

Archaeological Perspectives on Political Economies

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Reflections on the Early Southern Mesopotamian Economy

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Unique among the world's known instances of a more-or-less autochthonous rise of early states and civilizations is southern Mesopotamia's depth and breadth of supporting written evidence. Much of this ancient written record, moreover, is directly relevant to mundane economic and administrative features of the society that are the special focus of this volume. Difficult as they may be to interpret in full context, these records are largely concerned with specific individuals, acts, and relationships, in strong contrast with the more loosely grouped aggregations of behavior patterns to which a purely archaeological record is limited. Whereas the first introduction of writing followed the advent of cities and states by several centuries and so is not a strictly contemporary record, it is at least an unequalled retrospective source of illumination of one of the great formative episodes in the human career that might otherwise remain forever mute. To be sure, the causative factors initially involved cannot be unambiguously identified with this later testimony. But before long, as I will presently argue, the exceptional range of administrative uses of cuneiform writing profoundly intensified the authoritarian character of the state itself.

There are a number of excellent, relatively recent accounts that more-or-less comprehensively summarize the major bodies of textual as well as archaeological evidence for southern Mesopotamia. It would be redundant merely to abstract them here once again. Alternatively, I seek to play a somewhat more contrarian role. While covering a 2,500-year span of time (see chronological overview in Table 4.1), I stress the importance of recent investigations of human-environmental interactions, especially for the first millennium of that span. These studies appear to lend a somewhat different emphasis to the overall interpretations that currently prevail.

Readers interested in fuller, more detailed, and more variously interpreted reviews of especially the textual evidence are referred to valuable synthetic works by J. N. Postgate (1992), Norman Yoffee (1995), Daniel C. Snell (1997), Marc Van de Mieroop (1999a) and, with greater archaeological emphasis, Gil Stein (2001a). Especially with regard to agriculture, surely the dominant economic activity, a guide to the historical trajectory that research has taken in the last century or so is provided by Benjamin R. Foster (1999). Even more detailed in this respect (if in places somewhat eclectic in coverage) is the important series *Bulletin of Sumerian Agriculture*. Finally, for the fourth millennium the recently published symposium *Uruk Mesopotamia and Its Neighbors* (Rothman, ed. 2001) includes most of the relevant information employed here.

There is a second distinctive feature of the Mesopotamian instance of the achievement of pristine early statehood—which was, after all, the earliest. It challenges the applicability

Table 4.1. Archaeological Historical Chronology of Southern Mesopotamia

	Cassite
1500 B.C.	Old Babylonian
1800	Isin-Larsa
2000	Ur III
2150	Gutian
2250	Akkad
2350	Early Dynastic III
2600	Early Dynastic II
2750	Early Dynastic I
3000	Jemdet Nasr
3200	Late Uruk
	Middle Uruk
	Early Uruk
4000	Late Ubaid

of the characterization as "chiefdoms" that generally prevails in other world regions for the phase antecedent to the first appearance of cities and states. I believe it is fair to say that the substantive understanding of the concept derives entirely from ethnohistoric and ethnographic examples. That does not preclude its application to earlier settings where archaeological evidence alone is available, but it may justify taking an independent view of the question where there is an abundant-if admittedly slightly later rather than contemporary-textual record. Acknowledging that the argument cannot be conclusive at this juncture, I suggest that there is little positive evidence of any kind supporting the construct of chiefdoms antecedent to states in southern (as distinct from northern) Mesopotamia. And as Dietz Edzard has independently concluded, reflecting his unsurpassed knowledge of the cuneiform evidence: "As far back as we can trace our historical sources, we had of course rulers' titles, but they do not connote what I would call 'chieftains.' . . . I would be at a loss to find a word for 'chieftain'" (in discussion, in Hudson and Levine 1996:58).

A number of features tentatively suggest the possibility of an alternative developmental path. Most important is an early and continuing architectural emphasis on ceremonial/community structures conventionally but perhaps too narrowly characterized as "temples" (Nissen 2001:154-155). These relatively large and formal buildings, although dominating the communities growing up around them, provide little to suggest an early association with individuals of authority.

tative, chiefly status. Organized instead around these institutions, at the time when the very earliest writing first provides us with a glimpse of their mode of operations, are somewhat abstract, functional categories of people that are not suggestive of either ascriptive kin-group membership or authoritarian, personalistic control. These features demonstrate the existence of comprehensive redistributive systems involving standardized rations, although admittedly they do little to clarify how this system originated or what decision-making powers were involved in sustaining its operations. At roughly the same time, powerful, militaristic, primarily secular figures also made their first appearance in glyptic art. But this was after the advent of true cities and was associated with a general level of scale and complexity *implying* the unambiguous existence of states. In summary, there are grounds for doubting that individuals of chiefly status led the way to states.

Thus it is possible that there was a different path to statehood, lacking chiefdoms as a transitional step, in at least the Mesopotamian case. Enhancements of individual status might well have been preponderantly a part of the process by which contending state organizations emerged, perhaps accompanying progressively larger and more institutionalized military activities. The seemingly rather abrupt transition to settlements of unambiguously urban size and complexity may be another factor, precipitating new forms of social organization with different, more functionally specialized internal structures than those usually associated with chiefdoms. This is certainly a plausible implication of some recent investigations, the findings of which need to be recounted at the outset.

CHANGED EVALUATION OF EARLY URBANISM'S ENVIRONMENT

The environmental context of the beginnings of southern Mesopotamian states and urbanism looks substantially different today than it did just a very few years ago. Studies of declassified satellite photographs by Jennifer Pournelle (University of California, San Diego) shed new light on the lower plain in particular. They persuasively establish that widespread flooded areas were only gradually draining during the fourth millennium. Marshes and tidewater lagoons formed a major constituent of the landscape and played a correspondingly substantial role in human subsistence. Apart from a rich spectrum of aquatic resources, zones suitable for cereal cultivation were at first quite restricted locally so that foraging conditions were more favorable for cattle and pigs than for sheep and goats. Late Ubaid settlements had been sited on relatively widely separated "turtlebacks," slightly elevated islands in generally marshy surroundings. As the Flandrian marine transgression receded during the course of the fourth millennium, continuous drainage channels emerged more clearly. Adjoining levees developed, linking the earlier turtlebacks into continuous strips of slightly elevated land. As drainage continued, there were growing zones along the backslopes of the levees suitable for canal irrigation. Recent paleoclimatological research indicates that the Tigris-Euphrates hydrological cycles were more favorable to the winter cereal-growing season than they are today in the timing of the season of destructive flooding. Colder, drier winters would have inhibited the winter growing season for cereal crops that later became traditional, but on the other hand, a shift in the Indian Ocean monsoon belt made some summer precipitation likely. All this suggests an altered spectrum of subsistence techniques and choices from those extensively documented in the later Sumerian Geographica (Civil 1994) and other third-millennium textual sources.

Unclear at present is how far northward this characterization applied within the present extent of the Mesopotamian alluvium. The limits of the Flandrian transgression of the Persian Gulf itself lay some 200 km north of the present shoreline, in the vicinity of al'Amara, but the eastern and western boundaries of this large embayment are still ill-defined and in any case graded into lagoons and marshes covering large additional areas.

Unfortunately, the northern part of the alluvium is heavily overlain with later canal levees and irrigation sediments. Hence, although there has been extensive (if erratic) wind deflation in some areas, early land surfaces tend to be progressively more deeply buried as one moves northward. It is likely that cereal cultivation and sheep and goat herding played a more prominent part there throughout the fourth millennium. But the southern part of the plain, where the Sumerian cities of the third millennium were concentrated, clearly coincides with these formerly marshy environs rather than the consistently semiarid regime found today.

Another major new finding proceeds in part from Pournelle's studies of satellite imagery but is given greater temporal precision and historical significance by a persuasive analysis of relevant economic and other textual sources by Piotr Steinkeller (2001). It has long been taken for granted that the Mesopotamian plain depended almost completely on the Euphrates. But it now seems clear that the Tigris and Euphrates were frequently if not altogether consistently linked into a naturally interconnected, anastomosing system during and after the fourth millennium as well as earlier. During much of this time the Tigris directly provided a principal source of canal transportation and irrigation water for many of the major urban centers, including Adab, Umma, and the large Lagash complex. Furthermore, a branch canal taking off the Tigris above Umma was at least a supplementary source for Uruk and continued on to reach Ur. This reconfiguration points the way to a much better understanding of barge traffic along the major rivers and canals, especially during the Ur III period at the end of the third millennium, when many cuneiform documents specify the duration of towed travel, and hence approximate distance, between cities whose location is still unknown. In prospect is a vastly improved understanding of the economic geography of the plain.

There are two striking features of the southern Mesopotamian alluvial environment during the fourth millennium that bear on its extraordinary course of development. First, it underwent a long transition away from prevailing marshy conditions and in the direction of conditions suitable for the traditional irrigation agriculture with which we today, and the texts of the third millennium (and later), associate it. But second, although the transition toward semiaridity surely presented important challenges of adjustment to which I will return, both the earlier and the later environments were potentially conducive to flourishing urban life. This is well understood for large-scale irrigation on a semiarid plain but may seem more surprising for marshes, which may have a contemporary reputation for being inhospitable. But under the different conditions then obtaining, they offered a stable multiplicity of rich subsistence and construction resources. Moreover, they made possible bulk transport by boat or barge that permitted very economical concentration of subsistence resources of every kind in large population centers. A vivid sense of the significance of both their resource and their transport potential can be found in the classic account by the early Islamic historian al-Tabar. of the Zanj rebellion in a region of the southern plain that again returned to marshlands in the later ninth century A.D. (Waines 1992).

As the uppermost centers of the settlement hierarchy moved to unprecedented levels, the diversified subsistence system responded with substantial opportunities of its own. These took two principal forms. In the first place, there were a number of distinct, complementary streams of subsistence products drawn simultaneously from a mosaic of marine, marsh, garden, field, and steppe ecosystems. Enormous as was the overall advantage that this variability provided, each individual component imposed a seasonal production cycle of its own and an accompanying set of risks that needed to be buffered and shared. Here, in other words, were major inducements to the development of specialized technologies and bodies of skill or experience. Nor was any unchanging arrangement feasible for bringing together and redistributing

these resources for the common benefit, since the mosaic was in fact a continuously changing kaleidoscope as the drainage of the alluvium went forward. And superimposed on this need for continuing adaptive modification was the process of rapid population growth, urbanization involving large-scale shifts in subsistence routines and residence, and surely political centralization as well.

"THE URBAN REVOLUTION"

That these were highly favorable circumstances for a very rapid expansion of human settlement, largely by natural increase and shifts within the alluvium but probably also in part by immigration from adjoining areas in all directions, is shown by the striking increases that archaeological surveys have recorded in the numbers of sites of all size categories. Perhaps most notable was the first appearance of sites of clearly urban proportions, exceeding (and sometimes greatly exceeding) 50 ha. Uruk, in particular, already extended over 250 ha by the mid-fourth millennium. Identifiable mainly by their size, their monumental institutions (whose associated religious features and activities certainly do not exclude more encompassing socioeconomic or sociopolitical roles), and the relative wealth and diversity of their material remains, such settlements were unquestionably present before the middle of the millennium.

V. Gordon Childe's (1950) anticipatory characterization of this as an "urban revolution" decades before corroborative data to support it became available primarily from archaeological surveys (Adams 1981, 2002; Adams and Nissen 1972; Wilkinson n.d.) still accurately conveys the transformative character of the change as well as the abiding ambiguity about the respective roles of force and persuasive incentives in bringing it about. Within the limits of ceramic and radiocarbon chronologies, the evidence is increasingly convincing that this was a progressive and consistent process, although protracted over a longer period of at least several centuries rather than the truly implosive process we who were involved in the surveys originally assumed (Rothman 2001; Wright and Rupley 2001). Urban population growth could well have been encouraged by the relative advantages of politicoeconomic—as well as military—power it conferred on large concentrations of urban residents. On the other hand, cities also brought heightened problems of sanitation and disease, as well as the need to develop new logistical solutions to the challenges of longer-range subsistence procurement and storage. Nor were the reciprocal changes in the surrounding hinterlands necessarily any smoother, as Yoffee notes: "The countryside in early states, with its villages connected to cities and with its own specialized institutions of production and consumption, is utterly different than the countryside of pre-state times. The evolution of states, thus, cannot be modeled as a layer cake, with the state as the highest layer atop a stable and unchanging social base" (1995:284).

On balance, it seems fair to conclude that a concurrent emptying out of the immediately adjacent alluvial countryside was a substantial contributor to urbanization. Indeed, the surveys clearly disclose just such a process of attrition of formerly more evenly distributed small towns and villages in at least the southernmost portion of the alluvium (Pollock 2001).

The new class of urban settlements, viewed in political terms as the nuclei of emergent states, surely encouraged various economies of scale. By size alone, and by their ability to marshal unprecedented concentrations of population both as offensive military forces and as labor *corvées* to construct civic, defensive, and irrigation works, they could dominate their immediate neighbors. Patron deities (and their human priests, managers, skilled craftsmen, and retainers), thought of as occupying sacred households in cities, would have become the beneficiaries of growing flows of offerings in temple complexes that also were growing in monumentality. Archaeologists tend to be agnostic materialists by nature, but the symbolic aspects of urban hegemony may be no less important than the material ones.

Yet until the advent of writing late in the fourth millennium, the details of these processes remain largely obscure. Particularly at the elementary, household, or *oikos*, level where a more balanced archaeological record should in theory be most accessible, there is as yet little information available. We also are virtually ignorant of how the outlying countryside was transformed as former villagers were drawn into the orbit of the cities. Some indirect evidence of the way in which lower-status members of the community--certainly including most recent rural immigrants would have been drawn in may be provided by the terminology employed in the early archaic tablets from Uruk for the redistribution of grain rations to dependent male and female laborers. They are listed separately according to sex and age, "herded" in exactly the same terms (although also individually named) as in parallel accounts of herds of domestic animals (Englund 1998:176).

Was agriculture carried on exclusively by herdsmen and cultivators commuting for substantial distances from urban residences, or were there new, impermanent settlements into which agriculturalists moved at times of more concentrated effort during the growing season? Might their transient, ad hoc character explain why such remains have generally resisted identification in surveys? Were there possibly, in addition, unprecedented new facilities for collecting and transporting domestic animals and harvests into the cities? The lack of answers to questions like these reflects the virtual absence heretofore of serious attention to what might be called rural archaeology once cities had come into existence. And even from much later times, much better known from the cuneiform documents, Richard Zettler has identified similar difficulties: "Were the cultivators, as has commonly been suggested or assumed, urban dwellers who moved back and forth to the countryside at certain times of the year? Or were the cultivators tribally organized persons, residing in small villages or hamlets, who had some rights to the land? These questions cannot be answered on the basis of information available for the Ur III period" (1996:99).

ALTERNATIVES AND CONSTRAINTS ON INTERPRETATION

From a generalizing social science rather than philological perspective, several cautionary observations that certainly apply to southern Mesopotamia seem likely to be equally applicable to cities in other nuclear areas dealt with in this volume. To begin with, we are dealing with a *1011gue dude* transition of a group of institutionally similar, culturally related but at the same time individually distinct and usually contentious urban entities, irregularly undergoing a profound series of transformations. It is misleading and in most instances probably false to assume that, individually and collectively, they would have exhibited consistency or smooth, long-term continuity in economic arrangements. Textual as well as archaeological attestations of economic decisions or behavior frequently may have been representative of relatively brief periods and restricted localities and should be assumed to have had wider and lengthier application only with considerable caution.

The economy, and all the institutions, activities, and relationships we are accustomed to thinking of as composing it, was from prehistoric times onward for a millennium or more a fairly amorphous category conforming only poorly to any modern abstractions of what an economy ought to be. In other words, it was deeply intertwined with other cultural patterns whose articulations we can seldom do more than dimly surmise. This is not to deny that there also probably were domains of activity we might recognize as "economizing" and "rational" if we could adequately detect them. In general, I tend to share the recent position of Stephen Silliman in not seeing "agents acting strategically, rationally, and self-interestedly" as more than a fairly marginal presence at this time, and join him at the other end of the continuum with those "who view individuals acting meaningfully in historical and social circumstances

only partly of their own making. In this scheme, individual actions are contextualized within an array of rules and resources that precede them but that give them opportunity. The dialectic is one between structure and agency. In these perspectives individuals often conduct their daily affairs in intentional and strategic *and* in routinized, nondiscursive or preconscious ways. To state the common expression, social agents are both constrained and enabled by structure" (Silliman 2001:192).

State institutions, at this early stage in their development, were surely multivalent in their routines and spheres of action and authority. Even much later in the course of Mesopotamian history, for example, when legal sanctions were proclaimed, the sources tend to be silent on their enforcement rates and procedures. Evidence of agency and motivation (not to speak of constraints on alternatives) in voluminously recorded administrative and economic activities is, in short, formalistic at best and mostly lacking. It is a step in the right direction to use instead the term *political economy* (Yoffee 1995), as a good part of our interest focuses on the emergence of states. But the articulation of state interests and institutions with those of familial, kin, community, occupational, or religious groupings, insofar as there is any evidence whatever for this at any given location or period of time, is little more than hypothetical.

Differences within the alluvium, such as in the major economic and institutional structures of individual cities (Maekawa 1973/1974:142-144) and in reportedly contrastive patterns of landholding units in northern and southern subregions (Liverani 1996; Steinkeller 1999), are receiving greater emphasis as advances are made in thematic as well as archival studies. Rates as well as trends of institutional change—not to speak of the substrate of behavioral change, which is rarely visible at all—were clearly affected by the shifting outcomes of interurban and sometimes even interpersonal rivalries. Furthermore, the inevitable accidents of discovery mean that both the archaeological and written evidence not only is markedly discontinuous in temporal and regional distribution but also often fails to maintain consistent foci of coverage. Any assumption that we can fall back on a kind of connect-the-dots uniformity and gradualism is worse than perilous it is almost certainly misleading.

Related to this set of issues may be a broad, ongoing shift in contemporary scholarly perspectives on the character of ancient Mesopotamian statehood—a shift, however, that is as yet prompted more by growing awareness of the limitations of the textual and archaeological evidence than by positive attestations. Discerning the same tendency, Stein has recently summarized it as replacing with more heterogeneous or non-unitary models a formerly more "integrative model of states as homeostatic systems." The result is a de-emphasis on centralized control and older interpretations from textual data that projected "vast temple and palace bureaucracies." Different groups in the same society could have radically different goals, he suggests, with conflicts between their short-term goals having quite unintended long-term consequences (Stein 2001a:2.14-215). I find this a very persuasive position, having independently argued for a variant of it in order better to understand the limitations of Ur III society at the end of the third millennium (see below).

The issue of unity versus heterogeneity has another, earlier manifestation, already in the fourth and earlier third millennia. It involves whether we visualize much or even all of the southern Mesopotamian plain as subordinated to the city of Uruk as a single primate center. A contending peer-polity system for much of this time range may well be a plausible alternative. It finds support in recent (illicitly excavated) finds of archaic tablets such as those from late-fourth-millennium Uruk at an uncertain site apparently farther north; in size estimates of surveyed sites that may need to be adjusted upward just as Uruk's was on more systematic, later examination; and in satellite images of major centers such as

Umma that appear to be several hundred hectares in size and are known to have early occupations but have never been scientifically excavated. No less relevant here is Pollock's observation that at least in the earlier Uruk period the Nippur-Adab area "was *110t* characterized by a highly integrated economy" (*italics original*) like that in Uruk's immediate hinterlands farther south (200r: 208).

I am here calling into question not the virtues of the written records, which are obvious, but the substantial limitations of what ultimately gets codified into writing (d. Civil 1980). Almost always, recorded representations of behavior are more conventionalized and slower to change than the more variable, fluid originals they purportedly reflect. In addition, whereas modern life accustoms us to think of coherent institutional structures with bounded responsibilities and designated procedures of their own, none of these features is likely to have been more than rudimentary in Mesopotamian state and religious institutions in their early antiquity. Attempts to reconstruct an overarching economic order on the basis of inductively assembled rules and norms are correspondingly perilous. Consistent application of modern analytical principles with regard to prices and markets, for example, is virtually unimaginable. What we are likely to find instead are tantalizing clues to great variability in relationships and behavior that sometimes seem to embrace what are to us contrary principles of organization.

As anthropologists, we probably should describe our objective in attempting to outline an ancient economic "system" as seeking to understand how forces of a broadly economic character affected people's lives through a lengthy, complex process. How, in other words, economic forces affected as much as is known of the full range of networks, institutions, and relationships in which the whole population was implicated. This obviously includes ownership of or access to land and other productive resources; economic and social strata and the mobility between them; regional as well as craft specialization and means of acquiring it; some reference to forces for (politico)economic integration as well as fissiparous tendencies; apparent, suitably disaggregated demographic trends as well as uncertainties; and mechanisms of circulation of goods and services, including price-fixing markets and redistributive systems as only the polar ends of a long, mostly fluid and informal continuum. Implicit in all this is a concern to discover the role of individual and group *agency*, not only the degree of diversity in people's lives but their range of preferences and motivations. Very little of this is attainable within the limits of ancient Near Eastern data, textual as well as archaeological.

Risking oversimplification in the same generalizing vein, the available archaeological as well as textual evidence is overwhelmingly suffused with an elite bias. To be sure, it is debatable how significant this limitation really is. "Consciousness," a slippery characterization even for our own times, may have had little operational significance as a basis for independent action beyond some elite segments in the periods with which we are concerned. There is little convincing evidence of elite concern for general consensus building, or for that matter for having to deal with popular opposition extending beyond the membership of the elite itself.

POWER AND COERCION

Perhaps most conspicuously missing from both the archaeological and textual evidence are indicators of the practical range and limitations, as distinct from the pretensions, of royal power and authority. In the military sphere the need for a relatively unrestrained command structure must have seemed most compelling. Enlarged representations of the "king on the battlefield" that occur in glyptic art in the late Uruk period (Pittman 2001: 436-437) and later find extensive, monumental representation tend to confirm that this was at least an aspiration. Claims in royal inscriptions of sanguinary battlefield slaughter of enemies, representations of disciplined phalanxes of identically equipped troops, and numerous attestations in economic and

administrative texts of blinded, castrated, and enslaved persons who are assumed to have been war prisoners seem to point in the same direction. But the Gilgamesh epic, if behind its later, symbolic artistry is any shade of former realism, gives us a more equivocal picture of a ruler's machinations as he sought to invoke the enthusiasm of young warriors in order to overcome the opposition of the city of Uruk's assembly of elders.

Even before the onset of the Early Dynastic I period, at about the beginning of the third millennium, the process of reduction in the numbers of settlements and concurrent concentration in cities was accompanied by a significant reduction in the number of major channels of water distribution. We do not know, and may never know, how natural processes of changing river morphology associated with the reduction of the marshes intersected with human modifications of the landscape to bring this about. Nevertheless, the construction of growing irrigation systems and increasingly effective flood-control measures would have been facilitated if a greater proportion of the available flow could be consolidated in a reduced number of more stable channels. And it was clearly to the advantage of the cities, which owed their growth to their advantageous position along those channels, to concentrate the control of water in their own hands.

So it was, in any case, that a new linearity in these larger watercourses is apparent. In some cases (as around Uruk) there are suggestions of radiating patterns of smaller canals extending outward that emphasize this new pattern of more centralized control. There was, in short, "an unsettling metamorphosis in social and political life" at around the beginning of the Early Dynastic period (Yoffee 1995:287). It consisted of an ongoing transition in the direction of more coercive, hierarchically managed systems responsive to the heightened subsistence needs of the new and larger population concentrations. If Pollock's calculations for Uruk are correct, already much earlier, by early Uruk times, early in the fourth millennium, its "residents could not possibly have produced enough food to meet the needs of the city's population" (2001:195), implying a pattern of coercive extraction directed toward its neighboring dependencies that could only have intensified as Uruk continued to grow. But presently, as Hans Nissen (1976:23) has noted, it led to the Early Dynastic I introduction of new cuneiform irrigation terminology, possibly reflecting technical advances associated both with the efforts to ensure control of outlying irrigation networks and with the availability of the enlarged labor *corvées* that cities made possible.

We need to be mindful of the likelihood that there were many such derivative capabilities associated with urban growth that together laid the basis for quickly achieved but also enduring-urban dominance. Among them, enhanced communications were no less important as a concomitant of urbanization than intensified attention to new irrigation requirements. Both probably played a role in the increasing linearization of the overall watercourse pattern. Towed barge traffic was facilitated by linear, well maintained levee footpaths. The capacity for relatively inexpensive, large-scale movement of bulk as well as luxury commodities between the urban centers on the Mesopotamian plain was thenceforward surely a major factor in their collective as well as individual dominance.

Until the last few centuries of the fourth millennium we know very little directly of the mix of modes of exchange and redistribution by which resources were first concentrated in certain urban institutions and then exchanged or redistributed. Although their significance has been discounted by some, a large variety of clay tokens that were also prevalent in earlier times and that apparently functioned as counters in various contexts played a considerable part in the subsequent introduction of writing (Englund 1998:17). But in any case the existence of a well-developed system of rationing, and the hierarchically organized groupings of specialized occupations and allocations that accompanied and depended on it, is suddenly confirmed for us by the recent disclosure of the contents of

the late Uruk archaic tablets (Nissen et al. 1993). Some of the system's major elements must have gradually begun to come into existence considerably earlier. Perhaps precisely because of the complex resource base and the accompanying challenge of risks or stresses that tended to focus on only one or a few elements among them at any given time, a redistribution system seems likely to have been introduced at a relatively early date under institutional auspices having a predominantly religious character.

Massive, presumably concerted, and probably centrally organized long-distance population movements (Algaze 2001a; but cf. Nissen 2001:155-167) led to replications along the Upper Euphrates and elsewhere of many features of Middle-Late Uruk urbanism in its Mesopotamian homeland. Whether this followed a deliberate decision to send out expeditionary forces over formidable distances or was a more ad hoc outgrowth of a crisis of some sort, the consequence could only facilitate the substantial and growing importation into southern Mesopotamian cities of vital classes of raw materials—timber, copper, stone, bitumen, and exotic substances from even greater distances. Surely this was not wholly unrelated to the demographic upheaval involved in the extensive depopulation of the southern Mesopotamian countryside accompanying the growth of cities, even if an altogether persuasive explanation of the connective links in the process is still lacking.

From virtually the time of their origins, cities thus constituted the most basic, enduring features on the Mesopotamian social landscape. Repeated efforts to achieve stable, larger patterns of integration multiplied scribal (and hence Assyriological) efforts and provide interrupted foci of historians' attention. But few persisted in their success for more than two or three generations at most. Piotr Michalowski has pointed out that during the span of approximately a millennium, from the beginnings of relevant records early in the third millennium to the end of the Old Babylonian period in the second, the "whole time of unity of Sumer and Akkad. . . consisted of 230 years, at the most" (1987: 56). Persisting through the lengthy, chaotic periods of breakdown were the cities that had resisted subordination and incorporation in larger, panregional patterns. City-states rather than ethnic-linguistic groupings or larger, territorially organized states remained the characteristic sociopolitical form until larger, durable empires emerged in surrounding regions, not in the Mesopotamian plain itself in the later second and first millennia B.C. (Yoffee 1995:291).

Having thus far emphasized the relatively rapid but then enduring ascendancy of cities, we also need to consider some structural consequences of how their dominance was achieved. It is simply unrealistic to view their growth as an organic, consensual process involving a shared understanding by all participants, urban elites and displaced rural immigrants alike, of the common advantages of city life. Instead, taking a long view of early Mesopotamian history as a whole, Yoffee rightly observes, "City-states were not so much directed by kings and managers as they were the primary arenas for social and economic struggle" (1995:301).

Relevant here is widespread, recently awakened archaeological interest in the role of human agency or intentionality, as distinguished from former deterministic or adaptationist approaches drawn largely from mainstream evolutionary biology. Pierre Bourdieu, whose *Outline of a Theory of Practice* was a major stimulus to this new concern, took the position that in ancient societies there was "a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization" (1977: 164). But it will not do, as Adam Smith rightly criticizes, casually to consign the practices of otherwise unexamined forerunners of modernity to the exclusive realm of *doxa*, Smith's term for unquestioned belief systems, with "lives cast as routines predicated upon the mis-recognition of social orders as natural ways of life, rather than political products. . . . If archaeology is to succeed in articulating the past with the present in meaningful ways, then we must actively resist the construction of rigid boundaries that set the an

cient apart from the modern as an ontologically distinct entity" (2001:156-157).

Sherry Ortner hammers home Smith's point that "'agency' and 'practice' more generally must be seen as part of an essentially political problematic. A theory of practice is not an abstract metaphysical debate about the relative weight of free will versus determinism, or structure versus agency, however much it may have originated in such debates, but rather a theory of how people's actions reproduce or change a world that is never free of, and often centrally organized around, inequalities and power differentials" (2001: 272).

There were in southern Mesopotamia, I would argue, two major consequences of the operation of growing differentials in rank, status, and above all access to coercive power. The first was a persistent institutional segmentation of the elite; the second a seemingly rigid compression of the sphere of personal control of action as well as living standards of the lower economic strata of the population, urban as well as rural. The extent to which this was consciously implemented or even recognized is quite unclear, although there is virtually nothing to support the inference that something akin to "class conflict" might have been involved.

On the other hand, a different inference must be noted and highlighted. Writing and literacy, powerful technological innovations at the time, became as they improved in effectiveness the key instruments of bureaucratic control, manipulation, and propagation of the contents of the stream of political and sociocultural memory, and of rapid, accurate communication across the barriers of distance. Literacy itself, or at least authority over cadres of scribes, must have assumed a central place in the means by which these new structural features persisted for so long (Goody 1986:48-55; Larsen 1989).

FORCES OF CONTENTION AND SOCIAL RANKING

Temples (if indeed this convenient term does not overemphasize their cultic vis-à-vis other civic functions) are the earliest public buildings that archaeologists have encountered in southern Mesopotamia, with a long continuing sequence of increasing size at Eridu, for example, originating as early as the sixth millennium. By the later Uruk period they sometimes had attained truly monumental proportions. In Uruk itself, the Eanna precinct, dominated by its formal cultic/public buildings, alone covered some 7 ha. But although an early analysis of a voluminous and important temple archive found in Early Dynastic III (mid-third millennium) Girsu led for decades to an identification of Sumerian city-states as examples of a "temple economy," that oversimplified identification tends to be used today with considerable hesitation (Foster 1981; Lipinski 1979; Nissen 1982, 1999:156-159; Snell 1997:148-149; Yoffee 1995:289; see Falkenstein 1953-1954 for a comprehensive formulation of the earlier interpretation). On the one hand, it does indeed seem that in most Mesopotamian cities temples were the largest category of landholding units. But on the other hand, they were clearly not alone in this capacity, and their articulation with-including possible subservience to-political leadership is often implied or apparent.

Emerging into the dim light of history at about the turn of the third millennium were two other substantial social blocs. The more salient, increasingly assertive on its own behalf, is the institution of kingship, which quickly was given architectural embodiment in palaces alongside temples; it then developed its own mythological rationale for hereditary succession. Kingship is clearly associated, perhaps from its very origins, with leadership in battle. It goes on to acquire the services of large numbers of retainers in a wide range of specialties and statuses. Among them, although not credited for their individual accomplishments, were skilled craftsmen producing goods to meet elite tastes that by the mid-third millennium had moved beyond mundane articles such as pottery to textiles and highly refined products of metallurgy (Stein and Blackman 1993:55). Very shortly, palace households also became great landholding institutions, acquiring vast

estates at suspiciously low prices from ranked communities in which ownership or usufruct rights were hierarchically concentrated. As attested in a number of *kudurru* documents, a few leading individuals are identified as "eaters of the price" in such transactions whereas much larger numbers, listed only as witnesses, may more passively indicate some degree of assent or involvement by merely participating in a feast (Gelb et al. 1991). But how valid a view this provides of a possibly general decay of older forms of communal landholding before an aggrandizing royal power (Diakonoff 1982) is still disputed.

Here, then, we encounter a second, more heterogeneous and ill-defined but in all likelihood also very numerous group, corporate communities closely associated with the conduct of agriculture and probably of multigenerational depth. It is tempting to see in them the inhabitants of lower-level settlement hierarchies scattered around emergent cities such as Uruk who were presently swept within the walls of the cities as they grew. Their leaders might well go on to achieve various degrees of an elite status, taking their place alongside wealthy palace dependents as the nucleus of a private economic sector. Lower-ranked followers, meanwhile, must have contributed to the anonymous mass of conscripted, semifree, male and female laborers who were heavily dependent on the issuance of rations. Some such process of secular transfer, intimately associated with urbanization, also may be associated with the civic institution of assemblies. These may seem out of place next to great temple and palace estates but nevertheless persisted at least until the mid-second millennium. Falling largely outside the realm of elaborate record keeping of the "great organizations," this sector is always difficult to identify in day-to-day action. But as Gelb (1969) has repeatedly insisted its presence alongside the palace and temple can be traced as far back as historical records take us. Although always under threat of exploitation and absorption by the dominant social strata, the assembly endured into later millennia (Van de Mieroop 1999a:107).

To confine ourselves primarily to what is better known, there is an unstable dynamic coexistence between great temple estates and ascending royal power as the latter increasingly associated itself with administrative, personnel, cadres of skilled craftsmen, and large landholdings under its direct control. This should not be taken to imply that the palace and temple were interchangeable as essentially exploitative institutions. Perhaps reflecting a much more ancient, initially largely consensual set of social arrangements temple estates "remained important for the population as a reserve dietary fund" even while also imposing labor requirements and taxlike payments on their constituencies (Diakonoff 1982:76). In any case high officials of both temple and palace estates were compensated by relatively large grants of land that we can take for granted they played no significant part in having to cultivate. In addition, beyond these two great institutional complexes there was a substantial population that also is represented among the elite, but there is little or nothing in the existing cuneiform records to reflect any claim of some sort of "third estate" status.

How does archaeology (the original basis of my own interest and training) amplify or modify this primarily text-based account of socioeconomic status? Social differentiation, beyond an advanced division of labor, is difficult to generalize about with any confidence for essentially all the fourth millennium—that is, even for several centuries after the beginnings of writing. Archaeological exposures of house architecture for this period in southern Mesopotamia are as yet too limited to provide clear patterns of wealth or status gradation through variations in size or furnishings. Contemporary cemeteries are noteworthy mainly for their curious absence until early in the third millennium, providing little clue to what one would assume must have been slowly growing social status differentiation. In contrast with northern Mesopotamia, the impression is worth noting that personal concentrations of costly materials and objects from the alluvium were markedly less conspicuous.

Archaeological evidence on the question of royal wealth is not necessarily any better at resolving issues of discontinuous status distribution or stratified access to the primary means of production. The so-called Royal Cemetery at Ur contains wide variations in the quality and quantity of grave goods of Early Dynastic date, some but not all clearly pertaining to royal family members. But are these attestations of an individual's disposable wealth, or only of the ceremonial importance (and accompanying public offerings) attached by the community to the event of a royal or high official's death? Similarly elusive are architectural distinctions between royal palaces, identified with a secular ruler, and temples devoted to patron deities and housing personnel of a more priestly character—who might also, however, be responsible for the complex administration of vast estates. By the late third millennium, secular rulership (of course still purportedly at the service of a divine patron) and hereditary succession were firmly in the ascendancy. But the transition seems to have been subject to some brakings and reversals along the way, and it is noteworthy that there is very little evidence of hostility or even competition between prominent individuals identifying themselves with secular or priestly power.

Very large and growing gradations of wealth are evident not only in landownership as attested in the *kudmrlts* but also in tomb furniture and variations in house size and furnishings. Elegantly finished stone bowls coincide with wealthier tombs in the Ur cemetery, whereas crude specimens in poorer graves may suggest some home imitations of craft products. A metalworker's shop on a public residential street in Eshnunna in late Akkadian times reveals that some craft specialists were already directing their attention to the wider public. Careful surface surveys of the site of Mashkan-shapir similarly suggest that copper or copper-alloy tools and utensils were in wide-scale, essentially universal use among residents of a third-millennium city.

By the early to mid-third millennium, increasing elements of a more recognizably politicized economy appear alongside temple estates and hierarchies, although the latter remain large and powerful economic units. With the ascendancy of political leadership came an intensification of intercity and interstate rivalry. Fairly transitory territorial states appeared in the latter part of the millennium, mostly with only a superficial influence on the city-states, which remained the fundamental units of social identification as well as economic organization and circulation. Divine assemblies are attested in the world of the myths, traceable back to the Early Dynastic period and probably reflecting human institutional forms of a considerably earlier date. Such assemblies also are mentioned in some contemporary cities. Possibly composed mainly or entirely of elders, they seem to have reached decisions by an informal process of consensus. They may have been limited to certain aspects of civic affairs and confirmation of decisions on going to war; there is nothing to suggest that they had a role in economic affairs.

The extent of authoritarian power exercised in late Early Dynastic city-states is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the scale of textile production, carried on under strict state control. Some costly garments were undoubtedly consigned to palace and temple elites or ceremonial purposes, but others constituted the chief export commodity, to be exchanged for supplies of key raw materials from distant areas. Texts from Lagash record the issuance of monthly barley rations to large numbers of female weavers and their children, many with non-Sumerian names, who had apparently been purchased as slaves (or captured, or arrested as fugitives). They were employed full-time in gangs of twenty or so that were separately accounted for under the immediate leadership of older, presumably more experienced women but with higher male supervision as well. Children accompanied them and also received rations, with girls at some age apparently being impressed into the ranks of the weavers while boys were separated and assigned to different accounting duties and units elsewhere. An overall total for the city of Lagash is not available, but these female weavers constituted as

much as half the dependent population under the control of one temple (Maekawa 1980: 82).

LATER, TERRITORIALY CONSOLIDATED STATES The pattern of protracted rivalries between city-states was briefly interrupted just after the middle of the third millennium by a new political formation with much enlarged (if ephemeral in their realization) territorial ambitions. The Akkadian state, although withering away after three generations or so, sought seriously to incorporate urban communities on the alluvial plain and beyond within an imperial entity. Sargon, the founder, attempted to break down city-state autonomy and boundaries by appointing royal officials to serve alongside the traditional rulers, allotting the officials local lands for their support. Before long, however, these arrangements were a source of tensions and presently also successful uprisings (Foster [993]).

Toward the end of the third millennium huge archives of tablets reveal to us an astonishingly pervasive and purportedly all encompassing bureaucratic structure that left little room for alternative modes of status gradation or resource allocation. Alongside a consolidation of military measures accompanying the formation of a standing army were the creation of a new system of provincial administration, a standardized form of taxation, a new calendar and standards of weights and measures, scribal schools, and the setting aside of a new category of crown lands (Michalowski 1987:64; Steinkeller 1987:2021). Men who were "hired," receiving barley as their "wages," to some extent may have begun to replace those formerly impressed in *corvées* involving onerous labor as a major source of manpower (Englund 1991; Maekawa 1987=69). But it is the scale of state enterprises that most amazes us. To take the textile industry as the prime example, it was centered in the capital city of Ur and required

the labor of some thousands of workers to produce the small numbers of the extraordinarily labor-intensive costumes worn by the king and other elites and the great numbers of garments needed to clothe thousands of dependent laborers in the province of Ur, and to supply state controlled trade agents with large supplies destined for internal and external exchange, through which luxury goods could be secured for the ruling family and for state agencies I-a yearly production of some 60 tons of wool is accounted for, sufficient for more than 100,000 workers at then-prevailing distribution rates; this is a high figure if regarded as a sustained annual average and may indicate unrealistic elements in the accounting system). All third millennium texts dealing with domestic production distinguish between the raw material wool and finished products. While both articles were distributed as rations according to unclear rules of disbursement, complex accounts prove that state controlled exchange mechanisms dealt primarily in wool. (Englund 1998:[51])

The "wool office" in Ur appears to have been a special focus of royal interest, with elaborate credit-debit entries covering its integrated responsibilities for collecting wool and weaving as well as further processing, including fulling and perhaps bleaching the finished cloth with alkali. Calculated from the standard allotment to individuals, the number of female slaves employed must have been on the order of 19,000. As in earlier Lagash (where at this time a single text attests to the presence of more than 6,000 weavers), there were provisions for male overseers, whose residences are given in nearby villages. This seems to imply that the weaving installations were dispersed; one instance of an apparent "putting out" system involved 23°weavers who were apparently employed (and lived?) together in the same installation. Fulling and bleaching were carried on by smaller numbers of other operatives in separate establishments but under the same overall management. At least in the Lagash weaving operations at this time, male children were separated from their mothers at puberty and, judging from the terminology then ap

plied to them, apparently castrated. Subsequently, they may have found menial employment as tow men in connection with shipping (Jacobsen 1953; Maekawa 1980).

The authoritarianism apparent here, however, may not have been as all-embracing as it first appears. To a still undetermined extent, state textual archives surely reflect an elite focused and somewhat self-enclosed set of concerns, and something less than a uniform domain of seamless control. Of immediate interest to the palace and hence under its direct supervision was a full-time enterprise of craft production, including specialists in metalworking, goldsmiths, stonecutters, carpenters, leather workers, felters, and reed makers (Neumann 1987). But this enterprise cannot be considered a model that was slavishly followed by the society as a whole. At the other end of a continuum it seems likely that marginal and only periodically subordinated groupings and modes of organization, replenished perhaps by fugitives from the cities, would have given the region as a whole a more mixed and unstable character than was recorded, or perhaps even perceived, in the major administrative centers (Adams 2002). On the other hand, at least in the crucial agricultural sector, where gangs of unskilled men and women laborers were permanently assigned under foremen to a shifting variety of onerous tasks (with debits for failing to reach their targeted levels of performance), conditions of regulated life seem fairly appalling. If anything is reported about them at all, it is usually only the time of their termination from state employment—by flight or death (Englund 1991:259, 280). Perhaps not surprisingly, this overextended bureaucratic impulse quickly began to erode and did not survive the dynasty itself.

A proliferation of Ur III settlements, many of them only tiny hamlets, is well attested in texts of the period, especially those from uncontrolled excavations at Umma (Steinkeller 2.001), and a large population for that region in particular may be reasonably inferred. But how generally the bulk of the urban population remained employed in agriculture is uncertain.

Reviewing the substantial body of somewhat disconnected, particularistic evidence, I suspect that the familiar Western models of later, plenipotentiary kings, to whom are ascribed in this case overriding rights of ownership as well as personnel control, are likely to be misleading. Functional authority may ordinarily have devolved in some never formally defined way on members of an elite with generally shared interests who were also major landholders and high officeholders. Formal title to land would be less important in this reconstruction than generally shared interests and status. Arguments over the time of origin and existence of discernibly private property, with unambiguous confirmation vainly sought in the generally equivocal evidence of buying and selling in a fluctuating market (Hudson and Levine 1996, 1999), may be of very limited relevance. During the Third Dynasty of Ur, at the end of the third millennium, some authorities report little or no evidence of the conveyance of land titles by private sale. No less forcefully, others point to indirect evidence for a contrary position (Gelb 1969). With textual evidence coming only from the "great institutions," limited or doubtful evidence would be in any case unconvincing as an argument for the absolute exercise of royal power in the assignment of usufruct and functional control of land. Members of the elite having such control would have been identified for this purpose not with reference to their largely independent interests and activities but more narrowly (and secondarily) under their titles as royal officeholders.

MARKETS, MERCHANTS, AND "PRIVATIZATION"

The emergence of local markets, probably under way well before the end of the third millennium, is still a matter of considerable dispute. Perishable goods such as fresh (not dried) fish, and cheap, mass-produced commodities such as pottery, simply do not lend themselves well to any completely centralized system of rationing or redistribution. Fortunately, the ceramic industry during the Third Dynasty of Ur is one whose production and

distribution arrangements are known or can be inferred in some detail.

Operating with a considerable degree *of* independence, potters were responsible for making and disbursing specified types and numbers *of* vessels to specified individuals and institutions for only a specified number of days in a year, and for these periods received rations *of* barley, wool, and fat. Although the part-time affiliation was semipermanent and included provisioning *of* needed fuel and other raw materials and the right to recruit and release state-assigned, unskilled worker-assistants, the industry itself appears to have been carried on in home workshops without direct supervision. Moreover, committed days *of* labor often were devoted to other, completely unrelated corvée assignments, and there existed still another category of "potters of the countryside" without any institutional responsibilities. The implication is that much of the potters' efforts was devoted to directly fulfilling domestic demand, even though this is wholly unreported in the bureaucratic sources. Even further, Steinkeller submits that "the overwhelming majority of Ur III craftsmen worked at home, in their own workshops, and that their professional activities were to a large extent independent from the state" (1996:252).

This and other fortuitously preserved textual] examples of actual behavior in some specialized occupations point to the likelihood that the seemingly all-encompassing grip of the Ur III bureaucracy may be in large part an artifact of the myopic purposes for which they were recorded. If men in these presumably somewhat higher-status occupations were only periodically employed by the state (for proportions *of* their annual effort that scribes took no interest in recording!), then much *of* their economically relevant activity lay entirely outside institutional purview and yet was clearly made available to a consuming public (Van de Mieroop 1999a:91-92).

Long-distance procurement, serving escalating needs for commodities such as metals and timber and requiring increasingly industrialized textile production to provide the primary economically transportable exchange commodity, represented an obvious priority for the state. But equally obviously, it represented an opportunity for those engaged in it to execute private commissions on their own behalf. The trade must have moved fairly quickly to somewhat standardized systems *of* valuation that also allowed for some variability in *price*. But although copper and bronze also were in common use and were accounted for as the raw materials were circulated to craftsmen, the finished articles moved outward into the population at large without intervention *from* central procurement offices. Additionally, a continuing need for skilled repairs and the recasting *of* broken implements called for craftsmen who directly supplied the community (Neumann 1992).

The existence *of* a market in privately held land poses similar problems of the probable inadequacy *of* the textual sources for addressing this question. Abrupt shifts in the relative proportions *of* temple and royal estates, and recorded prices for some *of* the lands conveyed almost a millennium earlier in the pre-Sargonic *kudurrus* for less than the value *of* a single year's harvest (Diakonoff 1982:68), suggest that there habitually was a large element *of* duress in many land transfers. Thus a lengthy coexistence *of* mixed, irregularly applicable systems is very likely. Unrecorded particularistic circumstances have defied some determined efforts (e.g., Farber 1978) to establish variable but intelligible exchange ratios for silver, gold, labor, and barley. Despite the arguments *of* some rearguard Polanyi supporters (e.g., Renger 1994, 1995), the substantial presence *of* many essential elements of a market seems virtually beyond dispute. As Van de Mieroop cautiously concludes, "One cannot ignore the empirical data... for the existence *of* some market mechanisms with the concept of profit and loss, with price fluctuations, and with situations of scarcity. But the fundamental difficulty lies in determining the relative importance of the exchange through a market within the totality *of* the ancient Mesopotamian economy" (1999a:117-118).

To touch only very briefly and selectively on the subsequent development of economic life and institutions, substantially different conditions can be documented in great detail for the Old Babylonian period beginning after 1800 B.C. By the earlier third of the second millennium, at any rate, the extension of literacy to permit masses of private correspondence shows that merchants had become a major, increasingly independent social force. Their entrepreneurial modes of behavior in some respects fall not far short in sophistication of those we associate with Renaissance Italian city-states. Could this behavior really have evolved so relatively suddenly, or does it again reflect an older pattern largely beyond the span of attention of the great palace- and temple-centered organizations that formally dominated in the third millennium?

There is voluminous private business correspondence involving mercantile ventures, the buying and selling of land, and provisions of credit to impoverished cultivators, leading in many cases to conditions of debt slavery. Wealthy individual creditors conducted many of their transactions with payments or receipts of silver, although measured quantities of barley continued as a recognized standard of exchange. Merchants lived in large, well-appointed, multiroom houses, nestled into the interstices among which were frequently others of poorer construction and a tenth or less the size (Elizabeth Stone, personal communication 2001; Van de Mierop 1999b). Entrepreneurs are even seen conducting large-scale transactions with the palace and temple that involve the leasing of rights of exploitation and the selling or purchasing of large volumes of agricultural commodities (Van de Mierop 1992:244). Of special interest is the formation of family corporate structures seeking the deity's protection for their assets through an unmarried female representative of the family (a *naditu*) permanently lodged in the temple (Harris 1964; Stone 1982). Few long-continuing private "dynasties" are in evidence, however, with wealth ordinarily dissipated over two or three generations through the capricious policies of rulers, partitive inheritance, the inevitable risks of long-distance trading ventures, and perhaps even the cyclical fortunes of ordinary economic investments in agricultural harvests.

Household slaves were present, but slavery of the kind familiar to us from classical times onward seems to have been quantitatively marginal. Much more significant are various forms of dependency, which as a general category does not correspond at all with gradations of wealth. Formal dependence on the palace or temple frequently characterized high-status individuals with official titles that could be inherited and yet with very limited duties, most of whose holdings and activities apparently were free of oversight or higher claim. Other kinds of dependents, as in earlier periods, had very inferior status. And large numbers of "free" individuals and families were by all appearances without land and survived by hired labor.

Most revealing for me has been an initiative in prosopographic history launched more than 30 years ago by A. Leo Oppenheim. It shed a fascinating light on the Old Babylonian town of Sippar by collecting all the available references to individuals in large archives there. What we seem to see at any one time is a relatively small, literate elite of perhaps a few score of individuals who combine and dispute with one another in various ventures, are appointed as judges and other civic functionaries, and serve together as officers in the town militia (at times going out into the surrounding marshes in pursuit of fleeing urban inhabitants of lower status). One gains the impression that they are self-confident in their collective standing, not particularly concerned over possible interventions by the dynastic ruler some distance away in Babylon, and irredeemably urban in their commitments and spirit (Harris 1975; Oppenheim 1965:35). On the other hand, it appears that the city was-and may always have been-a considerably less rewarding and even less-than-voluntary setting for a large proportion of their fellow inhabitants

who were less economically well situated and increasingly debt-ridden (Klengel 1987; Van de Mierop 1992:246).

Lest one is tempted by the apparent weight of documentation of multiple aspects of privatization in this period, however, it is imperative to draw attention once again to the considerable degree of our dependence on uncontrollable imbalances in our sources. If to my tastes simply too cautiously and negatively, Van de Mierop nonetheless rightly reminds us of the need to view the entire sequence of our economic understandings of ancient Mesopotamia not necessarily as a consistent record of long-term evolutionary "progress" but as a still substantially IIIICertain path whose major turnings remain in some doubt:

We are unable to draw up a balance sheet of the ancient Near East economy in any particular period, evaluating the relative importance of any particular sector, public, private or communal; hence we cannot see any evolution in their relative weight. The old idea that the Mesopotamian economy from 3000 to 1500 B.C. went through successive stages of temple, state, and private dominance is now almost universally regarded as a fantasy based on a shifting imbalance of the textual sources. But the problem is not just that we have temple archives from the Early Dynastic period, state archives from the Ur III period, and private archives from the early second millennium. Even if we had more of a variety of documents from the various sectors in different periods, we would not be able to evaluate them; a great deal of economic activity was probably never recorded at all. (Van de Mierop 2000:42)

But to the extent that it is justified, such pessimism also can be read as an open invitation to archaeologists to devise new and innovative research strategies to help clarify the sequence of broad transitions in the society and economy that lay so discouragingly outside the purview of the subjects and writers of the texts.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent research has underlined the extraordinary environmental challenges presented by the lower Mesopotamian plain to early human settlement. Agricultural routines, long familiar by the fifth millennium in surrounding areas, could at first find little place in a prevailingly marshy landscape. With a drying land surface and progressively drier climate during the later fourth millennium, there was a changing configuration of watercourses that increased opportunities for land use intensification along a reduced number of managed, major arteries. Thus there were pressures for continuous, but surely also difficult, change for those affected, favoring some localities and subsistence regimes at the expense of others. The plain itself was characterized by a mosaic of ecosystems and consequently by different sets of subsistence resources, which also were subject to irregular change in their locations and proportions.

These stresses led simultaneously in three directions. First, they demanded a high degree of complexity in arrangements for the amassing and redistribution of different sets of specialized but potentially complementary resources. Second, they generated real pressures to form hierarchies of access to particular resources and favorable settings. And third, they induced competitive advantages for concentrations of population that presently became true cities.

Cities, in turn, drawing on larger and more specialized populations and larger resource areas, intensified the pressures for more complex and effective administrative arrangements. This was a setting in which a writing system could be expected not only to originate at a relatively simple level but to be progressively elaborated into a technology of bureaucratic control and repression. Thus it was also on the way to becoming a stratified social setting. Alongside a need for regimentation of large numbers of displaced urban immigrants was the challenge of administering an enlarged and complex hinterland on which the very survival of the city depended. As relocation of progressively more con

strained water resources continued, it was, finally, a setting in which the offensive and defensive advantages of urban population concentrations became compelling.

City-states, in short, were an intelligible, "natural" outcome of an evolutionary process in a region that offered extraordinary opportunities if its challenges were met by many key advances in human organization. Contained within them were groups and structures broadly reflective of different phases or components in this irregular evolutionary process. Temple estates redistributing resources among their followers and more amorphous, quasi-kin communities probably had the deepest roots. War leaders acquiring the trappings and growing ranks of followers of kings were generally a later development, and like the other two they understandably began aggressively to pursue great landed estates of their own as a power base. Thus far, perhaps, one might have ventured, if somewhat speculatively, on the basis of archaeological evidence alone. In the context of this comparatively oriented volume, however, we should not overlook the fact that it is the absolutely unparalleled richness of the Mesopotamian textual sources, in diversity and substantive detail that allows an account of economic life to proceed much further.

As was asserted at the outset of this chapter, all the available evidence makes it clear that there was originally a tripartite segmentation in the society that came to characterize city-states, and in the elites dominating them and imposing repressive conditions of labor service and relative impoverishment on the bulk of their fellow urbanites. But what locked this structure into place for several succeeding millennia, stoutly resisting efforts of individual, temporarily dominant city state rulers to impose a new, territorial or proto-imperial level of control that involved the durable ascendancy of a single capital city?

Here I argue it was precisely the unparalleled effectiveness of the administrative system and the writing that enabled it, an organizational-technological linkage if you will, that we need to recognize as splendidly rising to the challenges of complexity that have been described. Cuneiform writing, in the extraordinarily versatile path of development it followed in Mesopotamia, did not merely permit effective solutions to a diverse set of administrative problems. It became the distinguishing badge and capability of a superordinate administration, a rationale for autocratic rulers hip and for imposing grossly differential access to collective resources, and finally, an instrument of genuinely historical consciousness. The city, as the home of a sponsoring deity with his or her supporting institution of a temple and its traditional domains and parishioners, was the all but unassailable focus of civic loyalty. This, I suggest, is what made the Mesopotamian city-state the "default" position to which the entire system reverted as successive attempts to impose higher levels of integration fell apart after a few generations. Durable territorial empires did not originate here, in spite of the economic, social, and intellectual capital that undoubtedly accumulated in city-states. Instead, they originated under a different set of conditions, on the plains of Assyria to the north.

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