

THE ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN CITY



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Family in Early Mesopotamia', in E. Lipinski (ed.), *State and Temple Economy in the Ancient Near East* (Louvain, 1979), 1-97. Johannes Renger has devoted several studies to the subject, e.g. 'Patterns of non-institutional trade and non-commercial exchange in ancient Mesopotamia at the beginning of the second millennium bc', in Alfonso Archi (ed.), *Circulation of Goods in Non-Palatial Context in the Ancient Near East* (Rome, 1984), 31-123; 'Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft', in B. Hrouda (ed.), *Der Alte Orient* (Gütersloh, 1991), 187-215; and 'On Economic Structures in Ancient Mesopotamia', *Orientalia* 63 (1994), 157-208.

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The Origins and Character of the Mesopotamian City

It is now generally accepted that Mesopotamia is the one region in the Old World where we can say with certainty that an urban civilization arose spontaneously. The origins of cities there have been extensively discussed in the past four decades, not so much by Near Eastern historians, who have often limited their comments to statements of archaeologically discernible facts, but by anthropologists, sociologists, and some urban historians specializing in later periods. The topic is of importance in the study of Mesopotamian urbanism, as our ideas about their origins influence to a great extent how we view the nature of cities in subsequent history. In this chapter I do not intend to give a survey of the events connected with the rise of urbanism, nor an overview and critique of all theories seeking to explain it. I will discuss some of the most influential theories on urban development and point out what elements in them seem most useful for understanding the Mesopotamian situation. This will lead to a consideration of the character of the Mesopotamian city once it was fully developed.

First, I have to restate a few well-known facts. Mesopotamia is the region where cities originated first in world history. Hence, the rise of cities there was an independent and indigenous event. Second, the entire evolution took place in prehistory. No textual sources are available from the time cities first arose, and texts from later periods can only be used to illustrate patterns visible in the earlier archaeological record. Third, the entire process from the first permanent settlement in southern Mesopotamia to the first cities there took an enormously long time, from around 5500 bc to around 3500 bc. The emergence of the city may have occurred relatively suddenly, but cannot be understood in isolation from what preceded it, and must be seen as a culmination of that process.

Of the numerous discussions on the origins of the city, three approaches have found the most adherents, each stressing a particular function of the earliest cities: ceremonial, commercial, or redistributive. The concept that the earliest cities, in all areas of primary urban generation, functioned foremost as ceremonial centres has been most extensively argued by Paul Wheatley, reviving an idea already developed by Fustel de Coulanges in the mid-nineteenth century. Wheatley maintained that religion provided the primary focus of social life in the period immediately preceding urbanism. Wherever cities first appeared, they contained a ceremonial complex, in his opinion, and even if the latter performed secular functions as well, these were part of the religious context. The priests were the first group to escape the 'daily round of subsistence labor',¹ hence setting the process of social stratification into motion. Only after ceremonial centres were firmly established did they obtain a redistributive economic role, and secular élites only developed after cities had been in existence for several centuries.

Although the observation that all the earliest cities contained a ceremonial centre is accurate, for Mesopotamia at least, the conclusion that religion drew people together in urban conglomerates is not warranted. The reasoning behind it seems to be one of *cum hoc ergo propter hoc*. The idea that temples are primarily religious institutions is a modern concept and does not apply to the early Mesopotamian temples. They fulfilled primarily a managerial role in the local economy. As I will demonstrate later, no urban settlement is possible without an agricultural base to support a dense population. Agricultural resources needed to be extracted from the countryside by an authority, and religion provided that authority. But people did not converge upon ceremonial centres for their spiritual leadership, and throughout the world many such centres exist in isolation. Moreover, the temple's importance in early Mesopotamia is greatly overstated, due to the archaeologists' focus on monumental architecture, and a misreading of mid-third-millennium archival records. The ideological focus provided by early cities clearly existed, but it was of insufficient strength to be the sole driving force towards urbanism.

A second theory emphasizes the role of long-distance trade in the

¹ Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago, 1971), 303.

development of cities. Its most extreme advocate is the urban theorist, Jane Jacobs, who has earned an almost legendary status in the USA for her 'visionary' ideas and is extensively quoted in anthropological and sociological literature. However, she is almost entirely unknown (or ignored) among ancient Near Eastern specialists. In her book *The Economy of Cities* (1969), she attacked the 'dogma' that agriculture preceded cities, and replaced it with a theory that the existence of cities led to agriculture, and that cities first originated because of long-distance trade in raw materials. The empirical basis for this theory is the existence of such eighth- to sixth-millennium settlements in the Levant and Anatolia as Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, interpreted by some scholars to have been cities. But, whereas the latter scholars acknowledge that an agricultural base was needed for these settlements, Jacobs hypothesized the existence of pre-agricultural cities antedating these excavated sites. She described an imaginary city, New Obsidian, which was involved in the long-distance trade in obsidian without being located near its sources. Food for the inhabitants would have been obtained partly through barter with nearby hunter-gatherers, but mainly through imports from foreign hunting territories. Because meat would have spoiled during its transport, live animals were driven to New Obsidian, where soon a selection of the tamest animals was made for breeding. Seeds and nuts were brought into town as they preserved better than fruits and vegetables, and when mixed together in bins and partly sown in wild patches, they were accidentally cross-bred and became 'better' than their wild progenitors. Soon the city began to grow most of its food. 'Cities First—Rural Development Later.'

Jacobs's theory is based entirely on false premisses. It relies heavily on an unconvincing parallel with the modern world, where the most advanced urban areas are supposed to have the most advanced agriculture. And, when dealing with prehistory, Jacobs ignores altogether what Bairoch has called 'the tyranny of distance'.² The transport of food products is very expensive, as the transporter consumes part of his or her load. A man carrying the entire load, can daily transport 35–40 kilograms over 30–35 kilometres. Every day he has to consume about one kilogram, so he

² Paul Bairoch, *De Jéricho à Mexico: Villes et économie dans l'histoire* (Paris, 1985), 33–4.

eats his entire load in about seventeen days when he has marched at the most 600 kilometres one way, taking into account that he has to eat on his way back. Of course, to be able to barter the food he cannot consume all of it. An example makes this problem obvious. If a man comes a distance of 100 kilometres to obtain obsidian at New Obsidian, he will start out with 40 kilograms of food. In three days he will have reached his destination with 37 kilograms, and he will be able to barter a maximum of 34 kilograms for obsidian. Those 34 kilograms will feed one inhabitant of the city for slightly more than one month. For the 5,000 inhabitants of Çatal Hüyük to be supported for one year, 60,000 trips of this type would be needed from a radius not surpassing 100 kilometres from the site. That area is only 157 square kilometres, and considering the extremely low population density in pre-agricultural times, there were not enough people in that region to provide all the food needed in New Obsidian. Moreover, all these calculations are based on the assumption that circumstances were optimal. It seems impossible to walk 33 kilometres a day in the region around Çatal Hüyük, while rest-stops on the road would have increased the consumption by the transporter. How long would it have taken to drive live undomesticated animals over this distance? The problems could not be alleviated by using draft animals, as Jacobs states that all this activity took place before the domestication of animals. Nor does river transport provide an alternative, as rivers are only navigable in one direction in the area of Çatal Hüyük. Jacobs's theory is thus entirely unacceptable.

Mellaart, whose work inspired Jacobs, was more careful as he acknowledged the existence of agriculture around sites such as Jericho, Çatal Hüyük, and others. He also stressed the role of religion in the creation of these settlements, referring to man as 'a religious animal' and to the fact that 'religious structures are among the earliest remains of the *homo sapiens*'.³ But still the settlements of the eighth to sixth millennia he studied are not to be regarded as cities and certainly not as the beginnings of urban civilization. They were highly anomalous settlements, relying on unique coincidences of very fertile surroundings and location on trade routes, enabling and precipitating a dense habitation. No

social hierarchy is clear within these settlements, nor do their hinterlands show an urban infrastructure. Moreover, they were evolutionary 'dead-ends': after 5400 BC they disappeared and for over 1,000 years urban settlements are not to be found in the regions.

The last theory I will discuss here has gained the most popularity in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies after it was cogently argued by Robert McC. Adams in his seminal book *The Evolution of Urban Society* (1966). The book focuses on the societal changes which led to an urban civilization in two regions with primary urbanization: southern Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica. Adams recognized three major stages in this evolution. First, the development of agriculture led to increased stability of residence, increased yields, and incentives for population growth. As a result there was greater societal stability, and a surplus appeared in food production. Because of a specialization in food production, a mediatory role for the exchange of goods was needed, and the power of redistribution was concentrated in the hands of a small group within the society. Second, classes gradually replaced kin-based groups. Differences in access to the means of production led to a social stratification. Individuals identified themselves more with their equals in social status than with their kin. But kinship affiliation did not disappear altogether, as the relationship to a real or imaginary common ancestor was used as the basis for social stratification. Third, the upper classes in the social hierarchy took hold of the administration of the by now complex society. The first group to do so was a priesthood that may have justified its leadership through religion. The earliest Mesopotamian cults focused upon fertility, and ecological instability may have led people to rely on priests to intercede on their behalf with the gods. But the main function of the temple was one of economic redistribution. Increasingly large and complex temples organized the varied and multiple interactions between different groups within the society. The priests relied on technological innovations such as writing and bookkeeping for their trade. Craft centres grew up to provide for their needs with increasing specialization, and expensive raw materials were imported by them through long-distance trade. A physical separation from the rest of society ensued with the temple personnel residing in or around increasingly monumental temples in cities. Only centuries later were the powers held by the priests

³ James Mellaart, 'The Origins and Development of Cities in the Near East', in Louis L. Orlin (ed.), *Janus: Essays in Ancient and Modern Studies* (Ann Arbor, 1975), 13.

usurped by a secular and military authority, whose influence was nurtured by increased competition between the various urban centres.

Adams considered the rise of the city as one aspect of the rise of the state, i.e. a society that is hierarchically organized on political and territorial lines rather than on the basis of kinship or other ascriptive relationships. The political authority of the state happens to be situated in the city where a dense and socially stratified population resides. I would agree with this viewpoint, although I do not want to broaden the discussion here to the rise of the state in Mesopotamia. In Adams's opinion cities originated because states developed. Society was structured with classes, differentiated both through wealth or access to means of production, and through occupation which could be agricultural, pastoral, industrial, commercial, cultic, or administrative. Cities were the loci where these classes interacted or where the interactions between them were regulated. In economic terms they were redistributive centres of goods and services produced by these classes. Adams's theory has earned widespread support among Mesopotamian scholars, who have elaborated on it, and indeed its argument is highly persuasive. In the present discussion I would like to stress why cities evolved in southern Mesopotamia of all places, and to elaborate on the various aspects of their redistributive role.

It is very difficult for us to determine why cities appeared in southern Mesopotamia, rather than in Anatolia or the Levant, for instance. By the beginning of the fourth millennium the region provided the three preconditions of city life, as determined by Gideon Sjoberg: a favourable ecological base, an advanced technology (relative to the pre-urban form) in both agricultural and non-agricultural spheres, and a complex social organization, especially with regard to the power structure.⁴ But these circumstances do not necessarily lead to an urban society. As Ester Boserup has shown there is a need for a certain level of population density, as the aggregate food surplus produced by the agriculturalists needs to satisfy the requirements of the non-agricultural urban population.⁵ The southern Mesopotamian countryside was certainly

⁴ Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City, Past and Present* (Glencoe, 1960), 27-31.

⁵ Ester Boserup, *Population and Technological Change: A Study of Long-Term Trends* (Chicago, 1981), Part II.

fertile enough to sustain a dense population, but there was no shortage of agricultural land that would force people to live closely together. So why did they decide to remain in a small geographical zone, so that the prerequisite population density could be attained? I think we can answer this question by looking at the ecological diversity of the region. Several scholars, such as Adams and Liverani, have pointed out that the Near East contains a number of diverse ecological zones in close contact with one another: steppe, irrigated alluvium, and mountains with forests and pastures. This is also true on a more microscopic scale, especially for the very south of Mesopotamia. All too often it is imagined that this area was uninhabited until the arrival of irrigation farmers in the mid-sixth millennium. But many wild natural resources were available to non-farmers, and were exploited by them prior to the appearance of farming: pasture for herds of sheep and goats in the river valleys and the steppe, and extensive fishing and hunting grounds for fishermen and hunters in the marshes. When the technology to tap water from the numerous natural channels of the Euphrates river was introduced, large-scale farming became possible, but it did not replace herding, fishing, and hunting. All these activities took place in a small area in the very south of Mesopotamia, and it is thus not surprising that the earliest cities, Ur, Eridu, and Uruk, are to be found there as well. Exchange between the different food-producing groups became extensive and commonplace, and an organizing institution soon developed at the same time as the introduction of irrigation farming. Of course, exchange requires surplus production, something many scholars assume to have originated virtually spontaneously. Such an assumption is false and the origin of a surplus is the subject of much debate. No family will produce more than is needed for its subsistence unless it is forced to do so by a higher authority, or because the benefits of a surplus are obvious and indispensable. In theory, each of the specialized food-producing groups could be self-sufficient, and perhaps only the desire for a less restricted diet or for products that do not fulfil elementary needs pushed them to barter part of their produce. Still, the development is not inevitable and obvious.

The focus upon a small zone in the very south of Mesopotamia explains, in my opinion, why that was the area of primary urban development. Once the city had become a fact of life in the very south, the concept spread further north along the many channels of

the Euphrates, which enabled easier exchange of bulky items along the river. By 2800 BC we find a system of city-states stretching from the Persian Gulf to the area just south of modern-day Baghdad. Inter-city trade of agricultural produce remained limited, however, and each city-state was self-sustaining in its food supplies and basic material needs until about 1800 BC when the military unification of Babylonia led to an integration of the agricultural economy as well.⁶

But this leads us too far in time, and we need to backtrack in order to explore further what the role of the earliest cities was. So far, I have referred only to their functions in the economy—moreover only in certain aspects of the economy—an approach that is too limited in its scope. The social stratification that characterizes urban life involves social power which relies on four sources, according to a theory developed by Michael Mann: economic, ideological, military, and political. With these sources of power, certain individuals or groups attain their goals in society. In the case of early cities, the urban élites were closer to these sources than were the other members of society. I would like to investigate here how this manifested itself. By treating these four areas separately, I do not intend to indicate that they had independent identities. They are interacting networks, whose separate consideration I hope will lead to a clearer understanding of their nature.

The economic power of urban élites has already been discussed in part. Their role was mainly managerial: the interaction between differently specialized producers of goods and services was controlled by a small segment of society. In the first cities that group had temple connections, and the anachronistic term priesthood is commonly used as its designation. An unknown number of these priests had the knowledge of writing, the ability to record transactions permanently on bulky clay tablets. The economic power was not limited to local affairs, but also extended to long-distance trade.

The importance of long-distance trade in early Mesopotamian civilization is not as easy to assess as is often assumed. A majority of scholars agree that southern Mesopotamia is a region lacking all raw materials but clay and reed, and that long-distance trade is needed to obtain access to basic materials such as timber, stone,

⁶ See Marc Van De Mieroop, 'The Reign of Rim-Sin', *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 87 (1993), 47–69.

and metals, and luxury goods such as semi-precious stones. The need for such materials has been used as one, or even the most important, causal factor in the rise of cities in southern Mesopotamia, on the grounds that it would have necessitated the production of a surplus for exchange purposes. This explanation is not convincing, as it fails to show why other regions of the Mesopotamian alluvium, equally lacking in resources, did not develop cities at the same time as the South; besides, the poverty of southern Mesopotamia in raw materials has been greatly overstated. Wood and stone were available and useable, even though they were not of the best quality, and clay, bitumen, and reed could substitute for other materials. There was no necessity to acquire products from abroad, although it is clear that from the fifth millennium onwards trade contacts between southern Mesopotamia and the surrounding areas existed. Pottery produced in southern Mesopotamia dating to that millennium has been found along the Persian Gulf as far south as the United Arab Emirates, and in the second half of the fourth millennium an incredible expansion of the southern Mesopotamian Uruk culture throughout the Near East may have been driven by trade. But the economic importance of that trade remains to be assessed. A find in Saudi Arabia of a pot produced in Ur shows direct or indirect contacts between these two places, but not how common these contacts were.

Be this as it may, it seems likely that long-distance trade was originally controlled by the temples, and that the merchants had temple affiliations. This was probably caused by the fact that surplus production of textiles and other tradable goods was held by the temples. It is interesting that long-distance trade was the sector of the economy that was privatized earlier than any other state- or temple-controlled enterprise. Perhaps this can be explained as the result of the merchants' need for as much neutrality as possible, in order to avoid identification with a participant in a power struggle. Thus, we can conclude that the economic power of urban élites originally included long-distance trade, but that the importance of this trade has been exaggerated, and that it soon was delegated to private entrepreneurs.

The second source of power is ideological. At the time of urban origins, ideology was primarily religious. Although private shrines and ancestor cults survived throughout Mesopotamian history, urban temples grew increasingly large and the priesthood seems to

have taken the role as mediator between the people and the gods. A late fourth-millennium carving on a stone vase found at Uruk (Fig. 2.1) shows a row of naked men carrying vessels and jars of produce to a goddess, identified by the symbols behind her as Inanna, the goddess of procreation. In front of her stands the city ruler, represented larger than his men and fully dressed in ceremonial robe, clearly acting as an intermediary. Rituals of fertility involving the ruler and the goddess were common until the eighteenth century at least. It is reasonable to assume that religious ideology was used by the priesthood to extract produce from the rural population, but its exact methods are not revealed to us.

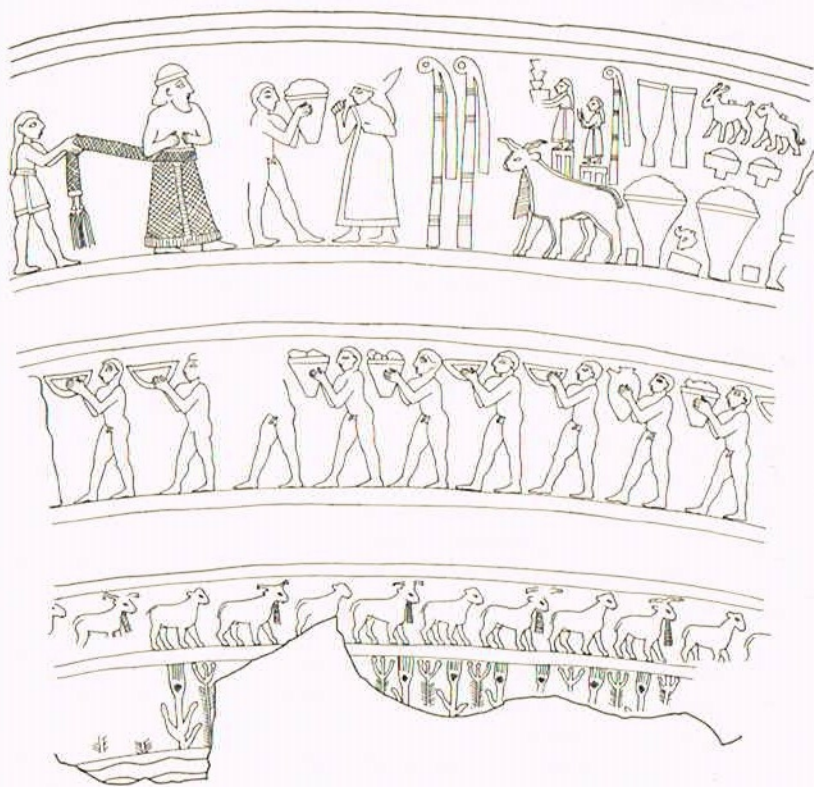


FIG. 2.1 Uruk vase with reconstruction of the image of the city ruler in the top register

With the rise of kingship, a secular authority in need of an ideological basis developed alongside the religious one. This basis was provided through a combination of military and religious leadership. The latter had been provided by the priesthood, whose powers needed to be usurped before the military commander could claim religious leadership as well. The king fought battles against other city-states, but these battles allegedly were to protect the property of the city god. The conflict, lasting more than a century, over an agricultural area between the neighbouring city-states Umma and Lagash is portrayed as the defence of the rights of the god Ningirsu by successive kings of his city-state, Lagash. One king, Eanatum, even portrays himself as having been bred as Ningirsu's champion, and nurtured by the goddess Ninhursag:

Inanna stood by him, and named him 'Eana-Inanna-Ibgalkaka-atum'. She placed him on the good lap of Ninhursag. Ninhursag [laid him] on her good breast. Ningirsu rejoiced over Eanatum, semen placed in the womb by Ningirsu. Ningirsu measured him with his span: (he was) five cubits and one span tall! With joy Ningirsu [gave him the kingship of Lagash].⁷

Similarly, the 'Sacred Marriage Rite' came to involve the king who had intercourse with the goddess in order to assure the fertility of the land.

Traces of conflict between secular and religious leaders are noticeable in texts from the best documented city-state, Lagash. In the early twenty-fourth century the distinction between the two seems to have been eradicated when king Uru'inimgina proclaimed an edict ostensibly placing all lands in the hand of the city-gods, but in reality taking control of all temple domains himself. Later kings always held the position of high priest or even legitimized their rule by accepting divine status. The ideology of the secular power could thus not be separated from religion. Both temple and palace were located in the city, and the kings always stressed their urban background. So, here also the city acted as an ideological centre for the state.

Evidence for military engagement goes back to the pictorial representations of the late fourth millennium (Fig. 2.2), but it becomes abundant only in the mid-third millennium when royal inscriptions and monuments boast about military campaigns

⁷ Stela of the Vultures, col. iv l. 18–col. v l. 17, Horst Steible, *Die altsumerische Bau- und Weihinschriften I* (Wiesbaden, 1982), 122–3.



FIG. 2.2 Late fourth-millennium sealing with combat scene

against neighbouring city-states or distant countries. All we know about the military involves such warfare, and the rise of the secular king has been convincingly related to the increased hostility between competing cities in southern Mesopotamia. Military power was always held by the palace located in the city, although the priest-ruler may have held that authority in the late fourth millennium as well. Feudal-style manor lords who delivered troops to the king when he needed them, and who raided on their own account, when free to do so, did not exist. Even when states relied on military levies from semi-nomadic tribes, as is documented in the texts from Mari, the administration and command of these troops remained an urban affair. The state's military power was thus centrally controlled in the city.

This military power relates, however, only to the 'international' affairs of the early city-states. Was military power also used by the urban élites in order to control the rural hinterland? Adams, for instance, has suggested that military coercion may have forced the exchange between villages and towns in the mid-fourth millennium.⁸ In the early historical periods we do not find any direct evidence for such coercion, however. A standing army in the service of the king was perhaps only created in the twenty-fourth century by Sargon of Akkade, who claimed to have fed daily 5,400 soldiers, most likely a fictitious number. These men, and their successors in the employ of later dynasties, were involved in expeditions outside the heartland of their states. Yet the twenty-first-century kings of Ur appointed a military hierarchy, with blood ties to the royal house, next to the civil bureaucracy in the core provinces. These military men seem to have been installed to guarantee

to the king the loyalty of the civilian administrators who had local ties—not to help them extract resources from the local populations. Only in the peripheral areas of the state did the military fulfil the role of tax collectors for the kings in Ur.

Although active opposition to the king by his citizens is referred to in the omen literature,⁹ the use of the army against residents of the countryside is never attested, as far as I know. No installations where such military troops could have been housed are visible in the archaeological record before the appearance of arsenals in Assyria of the first millennium. The collection of taxes seems to have been taken care of by bureaucrats without threat or violent resistance. Peasant revolts are not attested in Mesopotamian history. On the other hand, these bureaucrats may have relied on soldiers to enforce their demands. In early second-millennium texts, men with military titles are sometimes perceived as a threat, as can be seen from this passage of a letter from Ur:

Concerning the field, the allotment of Sin-abushu which you have taken unlawfully and have given to Ili-idinnam, Sin-abushu went and approached the king. The king gave him a soldier. Be quick! Before the soldier of the king arrives and they make you give compensation for the field, return the field to its owner. It is urgent!¹⁰

The use of the military in internal affairs may thus have been more common than is suggested by the documentation.

The last source of power, political, is harder to define, especially since the military and ideological aspects have been stripped from it, a criticism that has been expressed against Mann's model. Mann separated political from military powers, describing as political 'those of centralized, institutionalized, territorial regulation',¹¹ as distinguished from decentralized, often independent, powers of military groups. If we regard politics as the actions and manoeuvres of the state, both for its internal organization and for its diplomatic

⁹ See J. Bottéro, 'Le Pouvoir royal et ses limitations d'après les textes divinatoires', in A. Finet (ed.), *La Voix de l'opposition en Mésopotamie* (Brussels, 1973), 119–65.

¹⁰ H. H. Figulla and W. J. Martin, *Letters and Documents of the Old Babylonian Period* (Ur Excavations, Texts 5; London and Philadelphia, 1953), no. 45, lines 5–17.

¹¹ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* 1 (Cambridge, 1986), 11. The separation of military power from political power has been criticized, e.g. by Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London and New York, 1992), 77; and John A. Hall, *Powers and Liberties* (Oxford, 1985), 19 n. 13.

⁸ Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities* (Chicago and London, 1981), 81.

relations with other states, we can discuss them separately from economic, ideological, and military powers. From the outset cities clearly demanded a political organization different from that found in village communities. Royal political domination was established through a bureaucracy that expanded in size throughout the third millennium, culminating perhaps in the twenty-first century during the rule of the Third Dynasty of Ur. At that time, possibly the most prolific bureaucracy of the ancient world recorded minute aspects of administration, economy, and the courts, in a standardized format using an apparently dead language, Sumerian. Again, what is important for our consideration of the origins of the city is the fact that this aspect of power too was firmly founded in the city. The state was built around the city, as we aptly stress by our use of the term city-state when referring to early Mesopotamian political organization.

Thus, when we look at the late prehistoric and early historic city in Mesopotamia, we see that all four sources of power were centred in it: economically it acted as a redistributive centre, ideologically it contained the focal institutions of temple and palace, militarily it organized the army used by the kings, and politically it incorporated the organizing forces of the state. The city played thus a central role for its surroundings in many different ways; it grew up to provide that focus. The particular ecological conditions of southern Mesopotamia gave rise to this organization after an evolution lasting two millennia. In the mid-fourth century, the city was a fact of life in that area, never to disappear for the rest of ancient Mesopotamian history.

In my opinion, there are some amazing aspects of the early urbanization of the South, that need to be discussed before moving on to the North. Around 3200 a completely urban culture existed in southern Mesopotamia. Several technological innovations became visible simultaneously: writing, monumental arts and architecture, and mass-produced goods, especially pottery. The first written documentation shows the existence of developed systems of weights and measures, time-reckoning, and numeration. These accomplishments led V. Gordon Childe to his famous ten criteria to distinguish the earliest cities from older or contemporary villages:

1. size of settlements: the concentration of relatively large numbers of people in a central place;

2. specialization of agriculturalists and craftsmen;
3. payment of small amounts of taxes to a deity or divine king;
4. truly monumental architecture;
5. social stratification and a ruling class supported by a surplus;
6. writing;
7. emergence of exact and predictive sciences;
8. artistic expression;
9. foreign trade to import raw materials;
10. class rather than kinship affiliation.¹²

Although one can criticize the value of this list in identifying cities, it is true that all these elements were present in the earliest cities of southern Mesopotamia. Their simultaneous appearance is indicative of the 'revolutionary' changes that took place in society, changes whose importance cannot be overestimated.

What seems to me to be even more amazing is that these changes took place first and foremost in one specific place: the city of Uruk. Admittedly there is a real danger of overemphasizing Uruk's role, as it is the only extensively and intensively investigated site of this period. But many aspects of Uruk show its special status in southern Mesopotamia. Its size greatly surpasses that of contemporary cities: around 3200 it is estimated to have been about 100 hectares in size, while in the region to its north the largest city measured only 50 hectares, and in the south the only other city, Ur, covered only 10–15 hectares. A clear migration, not only to the city of Uruk itself but also to its surrounding countryside, at the expense of the region to the north, is visible. And Uruk continued to grow: around 2800 its walls encircled an area of 494 hectares and occupation outside the walls was likely. A comparison with later cities shows the magnitude of this size: Athens after the expansion by Themistocles only covered 250 hectares, Jerusalem in AD 43 only 100 hectares, and Rome as the capital of an enormous empire under Hadrian was only twice as large as Uruk had been 3,000 years earlier.¹³

Not only was the city itself enormous, but its temple complexes were also extremely monumental and elaborately decorated. The building history of the temples devoted to Anu, the sky god, and to

¹² V. Gordon Childe, 'The Urban Revolution', *Town Planning Review* 21 (1950), 3–17.

¹³ Hans J. Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000–2000 BC*

Inanna, the goddess of love and fertility, is extremely complicated and need not delay us here. It suffices to say that they were enormous in size and both contained various buildings. In the Inanna complex several examples of naturalistic sculpture of extremely fine artistic quality were found, as well as the first evidence of writing on clay tablets. Marvin Powell has suggested that writing was invented by a Sumerian-speaking citizen of Uruk,¹⁴ a suggestion that is appealing if impossible to verify with the evidence available at present.

The importance of the city of Uruk was not limited to southern Mesopotamia. For about 500 years from the mid-fourth millennium on, the culture that we call the Uruk culture spread out over an enormous geographical area. Writing, mass-produced pottery, cylinder seals, and decorated monumental architecture were the hallmarks of that culture. At first it spread into western Iran where it influenced the culture at Susa, and then both cities established colonies: Susa as far east as Shahr-i-Sokhte in eastern Iran, Uruk in northern Syria at sites such as Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda, and as far west as the Egyptian Nile delta. The Uruk influence may have caused fundamental changes in Egyptian culture where individual marks of ownership were replaced by a real writing system and monumental funerary architecture appeared. The scope of the Uruk 'expansion' is thus overwhelming. Its stimuli are unclear; long-distance trade has been most often used as a justification, but its importance has been overstated and other factors must have played a role as well. Whatever the impetus of this expansion may have been, its driving force most likely was situated in the city of Uruk, the predominant centre of southern Mesopotamia. The leadership of Uruk, both locally and internationally, at a very early point in its urban development, is startling to say the least. It shows that much more complex factors were at work in urban development than the picture drawn here suggests.

The development of urbanism in northern Mesopotamia followed patterns quite different from those in the South, due to dissimilar ecological conditions. Rather than the great variety of natural settings in small geographical areas, the North consists of two physical regions. The western part, between the Tigris and

¹⁴ Marvin A. Powell, 'Three problems in the history of cuneiform writing: origins, direction of script, literacy', *Visible Language* 15/iv (1981), 422.

Euphrates rivers, contains a vast rolling plain, the northern and eastern sectors of which receive sufficient rainfall for dry-farming. The southern sector of that area has to rely on irrigation for its agriculture, and permanent settlement is limited to the river valleys. The eastern part, from the left bank of the Tigris to the Zagros mountains, consists of a piedmont region with low hills, gradually rising to the east. The western flanks of the Zagros contain a number of intermontane valleys running parallel to the Tigris river. Although rainfall is often sufficient for dry-farming, its reliability is low, and often irrigation water supplements rain.

Whereas village settlement in this region dates back several millennia farther than in the South—as far back as the eighth millennium—internal processes did not lead to the development of cities. Cities first appeared in the late fourth millennium with the expansion of the Uruk culture described above. Extensive excavations of such cities are rare; only at Habuba Kabira is the entire extent of the city known. Although it occupied only eighteen hectares, its urban characteristics are clear: monumental architecture, dense domestic habitation, mass-produced goods, and proto-writing, all directly influenced by Uruk. Interestingly, the city was surrounded by a defensive wall, a characteristic that also distinguishes earlier northern villages from contemporary settlements in the South. The reasons for the need of a defensive structure are unknown. There is evidence of fires at several locations in Habuba Kabira at the time of its abandonment, which may have been the result of a violent conquest. The absence of textual sources prevents a clear reconstruction of what happened. In any case, with the disappearance of southern influence in the region, urban settlements declined, either being totally abandoned, or continuing as villages.

Five hundred years later, around 2500, a second period of urbanization occurred in northern Mesopotamia, which seems to have been part of a process of urban development encompassing an enormous geographical area from the Indus Valley to the Aegean, and throughout Syria and Palestine. Large fortified cities appeared, now equalling the urban centres of the South in size. Textual evidence from Mari and especially from Ebla shows a secular urban élite holding all sources of power. The culture of these cities was greatly influenced by southern Mesopotamia, and southern diffusion has usually been considered the driving force of this evolution. Although the urban development of the region may have declined

around 2100, numerous cities survived in a framework of alternating political fragmentation and centralization under various powers. At the end of the Bronze Age in the fourteenth–thirteenth centuries all the main urban centres show signs of great decline, and only in the ninth–eighth centuries did cities reappear as a common feature throughout northern Mesopotamia. In the late seventh century BC, when the neo-Assyrian empire collapsed, the region suffered a total economic decline, and our knowledge of the level of urbanization becomes very vague.

Cities were thus not as easily maintained in the North as they were in the South. The agricultural potential of the region permitted the self-sufficiency of village communities, obviating the need for redistribution by cities. Only when southern powers installed centres to organize the extraction of northern goods for their own benefit, or when a centralizing political force arose in the North itself, were cities needed. Throughout the history of the region, cities were less common than in the South, and many of them owed their existence more to commercial, military, or political concerns than to agricultural ones.

In conclusion, this survey of the origins of cities in Mesopotamia has shown, I believe, that ecological conditions played an important role in their development. In the South the variety of zones with different agricultural potentials in close proximity to each other encouraged the growth of points of exchange. These nodal points gained a central role in other aspects of the economy as well as in religious, military, and political life. In the North, on the other hand, villages sufficed for the management of agricultural resources, and the city was at first introduced through southern influences. Throughout the history of the North the non-agricultural roles of the city predominated: trade, politics, militarism, and religion. They could only appear after the state had evolved, not before the state. The origins of urbanism in both areas had important repercussions for the characteristics of their cities, which I will explore in further detail in the following chapters.

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