Working at Home in the Ancient Near East

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Cover: Tell Beydar, Area B (courtesy of A. Pruß)

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Working at Home in the Ancient Near East: New Insights and Avenues of Research

Juliette Mas[1] and Palmiro Notizia[2]

The contributions collected in the present volume draw from the workshop *Working at Home in the Ancient Near East*, held in Vienna on 27 April 2016 at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and organized within the framework of the 10th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East.

The idea of this workshop originated from a discussion of common questions and challenges faced in our personal research on the socio-economic role played by non-institutional households in Mesopotamia during the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC, and their interaction with the institutional economy. In our investigations, we had approached these topics from different perspectives and by analyzing two different datasets: Bronze Age Upper Mesopotamian archaeological data concerning domestic architecture and Ur III administrative documentation. Both datasets and methodological approaches offered many possibilities for the study of the modes of production of private households, but they also presented specific constraints and limitations. The patchy nature of the archaeological evidence, the incompletely published excavation reports, and the difficulty of interpreting the material remains always make it problematic for the archaeologist to identify household installations related to domestic production and to reconstruct the social use of domestic spaces. At the same time, most of the enormous mass of written documentation from the era of the Third Dynasty of Ur comes from royal and provincial archives. The available documentation thus provides a very detailed view of how institutional households and state-run industries operated, but reports almost nothing about the activities taking place in rural estates belonging to members of the elite or within the urban residential setting. This is a significant omission, as the economic interests of private households were usually beyond the administrative reach of the state.

Finally, one has to consider that despite the fact that both archaeological material and epigraphical evidence from Bronze Age Mesopotamia is abundant, the study of the archaeological records can only rarely be combined with textual data. In fact, only a few private archives have been scientifically excavated, while the great majority of the cuneiform records have no precise archaeological provenience.

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To further address these issues from a more comparative perspective, and in order to profit from the discussion with other scholars, we decided to organize an international and interdisciplinary workshop, bringing together archaeologists, philologists, and historians specializing in ancient Mesopotamia. The invited speakers were encouraged to reflect on the topic of the workshop, to exchange their different views, and to discuss methodological concerns and common problems. Our aim was to integrate the archaeological and textual data available within a shared chronological and geographic horizon.

The present volume brings together elaborated versions of the majority of the papers that were delivered during this meeting. The proceedings display a balance of archaeological and philological oriented contributions on specific Bronze Age sites and archives, from northern Mesopotamia to southern Babylonia.

In her paper, **Laura Battini** focused on the presence or absence of workshops in the Nuzi houses and addressed the difficulty of identifying workshops in ancient Mesopotamian houses. She stresses the problem of dealing with data emerging from old excavations because of the medium quality of the excavations and of their reports. Despite the fact that only a small area of the lower town has been excavated, the Nuzi domestic architecture is well documented. Nevertheless, due to the incompletely published excavation reports, we lack most of the data concerning the material, pottery, furniture, and installations, that have been uncovered in these buildings. This situation makes complicated not only the identification of possible workshops set up in houses but also in a more general manner, the different functions of the Nuzi houses. In that respect, Battini was able neither to identify any workshops in the Nuzi houses, nor to find evidence of animal husbandry. Interestingly, the workshops in private houses were not set up in a room with a specific shape. The Nuzi excavation reports almost never attest the presence of material or installations within the Nuzi houses (even basic domestic installations related to cooking, for instance). However, Battini raises an important question: does silence mean absence in archaeology? By extension, does the absence of records attesting production and workshops in the Nuzi houses indicate the inexistence of workshops in the Nuzi houses? Despite the absence of such records, the excavation reports nevertheless attest material that could be related to crafts, agriculture, and commerce. This material was unearthed both in Level III and Level II, with, according to Battini, an increase during Level II. This increase would correspond, in her opinion, to the construction of the palace. Hence, the emergence of the palace would have led to an increase of needs and of commercial activities at Nuzi.

In his paper, **Alexander Pruß** discussed the evidence from the site of Tell Beydar and, more specifically, the remains and finds from Beydar Phase IIIb, dated to the EJZ 3b period. The latest level of this phase yielded 220 cuneiform tablets in different parts of the upper town. These tablets belong to an administrative archive written within

the space of a few years. Several administrative texts relate the delivery of rations to the inhabitants of the city. They mention the official in charge, the recipients (with their name and profession), the number of rations and sometimes the month. The professions listed are related to agriculture and the herding of domestic animals, or else refer to artisans and specialized workers. We can note an absence of the mention of textile workers, priests, and temple workers. Tell Beydar's 3rd millennium textual documentation brings forward new insights concerning the workforce and the organization of labor at the site, especially since this documentation can be correlated to substantial archaeological data (i.e. regarding contemporaneous domestic architecture and official buildings). The analysis of Beydar Phase IIIb houses reveals that the households who occupied them were likely dependent on the centrally distributed rations. In fact, the storage capacities of the houses corresponded to monthly rations and would not have enabled the households to survive between two harvests. Furthermore, none of the houses provided us with evidence of craft production; such production is attested only in specialized buildings. The same institutions that distributed the rations to the inhabitants of the city probably also controlled these specialized buildings. Taking all this into account, Pruß assumes that Tell Beydar's economy was controlled by the central administration and that the basic households were dependent on the grain distributed by the central administration in exchange for their labor, which corresponded to crafts that were produced in the city's specialized buildings, agricultural work in the city's fields, and care of the city's animals. Pruß points out the contrast between the picture that can be drawn from Beydar's documentation, and the paradigm usually reconstructed by scholars concerning the ancient Mesopotamian economic system. He explains this dichotomy through the coincidence of excavations, archaeological strategies and the possible coexistence of different economic systems in Upper Mesopotamia during the EJZ 3b period.

Juliette Mas' research focused on the archaeological evidence of production both occurring in private and official contexts during the 3rd millennium BC in Upper Mesopotamia. On the one hand, a large number of the private houses she analyzed revealed evidence of craft production. On the other hand, the evidence of production in official buildings and in specialized buildings is very scant. The importance of the private groups within the economic system and most particularly in the production of goods is therefore not in doubt, and the well-known extended families may have played a decisive role in this regard. Indeed, the private *oikoi* probably represented important producing entities with diversified activities. Nevertheless, the organization of these groups, as well as their relations with the official institutions, remain little known. Mas points out the important differences in the Upper Mesopotamian region between the first and second halves of the 3rd millennium BC. Significantly, during the first part of the 3rd millennium BC—i.e. during the Ninevite 5 period—Upper Mesopotamia developed along a ruralization trajectory; small settlements were predominant, and there is no attestation of state and no written record. In contrast, during the second

part of the 3rd millennium, the second urban revolution occurred alongside a revival of state and bureaucracy. Mas focused on four case studies from rural and urban contexts. Her research demonstrates that two different systems occurred both in large cities and in small towns or villages. Within the first system, no production occurred within a private context but instead took place in specialized buildings, under the extensive control of the official institutions. The second system was characterized by a large proportion of craft production carried out in private houses. In the second system, the private groups handling a large-scale production of crafts would, in any case, have maintained strong relationships with the official institutions. Nevertheless, we could have expected a different picture. In reality, the size of the settlements, and therefore the presence or absence of official buildings and institutions, such as the palace or the temples, did not seem to have had an influence on the importance of the households within the economic system, or on the production of goods.

In his article, **Paolo Brusasco** approached archaeological and archival data of the Old Babylonian period, originating from Ur and Nippur, from a multisensory, and interdisciplinary perspective. A combined use of architectural and textual evidence helped to shed some lights on how everyday life and working activities were regulated within ancient Mesopotamian houses. In this regard, business activities are analyzed through the interaction between visitors and residents, and their perception of the domestic space. Brusasco retrieves these social dimensions with the aid of 'sensorial maps': a combination of graphs showing how space is structured, how it is accessible and the extent of the sensorial zones. The complexity of these sensorial maps has been proved to be an index for hierarchical relations. The choice of the case studies is dictated by rich and solid archaeological evidence, accompanied by a good variety of legal and economic documents, which allow the retrieval of a connection between house space and social agents. Considerable residential areas, dated to the Old-Babylonian period, have been discovered both at Ur and Nippur. Residential suites show a fixed set of architectural parameters, such as storage and processing rooms, together forming the kitchen. However, according to the degree of social complexity of the families (from nuclear to extended family-type), these residential suites are either clustered altogether and shared, or separated according to social status. For the topic at issue, spaces devoted to the reception of visitors are particularly significant, being equipped with specific sets of architectural features and pottery assemblages (benches, water jugs, stands) that suggest an intermingling of private and public functions. Some of these suites can be identified as bakeries, foundries, or workshops devoted to stone-cutting and seal-making. In his research based on sensorial spatiality, Brusasco identifies three types of architectural complexes. In these three types of houses, the degree of perception of smells, lights and sounds varies greatly according to the complexity of the architectural space, creating the effect of separation and seclusion between working activities and private time, which affected the sensorial perception of both the families and their visitors/clients.

In his contribution, **Steven Garfinkle** concentrated on the activities of a wealthy family of merchants, based at Ĝirsu/Lagaš during the Ur III period. He addresses the critical issue of the uncertain nature of merchants as economic agents, whether commercial actors engaged in entrepreneurial activities under the direct control of large institutions, or operating with some degree of independence and on behalf of their own non-institutional households. Garfinkle also highlights how the various activities in which merchants were engaged encouraged the documentation of their work in the cuneiform records. The epigraphical material documenting the merchants' transactions was both preserved in the administrative archives of the state and stored in their homes. Garfinkle illustrates the role played by merchants as facilitators of exchange and as tax-farmers, as well as their involvement in long-distance trade on behalf of their institutional clients, especially in strategic resources and precious materials, such as copper and tin. He further argues that these activities directly connected the merchant families to the state-building enterprise of the Ur III kings. He examines in detail the activities of the best-attested family of merchants in Girsu/Lagaš, headed by Ur-saga, in order to describe how merchant work was organized. He concludes that merchants, like other professional groups in the 3rd millennium BC, operated mostly as family collectives. By comparison with the evidence from excavations at Ur III Nippur and Susa, along with those of Old Babylonian Ur, Garfinkle shows that urban professionals, like Igibuni from Susa, the prominent merchant Ur-Nusku from Nippur, and the copper-trader Ea-nāṣir from Ur, ran their operations from residential locations within the cities.

In his paper, **Palmiro Notizia** offered a detailed reconstruction of the career and fortunes of Lugal-irida, a superintendent of weavers, who, for almost two decades, was in charge of the most important center for textile production of the entire Ur III state, located in the Guabba district of the Ĝirsu/Lagaš province. Based on the data drawn from administrative documents connected to Lugal-irida's activity as a state official, and, in particular, on the extremely informative household inventory RTC 304, Notizia portrayed the economic well-being of this functionary by measuring his wealth in terms of real estate (arable land and garden plots) and movable property. His personal asset portfolio included a great variety of institutional goods and private assets: utensils, furnishings, clothing, foodstuffs, slave and servants, domestic animals, silver, precious metals and other native and imported products. Notizia assumes that Lugal-irida's official residence was part of the administrative building from which he operated as superintendent of weavers. In his house, which functioned both as a home and office, the state surveyors found the great majority of the objects and valuables enumerated in RTC 304. Notizia argues that the active role played by Lugal-irida in the administrative machinery as a member of the restricted group of high-ranking functionaries in charge of temple households and production units allowed him to accumulate considerable wealth and enhance his social standing. Furthermore, his engagement in independent economic activity, especially in the trade of copper, luxury items, and exotic articles, provided him with an additional source of income.

Notizia's research aims at improving our knowledge of the prosperity level and wealth investment strategies of the palatial and administrative elites of the Third Dynasty of Ur, and it has to be considered as a first attempt at 'materializing' wealthy households through textual analysis, when contemporary archaeological evidence is limited or even entirely lacking.

Norman Yoffee and **Gojko Barjamovic** offered a new discussion of the Old Assyrian trading system and how it defies the logic of a 'palace economy', the notion of which would be more accurately applicable to other periods and areas of the ancient Near East, but is quite unfitting in the Old Assyrian context. In the first part of their paper, Barjamovic provides an overview of the current data on this trading system, drawing from the thousands of tablets retrieved at Kaneš (Kültepe), the Assyrian commercial colony located in Central Anatolia. His analysis shows how the palace, as economic and political center, was virtually absent from the written documentation. The significant level of support required for long-distant trade, such as infrastructure and travel security, was achieved through the reliance on a complex system of collective governance, which provided the necessary safety net. This oligarchy, based on kinship ties, operated through commercial and political treaties, in order to secure a suitable network for merchants and to 'minimize risks'. Whether or not this civic assembly was formed by members who were themselves involved in commerce, it left the actual trade in the hands of private enterprises. After this reappraisal, Barjamovic provides stimulating comparisons among geographically and historically distant parallels (from medieval Europe to Aztec and Chinese empires) regarding communal or antithetical strategies in commercial and social organizations. In the second section of the article, Yoffee provides a re-evaluation of the history of trade studies in pre-modern societies and reassesses the importance of leading new researches from the perspective of how trade impacted on the society, how people perceived trade and traders, and how more or less structured political power interacted with those. Current and forthcoming bibliography will hopefully move in this direction, proving that, even tough a state would have gained benefit through trade, its participation in such dealings did not necessarily imply a state-controlled enterprise. On this basis, the authors raise a fundamental question: is there any longer a raison d'être for a distinction between private and public?

The organized workshop and the resulting volume do not pretend to resolve all the questions related to the organization, scale and the socio-economic role played by non-institutional households within the ancient Mesopotamian economic systems. Nevertheless, thanks to both the analysis of specific case studies and the attempt to develop a theoretical framework, the present collection of articles provides new insights and opens up new avenues of research on household economy, which certainly constitutes a hot topic in the Ancient Near East studies. This workshop and its proceedings fit within the dynamics of research widely developed during recent years. We can notably mention three recently published volumes originating from

a workshop: *House and Household Economies in 3rd Millennium B.C.E. Syro-Mesopotamia,*[3] *Labor in the Ancient World*[4] and *Household Studies in Complex Societies: (Micro) Archaeological and Textual Approaches*.[5] The present workshop *Working at Home in the Ancient Near East* and its proceedings are complementary and contribute to the debate. Indeed, numerous questions regarding the location, organization, control mechanisms and production strategies of both non-institutional and state-run workshops and industries in ancient Mesopotamia still need to be further investigated and discussed. Nevertheless, the contributions assembled in the present volume will hopefully help to bridge the gap between archaeological records and cuneiform sources, in order to provide a more accurate reconstruction of the Mesopotamian economies during the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. For these reasons, the authors express their gratitude to the contributors for their involvement in this project, which we as organizers personally believed in.

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