as a source of legitimacy.

V. Lesson Plans

1. What Makes People Obey Rulers: The Question of Legitimacy
2. The Early Mauryan Empire's Basis of Rule and Legitimacy
3. Emperor Ashoka: Rule by *Dhamma*

4. The Legendary Ashoka
5. Ashoka's Influence Spreads to Southeast Asia and East Asia

VI. INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students in the class if they would obey you if you told them to:
 - Read a chapter in the textbook and take a quiz on the information.
 - Do the shopping for your family.
 - Take off their shirts or sweaters and let you listen to their heart.
 - Enlist in the army.
2. Discuss why they would or would not follow these orders. What orders from a teacher would they obey? What if a parent gave the orders? Who would they obey for each of those commands? Why?
3. Discuss what a teacher can do if a student refuses to obey. What can other persons in authority do to make people obey their commands?
4. Review historic examples students have studied of people obeying rulers such as Pericles, Moses, or Pharaoh. Why did they do so? What makes the American people willing to accept a new president and allow him to govern?
5. Review examples of people ignoring or disobeying the government. What were some historic examples of people revolting against rulers (e.g. Spartacus against Rome, the French against Louis XVI, British colonists against George III).
6. What happens when a large group of people refuse to accept the command or authority of a leader or a government?
7. Have the class brainstorm various reasons why people obey their rulers. That is, what are some of the things that make people think a ruler has legitimacy? Ask the class to make an hypothesis about effective ways leaders or rulers have to make sure people will obey them.
8. Introduce or review the idea of symbols and symbolic meaning. What would happen if you burned an American flag or a Christian cross? What would happen if you drew a swastika on the blackboard? What type of symbols might convince people in a pluralistic culture that their leaders have legitimacy? Ask students to brainstorm symbols of legitimacy, for example, uniforms people in authority wear or titles used to address important people.