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Urbanization and Social Stratification in Ancient Mesopotamia and Palestine

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Urbanization and Social Stratification in Ancient Mesopotamia and Palestine. – Is there a qualitative change in society with the emergence of the state? The evidence available to us tends to favor the notion that there *is* a change, a point at which the evolutionary processes in early history broke off, in some way, from prior patterns of subsistence and settlement.

This attitude was not, however, present in the works of the earlier anthropologists, who tended to see the historical process of graduation from early societies into complex urban societies as evolutionary: a gradual advancement, with neither setbacks nor radical surges ahead, although anthropologists noticed the basic differences in the two societies. For example, the anthropologist ROBERT LOWIE (1927: 2–3) dealt with this question by trying “to apply to primitive and civilized societies alike the principle of continuity and psychic unity” and attempting “to bridge the gap between them by intermediate steps”.

The important word here is continuity, for LOWIE believed that there is no *inherent* difference between a “primitive” society and an urban one. Picking on isolated examples of contemporary “primitive” societies, LOWIE tried to make this point the main element in his thesis that kin and territorial (local) ties existed together, and that the territorial tie “originally weak but perceptible ... at first subordinate to the blood tie, was intensified to the point of assuming the dominant rôle” (*ibid.* 53–54). Now while the primary question is the process of transition and intensification, inherent to the formation of the state is the development of territorial concept as opposed to clan. The state is distinguished from “gentile” organization by grouping members on a territorial basis. This view was held by anthropologists such as L. H. MORGAN (1963).

Of course, it is not difficult to attack LOWIE’s thesis offhand for its simplistic outlook. However, the basic assumption LOWIE makes, and then amplifies, contains a graver error viz, his approach to the primeval political unit:

It appears, then, that the primeval political unit was insignificant in numbers and habitat, and was necessarily constituted in large measure of blood kindred. Of differences in hereditary status no suggestion has been found. There were no political institutions or officials, but merely headmen enjoying purely personal authority (LOWIE 1927: 5–6).

LOWIE then, however, goes on to say, “It must be admitted that this archaic pattern contrasts strangely with its equivalent in modern civilizations” (*ibid.* 6).

LOWIE then asks the question: “Why should the peoples of the world, after contentedly living for millennia under a government based on the blood tie, engage in that startling revolution ... of substituting the totally novel alignment of persons by locality?” (*ibid.* 53), assuming that the “Urban Revolution” was constituted of just this change only, that is, the change from blood to political territorial tie:

under threat of attack from a remote and consolidated alien foe, village might adhere to village in joint war... that even in extreme cases of separatism the neighborhood tie becomes a significant element in governmental activity, not perhaps in itself adequate for the institution of what we call ‘political’ organization but providing the germ from which such an organization may develop (*ibid.* 60).

However the argument weakens on his attempt to find a process which strengthened the local tie and made it predominant over the blood tie, for both his concept of associations (organizations consolidated by a common end), and his subsequent admission that the great importance which he had attached to associations as “potential agencies for the creation of a state by uniting the population within a circumscribed area into an aggregate that functions as a definite unit irrespective of any other social affiliations of the inhabitants” (*ibid.* 107) had undergone “serious modifications”:

Further study leads to the serious modification of this view. Undoubtedly the claims set forth for the destructive efficacy of associations hold: by the very fact of their existence they have created novel bonds bound to encroach upon the omnipotence of kinship ties. But their positive achievement is more doubtful: it is only when *supplementary* [my emphasis – WLY] factors of unification supervene that they achieve the solidarity of the entire local group. In itself, in other words, associational activity is not less separatistic than the segmentation of society into groups of kindred (*ibid.* 108).

This modification resulted from data collected by SCHULTZ on the pastoral nomads of Asia, where associational activity is rare or absent, and extensive and closely knit kingdoms appear in historical times causing a contradiction of the principle that "if there were a simple causal connection between associations and territorial integration, political unification should be weak wherever associations are lacking or weakly developed" (*ibid.* 111).

Thus LOWIE's thesis has failed on two points. He has failed to explain his process involved in continuity and he has furthermore failed in presenting his point convincingly by taking the simplistic concept of change in ties as the basis for the development of the state: "specifically, the problem was to determine whether 'savage' society recognizes the territorial tie or whether political order is maintained solely on the basis of personal relations, as Maine and Morgan contended" (*ibid.* 113). However it is in his conclusion that LOWIE vindicates himself by stating "... contact with a weaker or stronger neighbor – may produce an efflorescence of novel institutions" (*ibid.*).

What then occurs in the emergence of the state? What are the causes, results and processes involved in the change from a primary village-farming community to a developed village-farming community and finally to townships growing into urban centers and then city-states? Below we present a general phase scheme such as BRAIDWOOD (1962) has done for levels in pre-history ¹.

A) The era of primary village-farming community: – Co-existing with sedentary tribes (nomads), and resulting from pastoral tribe separation from egalitarian semi-horticulturalist tribal tradition (the first great social division of labour), this development led to a regular exchange between the two co-existing elements. A temporary division of labour resulted: production of exchange goods and production for village consumption. An increase in production would result as demand for exchange goods grew. The concept of tribal ownership shifts emphasis to a system of corporate ownership within a tribal framework. This was evident in Mesopotamia and Mexico in the "conical clans", the Aztec *calpullec* and the Sumerian *im-ru-a*.

These "clans" were with common family ties but which distributed wealth, social standing and power most unequally among the members of the pseudo-family. *It is my contention that this relationship is the only basis for the development of personal wealth evident in finds of cylinder seals and personal stamp impressions from this period on.* Such kin units trace their descent back to an original ancestor, real or fictious but, at the same time, they regularly favor his lineal descendants over the junior or "cadet" lines in regulating access to social, economic, or political prerogatives (endogamous structural grouping): "conical clans" are "probably ... of high antiquity, considerably antedating the onset of civilized life ... they represented [the reason] ... for the formation of complex, flexible hierarchies of economic and social differentiation that characterized the growth of the state itself" (ADAMS 1966: 94) ².

At the same time, however, they survived the superimposition of new political relationships for a considerable time, retaining loyalties and forms of internal organization that were rooted in kin relationships while adapting to the needs of the state through the elaboration of a new series of specialized functions. Among the specialized functions three

¹ The general phase scheme outlined is derived by concatenation of the phases proposed by BRAIDWOOD and HOWE for Mesopotamia and South-West Asia in their paper "Southwest Asia beyond the Lands of the Mediterranean Littoral" in BRAIDWOOD and WILLEY [edit.] 1962: 132–146.

² Our argument is essentially that in phases (A) and (B), periods of village/township transition, flexible hierarchies in the form of conical clans existed within an internally differentiated tribal framework. On the other hand, in phases (C) and (D), periods of town/city transition, hierarchies became rigid with the emergence of accumulation of wealth within extended families rather than within the tribal framework itself. Internally differentiated tribal structures as such could not co-exist with characteristics functionally determined by the necessities of urban life. Thus, the process of stratification cannot be dealt with separately from the urbanization process that it accompanied and resulted from.

Mesopotamian Alluvium		Mesopotamian Stages	Phases		Palestine	
Dynasty of Agade	BCE	Conquest states	D	D	2200	Nomadic invasions
	2300		↑	↑		
III	2500	Militaristic polities				(intermediate E B- Middle Bronze)
Early Dynastic	II					Early Bronze
	2700					Phase Ib (urban)
	I		* C	↑	2900	
	3100	Amorite pressures	↑	↑		Canaanite I (Phase Ia)
Protoliterate	3300	Theocratic polities	B	B	3200	
			↑	↑		
Warka	3700		A	A		
Late 'Ubaid	3900				3800	Ghassul

* Class distinctions appear in Mesopotamia at this point.

in particular may be mentioned.

(1) serving as units for military training and service; (2) providing a corporate framework for the development, employment, and retention of the skills and attitudes of specialized craftsmanship; and (3) serving as units of labor management for state projects and services (*ibid.*).

Thus we obtain an accumulation of wealth in individuals but still within the tribal framework (there are abundant records from proto-literate Mesopotamia which attest to great differences in land ownership) (*ibid.* 55). With technological advances such as the development of pottery and masonry, along with a quasi-religious development (see CHILDE 1943) we come to the second phase.

B) The era of developed village-farming communities: - A further development occurs in the concept of private property, evidenced by the abundance of stamp and cylinder seals in Mesopotamia, along with a division between artisans and agriculturists. With the emergence of social stratification as from the adapting situation of the conical clan, and an increasing population density, the "urban transition" proceeded with radical casual motivation towards the development of townships. The core trends associated with the urban revolution were: social stratification, urbanization, political differentiation, militarization, and craft specialization. Ecological instability, droughts, famines, floods,

during this period resulted in a crystallization of a concept of diety who would assure the fertility of crops and livestock. This caused an assumption of power in the developing theocratic groups unprecedented in the first phase. The power of the theocracy continued into later phases, its apex in this phase (ADAMS 1966; see also JAWAD 1965).

C) The rise and vogue of townships: – The “Urban Revolution” proceeded rapidly as the township grew, motivated by outside pressures; nomadic tribal pressures or the forced realization that more can be accomplished by a group effort with respect to cultivation and irrigation techniques, as in the floodplains. Natural pressures include silting, increasing salinity with rising ground-water, infestations, and inadequacies in water supply (ADAMS 1966: 54, 58). With these pressures came a political recognition of property differences yielding an increase in social stratification and institutionalization of political authority (*ibid.* 9–10) which seems to be more at the core of the “urban” transition-emergence of State than the process of urbanism itself. Thus the urban transition-emergence of the state (with all the institutions which are present in the state and not in the pre-state phase) takes place along with and concurrent to the emergence of the institutions present in the state.

As ADAMS puts it “Trends toward territorial aggrandizement, political unification, and population concentration within the political unit accordingly can be interpreted not merely as expressions of the outcome of the Urban Revolution but as functionally interrelated processes that are central to it” (1966: 46–47).

D) The growth and extension of the township into city-state: – The characteristics of this phase are amply attested to in the archaeological-literary record left by the documents and libraries of time and need not be mentioned here. However, the urban *transition* is over at this point, *with all the characteristic institutions of urban society present in prototype or complete form*. The most important point in my phase scheme is between the second and third phases, a point when

... society became more and more differentiated structurally and increasingly specialized functionally ... [and] civil society based upon property relations took the place of primitive society based on kinship; the State replaced tribe and clan (WHITE 1949: 381).

This is the point at which the radical causal motivation in the phase of the rise of townships occurs in Mesopotamia and Palestine. In Mesopotamia it was the persistent nomadic pressures.

... In Mesopotamia, nomadism was one of the strategic disequilibrating factors that may have set the core processes of the Urban Revolution into motion and, further, that the earliest durable patterns of political organization to extend beyond the confines of the individual city-state received their impetus from semitribalized entities whose recent nomadic background can be assumed [e. g. revitalization of Mesopotamian society through struggle between Sumerian sedentary villages and Akkadian semi-nomads] (ADAMS 1966: 49).

In Palestine, however, we must alter our view of the process of the interaction of urbanization and stratification to one differing from OPPENHEIMER’s theory of urbanization by pressure-conquest, asserting, rather, that social stratification results where it was preceded by an aristocratic tradition and ideology among the conquerors. OPPENHEIMER’s pressure-conquest theory as related by LOWIE and elaborated by ADAMS is applicable to Mesopotamia as follows:

When pastoral nomads come into contact with a sedentary peasantry, they at first resort to the simple device of wholesale pillage and slaughter. Later, however, an enlightened self-interest prompts them to spare the victims, allowing them to gain their livelihood and become objects of a more regular and rational utilization. A fixed system of tribute may arise, the tillers of the soil bringing their produce to the herders’ tents. Still later the nomads settle in the peasants’ territory, establishing military colonies all over it, while granting to their subjects a relative degree of independence in regard to their internal affairs. Conceivably a representative of the ruling class may fix his abode at each peasant chief’s residence. Finally the two originally separate groups are welded into

a national unit: the martial overlords extort what they will from the subordinate caste, but in turn protect them against alien aggression. Community of speech aids in the development of sentimental relations and the consequent integration of the stratified whole, while at the same time class consciousness is fostered by the conquerors' myth of their native superiority (LOWIE 1927: 20–21; see also OPPENHEIMER 1923).

This process, combined with OPPENHEIMER's nomadic pressure theory as outlined by ADAMS (1966: Ch. I–II), can be applied historically to the process of urbanization in Mesopotamia as follows: Amorite pressures (as attested to in Akkadian documents of the time) on the Akkadian semi-nomads in Northern Mesopotamia resulted in pressure on the Sumerian villages in the South. These Sumerian villages forged into walled townships but were finally conquered by the Akkadian groups with results which follow OPPENHEIMER's theory closely. This is evident in the archaeological documents available to us.

The problem of the urbanization process in Palestine during the Early Bronze Age in the region is one which may be solved by applying a modified version of the process outlined above. The problem is stated in depth in an article written by R. DE VAUX (1966: 233–234);

The Early Bronze Age (EBIa) was not evolved either from the culture of Ghassul-Beersheba in the South of Palestine which disappeared without leaving heirs, or from the culture of the red and grey burnished ware of the north, with which at the outset it lived in close proximity. It can be explained only by the influx of a new population, the first elements of which settled in the central regions of the country, which were less densely populated than the north and where the most important elements of phase Ia is to be found. These immigrants did not come from the south, which was reached only in slow stages by E. B. culture. The unity of culture apparent at that time with Byblos and South Syria (impressions on jars, pottery) shows that they came from the north, perhaps by way of the Jordan valley as far as Jericho, whence they penetrated into the interior of the country. Some groups intermingled with the makers of red and grey burnished ware in the large villages of the north. Their settlement was affected by peaceful infiltration and not by way of conquest. Nevertheless, these newcomers were destined to transform the country, for they brought with them new crafts, *especially an established tradition of architecture and urban life*. The sudden efflorescence of fortified cities in phase Ib cannot be explained in any other way.

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