

The Limits of State Power on the Mesopotamian Plain

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§1. There was a significant, and I believe unfortunate, moment of articulation in what now appears to be a widely accepted Assyriological view of ancient southern Mesopotamia that is represented in the proceedings of the XVIII. Recontre assyriologique in Munich in 1970 (Edzard 1972). It is embodied in two influential papers given there by Igor Diakonoff and I. J. Gelb. The issue between them, of late re-emerging in importance, was somewhat clouded at the time by their agreement on the then more salient subject of the relatively minor role of chattel slavery. A further barrier to understanding dependent/slave labor in ancient Babylonia may have been Gelb's subsequent, informal objections to the published version of his remarks. But the substance of the issue, although unremarked at the time, is clear enough. Here is Diakonoff:

*The state sector could be comparatively unimportant (as in Assyria) or very large indeed (as in the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur), but it never seems to have encompassed the whole society; alongside the state there always existed a "communal-and-private" sector, namely, communal because the main means of production, viz. the land, was communal property, but private because it belonged to the sphere of *jus privatum*. The economies in the "communal-and-private" sector were not private in the sense of "individual", at least originally; on the contrary, under the conditions of the greatest dependence of the cycle of production upon accidental circumstances (like the weather, natural calamities, vicissitudes of war, etc.), an individual household could only exist in cooperation with other households of the same type, and it was only the state economy which owing to its vastness could dispense with such cooperation. That is why we encounter nearly exclusively small individual families among state personnel, but large extended family communes among the agricultural population outside of the state sector (Diakonoff 1972: 44).*

§2. The published version of Gelb's remarks in response (1972: 49-51) was viewed by him as "somewhat gar-

bled," and is indeed somewhat less succinct and well-organized than the version he then circulated widely and independently. Here is his corrected typescript version on the subject of "the commune and family sector":

*I don't know exactly where in time Professor Diakonoff wants to place the commune. Obviously, I would agree with him on the importance of the family sector in early Mesopotamian society, in the period of the ancient *kudurus*. We know definitely that that was a period of great families who owned land, besides the state and temple sectors. I don't believe that this particular family sector is of any great importance in later Mesopotamian history. I grant that there is some information about communally-owned family land in the Old Babylonian period. This would be a logical consequence of the invasion of the Amorites, a non-urban people who came from the desert—or semi-desert, if you want—and brought with them a tribal organization, which would naturally result in a communal type of land tenure. I can also visualize similar conditions in outlying, more primitive regions, as, for instance, around Arrapha and Nuzi. But I don't see how we can talk about the importance of the communal family in Babylonia of the Pre-Sargonic, Sargonic, and Ur III periods.*

§3. In Gelb's own, earlier contribution at the meeting, he had also observed that "with the fully established centralized state organization and more advanced agricultural economy, the village community land controlled by tribes and clans gives way to public land controlled by the crown, temple, and nobility (=officials)" (1972: 90). Magically, as it were, the invention and apparent imposition of institutions of state-like authority in a few urban centers is too easily assumed by modern scholars to apply uniformly to the whole countryside without any demonstration that this was effectively the case.

§4. It remains only to note that in his own response to discussants, including Gelb, Diakonoff stood his

ground, arguing that “family communes or some equivalent organisations did exist in the countryside in that period” even if the sale of land was prohibited in most city-states (1972: 51).

§5. It is apparent that this controversy was essentially based on “first principles,” absent any serious, empirical investigation of the countryside. Although fieldwork had been conducted two years earlier, publication of *The Uruk Countryside* (Adams and Nissen 1972) followed only in the same year as publication of the 18th RAI. And that study focused not at all on this issue but instead on the antecedent issue of interpreting new data relevant to changing hierarchies and distributions of settlement. Similarly, Michael Rowton’s thinking almost certainly had already begun on the subject of state frontiers and what he called “the dimorphic zone,” but it remained to be developed more explicitly. His later, sweeping characterization of Mesopotamian urban civilization itself as “the greatest urban concentration in Western Asia [that] amounted to little more than a long, slender urban oasis lost in a vast tribal wilderness” (1976: 27) is an arrestingly contextualized observation of the larger geographical setting of ancient Mesopotamian urbanism. Implicitly at least, it is also a challenge to the assumed extent and firmness of state control. Yet though they adjoined one another in the Oriental Institute, nothing of this line of thought is detectable in Gelb’s understanding at the time. Centralized, firmly consolidated Mesopotamian civilization was simply assumed to be fully coterminous with the physical limits of the Mesopotamian alluvial plain itself. I doubt very much that this impression originated with Gelb, but to the best of my knowledge his was the first explicit formulation of it.

§6. In the light of several decades of later work, Rowton’s statement is considerably overdrawn. It is clear today, as it was not in his time, that there was not a single, slender ribbon of ancient urban settlement along the ancient course of the Euphrates but instead a network of branches of both the Tigris and the Euphrates, interconnected by canals conveying important streams of economic interchange (Steinkeller 2001). Fundamentally, however, Rowton’s characterization is still largely applicable. At no time in the 2nd or 3rd millennia BC can we identify, even with the aid of new and greatly superior Digital Globe satellite imagery, more than ribbons of irrigation of varying width between largely separate urban clusterings.

§7. Large dendritic systems of canals bringing whole sub-regions of the plain into coordinated control, of the kind now well identified with the alluvium from the mid- or late 1st millennium BC on until the declining days of the Abbasid Caliphate (cf. Adams 1965), did not exist earlier. It is perhaps significant that where they appear in their most fully developed form in the late Sasanian period they were manifestations of historically unprecedented conditions: titanic struggles with the rival Byzantine empire, state efforts to secure greatly enhanced revenues to pay for mercenaries, and thus the need to develop the Mesopotamian plain to the maximum under its own direct control independent of the demands of local nobility (Adams 2006).

§8. Thus it comes about that we need to view the ancient Mesopotamian plain as rarely if ever a unified region of state control. From the environmental-ecological perspective, it was and could only be a mosaic of different combinations of subsistence and other resources. Some were indeed dependent on intensive, state-supported irrigation, but others instead exploited extensive marshes with isolated, transient forms of settlement and social organization not unlike those of the Marsh Arabs of recent times. Still others, more pastoralist in activities and outlook, must have turned their primary attention to zones where steppe-like conditions prevailed.

§9. Elizabeth Stone of State University of New York at Stony Brook is currently examining in the satellite imagery scores of discolorations suggestive of human disturbance that were undetected in archaeological surveys of the 1950s - 1970s. Some may have been mere threshing floors and not human occupations at all, but others that exhibit architectural remains and not infrequent traces of looting attest to widely dispersed patterns of occupation away from the major urban centers. To be sure, it will require actual inspection of these surface remains to establish the periods of time when they were in use and occupied. But it is relevant that Claus Wilcke (2007: 115-121) has recently called attention to the immense quantities of reeds that were cut, bundled, and shipped out of Umma province in Ur III times, an indirect reflection of the very large scale existence and exploitation of natural resources like these.

§10. And with that mosaic there is reason to return anew to Diakonoff’s perception of communal and family organizations in varying conditions of dependence on and independence from the urban centers and institutions of state power that confidently proclaimed—

and may often even have believed—that their territorial authority and regimented pattern of exploitation over at least the entire alluvial plain at the center of their realm was seamless and unchallenged.

scale as well as the details of these more differentiated patterns of socio-economic life, of which only hints will have found their way into cuneiform texts through the myopic view of ancient scribes of their own hinterland.

§11. It will be a primary responsibility of future archaeologists, not Assyriologists, to discover the real

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