

7

Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia

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By around 3100 BC in ancient Western Asia and the northeastern corner of Africa, the two earliest states/civilizations in the world are believed to have emerged. (In this chapter we define “states” as the specialized political system of the larger cultural entities that we denominate “civilizations.” We explain and defend this distinction in our conclusion.)

In Mesopotamia (fig. 7.1), early political development is most clearly evident from archaeological surveys (Adams 1981) and from excavations at the urban site of Warka (ancient Uruk), with its massive temple complexes (including a possible palace), monumental art, cylinder seals, ration system, presumed central place in its hinterland, surplus production, and writing system (Boehmer 1991; Pollock 1992). Warka was probably one among a number of such city-states. The urban implosion, in which city-states carved up the countryside while the population of smaller sites shifted into the new cities (thus creating a depopulated, “ruralized” countryside), also produced—it has been argued—an explosion outward (Algaze 1989; Schwartz 1988; Yoffee 1995b). Mobilizing unprecedented numbers of dependent personnel, the leaders of these city-states established far-flung colonies (and/or immigrants from the south settled in northern villages) up the Euphrates into Syria and Anatolia, and onto the Iranian Plain (Algaze 1989, 1993a, 1993b; Sørenhagen 1986; cf. Johnson 1988–89; Stein 1993; Yoffee 1995b); the colonies proved easier to found than to maintain.

In Egypt (fig. 7.2), the signs of unification and civilization are less archaeologically conventional, encompassing the rapid development of large

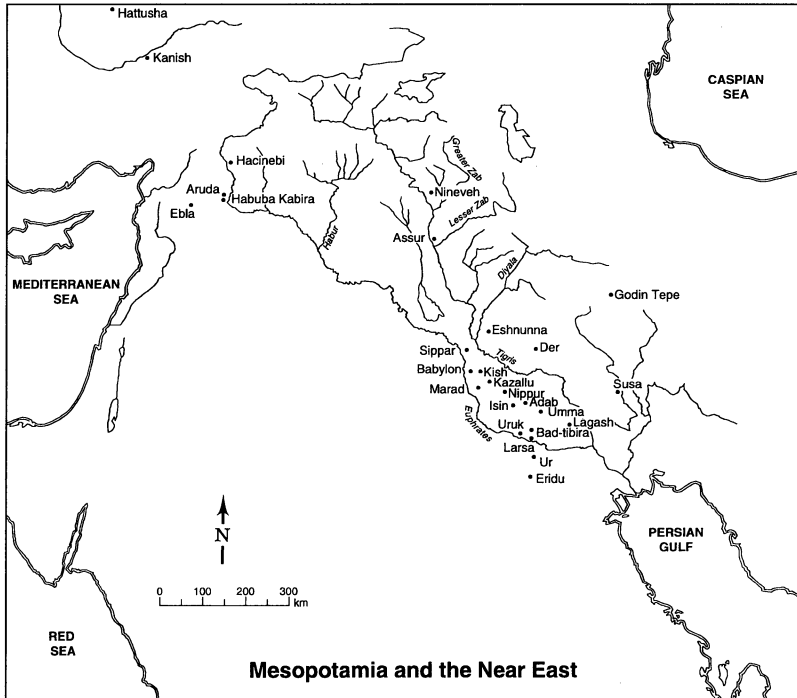


Figure 7.1. Mesopotamia (after Postgate 1992; Edzard, Farber, and Sollberger 1977).

cemeteries and standardization of the material culture of the late Naqada II and Naqada III phases throughout the country toward the end of the fourth millennium BC. In the wake of these changes came political centralization of the Nile Valley and Delta (from the First Cataract at Aswan to the Mediterranean), polarization of wealth, the decline of regional centers, and the development of mortuary architecture, luxury goods, characteristic art forms, and writing. The centralized polity reached out briefly to the south to devastate, but not occupy, Lower Nubia, and to the north to assert hegemony over southern Palestine.

Thus, at around the same date the two regions evolved highly differentiated and stratified societies (table 7.1). Both societies exhibited specialized political systems with bureaucratic administrations (or what soon became such—the earliest evidence does not permit a definite statement) based on

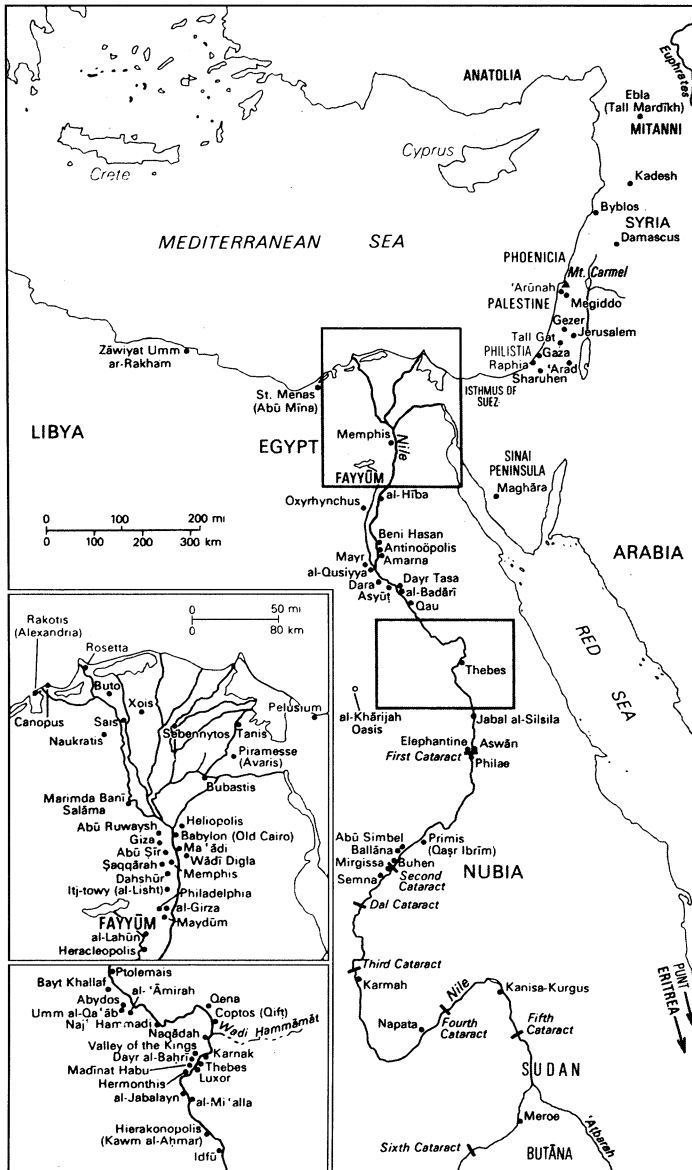


Figure 7.2. Egypt and Syria-Palestine. From "Egypt" (author and map consultant John Baines) in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; reproduced with permission from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, ©1988 by *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.*

TABLE 7.1. Prehistoric Periods, Historic Periods, and Dynasties: Egypt and Mesopotamia

Egypt		Mesopotamia	
Merimda (Delta)	5000	‘Ubaid	5000–4000
Badari (Nile Valley)	4500		
Naqada I (Nile Valley)	4000	Uruk	4000–3100
Ma’adi (Delta)	3800		
Naqada II (Nile Valley, later all Egypt)	3500		
Naqada III (late predynastic/Dynasty 0)	3100	Jemdet Nasr	3100–2900
Early Dynastic (1st–3rd Dynasty)	2950–2575	Early Dynastic II	2700–2600
		Early Dynastic III	2600–2300
Old Kingdom (4th–8th Dynasty)	2575–2150		
First Intermediate period (9th–11th Dynasty)	2150–1980	Akkadian (Dynasty of Sargon of Akkade)	2350–2150
Middle Kingdom (11th–13th Dynasty)	1980–1630	Third Dynasty of Ur	2100–2000
Second Intermediate period (14th–17th Dynasty)	1630–1520	Old Babylonian period	2000–1600
New Kingdom (18th–20th Dynasty)	1540–1070	Old Assyrian period	2000–1750
Third Intermediate period (21st–25th Dynasty)	1070–715	Kassite Babylonia	–1150
		Middle Assyrian period	1400–950
Late Period (25th–30th Dynasty)	715–332	Various dynasties in Babylonia	1150–730
		Neo-Assyrian period	1000–610
Macedonian–Ptolemaic period	332–30	Neo-Babylonian period/Chaldean dynasty	625–539
Roman period	30–AD 395	Persian period	539–330
Byzantine period	AD 395–640	Seleucid dynasty	330–164
		Parthians and Sasanians	238–AD 651

Note: All dates before 715 BC are approximate. Dates are BC unless otherwise noted.

a written recording system, surplus production, and a managed system of distribution. They also displayed symbols of rulership, specialized elite ritual forms (although priests are not clearly visible in Egypt), and the demarcation of a “core–periphery” structure with the external world.

In this essay we compare some aspects of these two ancient civilizations, proceeding from one or the other according to the topic at hand. Most striking to Egyptologists and Mesopotamianists are the many salient differences between these two civilizations, which developed at roughly the same time in nearby regions, probably with some indirect contact (e.g., Kantor 1992; the mode of contact is still disputed), and with a comparable reliance on irrigation/floodplain agriculture as the subsistence base upon which all social institutions depended (although the river regimes differed, and the organization in Egypt was simpler). Yet, so far as we know, there has never been a comparative examination of the two most ancient states and civilizations, although particular institutions have been studied (e.g., Engnell 1943; Frankfort 1948). Indeed, the specialized training needed to master the primary written and archaeological sources for either area virtually precludes any one person from attempting such comparisons.

Egyptian or Mesopotamian scholars rarely have attempted any overall historical and cultural assessment of the character of either civilization (exceptions include Kemp 1989; Oppenheim 1977; Postgate 1992), because both civilizations persisted for millennia and underwent major social and cultural change, while the nature of the nonwritten sources, scripts, and languages changed as well. Few Egyptologists and Assyriologists have the skills to assess all the periods in their particular culture, let alone two cultures. Moreover, few scholars of these civilizations are inclined to be comparativists, and many even regard the principle of comparison as violating the “conceptual autonomy” (*Eigenbegrifflichkeit*, a term coined by the Assyriologist Benno Landsberger 1976[1926]; see Yoffee 1992) of their area of study—its unique developmental trajectory and historical character. All too often, comparison seems to be sampled principally either to reaffirm uniqueness or to claim that a particular culture offers the quintessential example of some cross-culturally attested phenomenon (for the former, see Kraus 1973; for the latter, see Assmann 1991).

We therefore present this essay with some diffidence, not because we suspect the astonishment of some ancient Near East colleagues; we take that for granted. Rather, we are concerned that a theoretically oriented account of social and cultural life of the two areas cannot easily be presented in a brief survey, using nonparochial terms, and navigating through (but not disregarding) problems of interpretation. Because the subject matter is so vast, we fall back to an uncomfortable extent on studies the two of us happen to have made. We justify the comparison precisely because, by specifying in which

dimensions and for what reasons institutions—and what may presumptuously be termed the spirits of both civilizations—differ, we learn more about their structure and character.

We do not, then, compare the two civilizations to enumerate similar traits or to establish the core principles of an abstraction, the “archaic state.” Rather, through this controlled comparison in time, place, and historical contact, we seek to identify major axes of variation and to advance an important anthropological principle: by knowing what is institutionally and structurally dissimilar in one society judiciously compared with another, we can begin fresh investigations of the principles of organization and change in either society, or in both. Our larger intention is to contribute to the set of comparisons of archaic states or early civilizations in general, to see what organizational principles are widely shared, what, if anything, is truly unique, and what general societal and transactional models can address data from a wide range of societies (cf. Trigger 1993).

SOME PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ANCIENT EGYPT AND MESOPOTAMIA

We review differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia in terms of the relation between political and cultural systems, kingship, and urbanization. Egypt exhibits nearly total convergence of polity and culture. The establishment of the unified and centralized polity was characterized far more by territorial extent than by urbanization, although settlement sites, which might round out the picture, are almost inaccessible. From ancient Egyptian civilization into modern times, there has been a clear definition of the extent of the country. The principal change has been that, whereas in antiquity the Nile Valley and Nile Delta made up the area ruled, lines have recently been drawn on a map and used to justify a geographical claim to rule adjacent deserts with their transit routes, as well as resources of a few oases, a very small number of nomads, and significant mineral deposits. In antiquity, these regions (except for the nearer oases), although exploited, were treated as being “abroad.” In some periods Egypt conquered large sectors of the Middle Nile and of Palestine and Syria, but these were never held permanently. Attempts to integrate the southern domains into a larger conception of “Egypt” did not succeed in the very long term.

This congruence of country and region also was cultural: Egyptian civilization extended to its southern border at the First Cataract of the Nile. At times, Egypt had great influence farther south, but generally less in Syria-Palestine.

The most apparent of all differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt is that there never was any enduring political unification in Mesopotamia

until the Persian conquest in the mid-first millennium BC; if there must be a political definition of the state, then there was no “Mesopotamian” state. In a wider comparative perspective, however, it is Egypt that is exceptional in displaying convergence between a polity and a more abstract civilizational boundary. Mesopotamia consisted politically of a congeries of city-states and culturally of an overarching cultural tradition.

In later periods, after 1600 BC, there were trends toward the formation of Assyrian and Babylonian regions, which in the south were especially loose fitting. Although Assyria did conquer Babylonia in the seventh century BC, absorbing it into its “empire,” that unification diverted military authority and resources from other imperial ventures. Ultimately, Assyrian rule over Babylonia was successfully resisted, and this led to, or was combined with, other missions toward independence by former Assyrian subjects. These struggles were followed in rapid order by military defeat and the demise of Assyria (Dalley 1993; Postgate 1993; Yoffee 1988b).

Kingship and Other Forms of Rule

Among forms of political structure, kingship can be defined, rather inexactly, as rulership by a single individual holding a supreme office in a lifelong tenure, most often succeeding on a hereditary principle and wielding—or not, as the case may be—great personal power. As such, it may be the single most frequent form of state government, but it is by no means the only one. It occurs typically both in states and in nonstate entities such as chiefdoms: there is no easy distinction between “chief” and “king.” Conversely, city-states (Yoffee 1997), while belonging firmly with state forms in which administration is at least partly disembedded from kinship rules, generally display a range of types of government and often do not focus on kingship (compare speculations on the nature of rule at Teotihuacán [Cowgill 1992b] and at Mohenjo-daro [Kenoyer 1991; Possehl, this volume]). These contrasting options are exemplified by the ancient Near East. Egypt offers a type case of the kingship-dominated non-city state; in the more diverse city-state forms of Mesopotamia, kings were at their most salient during periods of centralization, and then during the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires of the mid-first millennium.

A form of leadership whose symbols developed directly into those of kingship can be identified in Egypt by the early fourth millennium BC, before social complexity had developed to a significant extent. Kingship emerged before unification, and, probably through internal assimilation and conquest in the formative period of the late fourth millennium, kings created the unified polity whose ideology set the trajectory for all later times (Baines 1995a). During Dynasties 0–3 (c. 3100–2600 BC) the king acquired a complex titulary that proclaimed he manifested aspects of various deities

on earth. Official forms displaying his qualities related him to the gods, but he was not the same order of being as they—more central and salient for human society, but of lesser status and potential.

The two basic terms for “king,” *njswt* and *bjtj*, related to hierarchically ranked aspects of kingship and, in dynastic times, were connected with Upper and Lower Egypt (roughly equivalent to the Nile Valley and the Nile Delta). This characteristically Egyptian dualism held that only entities formed from dualities were meaningful (e.g., Hornung 1982:240); by implication, the unity of the country—typically known as the “Two Lands” and long lacking an overall proper name—was vested in king and kingship. Neither the country of Egypt nor full rulership could be imagined without kingship, because the king was the sole formal intermediary with the gods. Only around 750 BC, toward the end of several centuries of the Third Intermediate period, did significant numbers of regional leaders emerge who did not claim the title of king.

The king’s role in relation to and in combination with the gods perpetuated the fragile order of the cosmos, offering a central legitimization that overrode the “moral economies” of smaller social organizations (Baines 1995b). This principal ritual requirement remained in force into Roman times, when the emperor, who could have known little of what he was subscribing to, was represented in temples in forms that conveyed essentially the same message as the key originating works of the late Predynastic period (Derchain 1962).

The ritual and cosmological aspects of kingship are embodied in much of the country’s vast monumental legacy, but also in royal action and in foreign relations. Missions abroad were undertaken to bring back materials needed for king, cult, and the dead. Conquest was an “extension of the boundaries” that built upon the idea of maintaining the cosmos. The basis of kingship was not, however, strongly military, and for much of the third millennium the country seems to have lacked a standing army.

Within Egypt, royal authority was underpinned by the king’s theoretically absolute ownership of the land and rights over his subjects. Even in Greco-Roman times, streets running past private houses were termed “the street of Pharaoh” (e.g., Smith 1972:711). Kings appear to have asserted these rights in early periods by redefining landholding patterns on principles defined at the center and by constructing many new settlements, imprinting their requirements on the fabric of the land (Helck 1974:49–53; Janssen’s reservations [1978:226] seem excessive—such phenomena are known elsewhere).

The king’s most powerful influence was probably on the elite. Their status and wealth depended on him—often on his personal favor and caprice. The palace was the central institution that mobilized the country’s resources,

although in most periods there also were significant “secular” and temple administrations. The term “pharaoh,” regularly used for kings of Egypt by foreigners at least since the first millennium BC and by Egyptians from around the time of Akhenaten (c. 1350 BC), derives from the ancient “Great Estate (*pr-ʿ3*)” that focused on the institutional and economic aspects of kingship.

Mesopotamian kingship contrasts strongly with that of Egypt. Without an overarching political state, its forms of kingship were markedly different. Kingship acquired its character in the endemic struggle among the Sumerian city-states in the time before Sargon of Akkade (c. 2350 BC; Cooper 1983). It seems that kings were at first elite landowners, perhaps important figures in community assemblies, who progressively assumed more power as war leaders and who bought land from corporate landholding groups (Diakonoff 1969; Gelb 1979; Jacobsen 1957). In pre-Sargonic land-sale documents (Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991), the buyer of the land is often a ruler or high official; the seller is denoted both in the body of the document and by the list of his relatives who are recorded as the witnesses and who receive gifts. While the texts do not indicate what happened to these newly landless people, it is assumed that they did not actually move from their land, but acknowledged its new owner and paid him both taxes and obligations of service (Yoffee 1995b). These documents show the strong difference from Egypt in how early Mesopotamian kings were able to gain power, labor, and resources. The Mesopotamian king was a local lord whose acquisition of power was internal and unrelated to conquest outside his own state.

Rulers of pre-Sargonic city-states were variously called *en*, *ensí*, or *lugal*. Although these titles have different etymological meanings, and some have tried to see a progression from priestly to secular kingship as reflected in their evolution, they can all be translated as “ruler” for pre-Sargonic times. With the conquest of Sargon, however, *lugal* (Akkadian *šarrum*) became the accepted title for “king” and *ensí* was reserved for the governors of city-states (and *en*, originally “lord,” became a title of the priesthood). In the Old Babylonian period *ensí* became further devalued, meaning “manager of an agricultural field.”

Early Mesopotamian city-states were arenas for a normative and constant struggle between the burgeoning royal authority and the power of the temple estate. The so-called reforms of Urukagina of Lagash (c. 2400 BC) in southern Mesopotamia indicate that there the temple was able to stage a coup d'état against the kings who were seizing its land and privileges, but that the coup was only a minor interruption in the trend toward increasingly centralized power vested in the royal government (Nissen 1982).

In the succeeding Akkadian period, Sargon and his grandson Naram-Sin reorganized administration, founded a new site as capital of a regional state,

and established new titles in order to imply that the House of Akkade was not just another powerful dynasty: it was the legitimate political center ruling over all Mesopotamia (see Liverani, ed. 1993). Naram-Sin himself became deified, thus reinforcing his imperial status over the Mesopotamian city-states (Glassner 1986). When the Akkadian dynasty fell, city-states reemerged, as they did also after the short-lived regional state of the Third Dynasty of Ur. The kings of these newly independent city-states once again began the struggle with their neighbors, just as had their predecessors in the days before Akkade.

In sum, while Mesopotamian kings were powerful leaders in war and in civil administration, they never achieved the same position as the foci of ideology, economy, and social life as the kings of Egypt did. In some periods the Mesopotamian king shared power with temple estates and local assemblies. Furthermore, the palace often contracted with, and sometimes depended upon, private entrepreneurs to supply its local subsistence needs, as well as its desire for distant luxury goods (see section on “Economy”; Yoffee 1995b).

Urbanization

Mesopotamia and Egypt contrast strongly in the vital area of urbanization. City-states were the major arenas for the interplay of characteristic Mesopotamian institutions. This statement can be defended, even against the charge that written sources and archaeological investigations are utterly biased toward urban places (a bias that intensive field surveys seek to correct, e.g., Adams 1981). It is not that villages, nomadic, seminomadic, or crypto-nomadic pastoralists, and de-urbanized bandits were not integral to the Mesopotamian scene. However, it is in the comparison with Egypt that one can see the significance of city wards (Gelb 1968; Yoffee 1992), local assemblies, resistance to urban rulers, a temple-versus-palace struggle, an urban prejudice against the countryside, and the superior ability of nonurban people to use their extensive ties to seize political power (Kamp and Yoffee 1980). All of these features of Mesopotamian civilization are conspicuous by their absence in Egypt, or are extremely attenuated in the context of the central symbols of Egyptian civilization.

The urban implosion of late-fourth- and early-third-millennium Mesopotamia resulted in a massive population shift into large sites (Nissen 1988). These new city-states, consisting of one or more large sites, such as Lagash and Girsu of the city-state of Lagash, Uruk and Kullaba of Uruk, Kish and Hursagkalama of Kish, and attendant towns and villages (for third-millennium Lagash, see Grégoire 1962), set the pattern for Mesopotamia as “the heartland of cities” (Adams 1981). For as long as Mesopotamian civilization remained independent, with multiple polities, it retained not only

the configuration of city-states and countryside, but also the ideology of the city-state (Postgate 1992). Rulers were mainly defined in connection with the city-state from which they ruled; even those associated with extensive conquests focused their domains on a core city (e.g., Hammurabi of Babylon, 1792–1750). Major reorganizations of empire, however, from Sargon of Akkade and notably including Tukulti-Ninurta of Assyria (fourteenth century) and various Neo-Assyrian rulers in the first millennium BC, were often accompanied by the establishment of new capitals. These new cities served to dislocate and disenfranchise old elites and bureaucratic networks, and they also were monumentally emblematic of changes in administrative power and purpose. From the end of the Uruk period to the conquest of Cyrus the Great of Persia (539 BC), city-states were an irreducibly essential quality of Mesopotamian civilization. In the Sumerian King List, a historiographic text relating the birth of Mesopotamian political systems (Michalowski 1983), kinship descended from heaven to *cities*: without autonomous cities, a Mesopotamian way of life was unthinkable.

For Egypt, central places were important on a number of levels; the idea of a walled, nucleated settlement goes back into prehistory. Certain crucial towns, such as Buto in the Nile Delta, Hierakonpolis in the south, and Elephantine at the First Cataract, played key roles in defining the extent of Egypt during the period of state formation. Nonetheless, only scholars who appear to feel that urbanism is a *sine qua non* of civilization (e.g., Kemp 1977) are prone to maintain that the city was a primary motor of development or strongly characteristic of Egypt. In early times the Egyptians seem to have been almost more interested in their frontiers than in their center (e.g., Seidlmayer 1996); government policy toward regions and settlement patterns appears to have disfavored cities in certain respects, notably by using an estate-based system of redistribution. The elite's ideology had a rural tinge—rather like that of the English country gentleman—despite the pattern of land tenure, which was theoretically insecure because rights to land were based upon holding administrative office.

These biases changed in periods of insecurity and decentralization, and more profoundly in the New Kingdom (c. 1520–1070 BC) and later, when the ideal of the city was well established along with the notion of city as cosmos (Kozloff, Bryan, and Berman 1992:103–4; O'Connor 1998). From early Islamic times to the present day, the country's common name, *Misr*, has been the same as that of the capital city; this congruence also can be observed for the first millennium BC. The city was the country.

Moreover, when the Assyrian king Assurbanipal described Egypt around 660 BC, he did so in terms of cities and their rulers, most of whom he designated with the Akkadian word for “king” (*šarrum/lugal*). This was a period when the Delta in particular had moved toward something like city-state

forms, but one wonders whether his approach owed more to his background and that of his recording officials in a city-state civilization than to what was observed on the ground.

Nature of the Sources

Cuneiform tablets, the main source for our understanding of Mesopotamian history and culture, preserve decently in general and wonderfully well after a good sacking and burning; they record not only myths and epics but also private letters, bureaucratic notes, private contracts, records of smuggling, and so on. It is important to take into account the systematic bias of the documents from the various periods. For example, it is not easy to reconstruct anything like a comprehensive history of a period or place from archives, however rich, that deal mainly with long-distance trade (e.g., Larsen 1976). Consider the following characterization of the major tablet finds in early Mesopotamia: for pre-Sargonic Lagash, the archives come mainly from temple estates (Diakonoff 1969; Maekawa 1987); for the Ur III period, they are almost entirely from the royal bureaucracy (Civil 1987; Steinkeller 1989); for the Old Babylonian period, although there are temple and palace archives, many tablets come from private houses and record business transactions, family law, and private correspondence (see Kohler et al. 1904–23; Kraus 1964). This distribution could depend on chances of recovery, but most scholars believe that it reflects the cultural and organizational emphases of distinct periods and important differences between them.

For one example, we can rightly infer that the absence of textual documentation in the time after the collapse of the Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian states in the middle of the second millennium BC reflects the absence of centralized states and the written products of bureaucracies. In another case, for the last days of Mesopotamian civilization, most literary and economic documents come from temple precincts, since temples clung to the vestiges of Mesopotamian belief systems and also maintained control of dwindling land and resources.

Inscribed texts are part of the archaeological record and need to be appraised alongside settlement patterns, architecture, and artifactual finds. It is only in recent years, however, that texts and other materials have regularly been utilized together (Charpin 1986; Postgate 1992; Stone 1981, 1987; van de Mieroop 1992). Most studies of Mesopotamian art and artifacts have been concerned with styles as chronological markers or as powerful statements of royal actions. In contrast to these few studies (but see Winter 1981, 1983, 1991, 1992, 1995; M. Marcus 1995), the understanding of Egyptian culture is enriched by much work on visual media.

Comparison of this skeletal list of Mesopotamian source categories with material from Egypt throws into relief the fact that many aspects of life are represented little or not at all in Egyptian written and pictorial evidence, which is mainly monumental and centered on the ruling group, on religion, and on the symbols of Egypt as a single polity—much of it filtered through the characteristic requirement of tomb building. This focus reflects, above all, the disappearance of administrative records, which were written on papyrus and other perishable media that were used in the floodplain and not the desert (it also reflects earlier excavators' interest in the "treasures" to be found in tombs). Nonetheless, the role of the centralized Egyptian state, the relation of royal government to the temples and the civil administration, and the character of private (nonroyal, nontemple) activities appears different from that in Mesopotamia—for example, in most periods there was less mercantile activity and less opportunity for political struggle. What it does not reflect is a reticence in using writing in state administration. In his classic work, Adolf Erman rightly wrote of a "mania for writing" (*Schreibwut*; Erman 1923:125) as pervading documents of state administration from the Ramessid period (thirteenth century BC).

This contrast with Mesopotamia should not be overdrawn. Thus, we find evidence of Egyptian trade and foreign expeditions in reliefs and inscriptions of kings and nonroyal officials; the archaeological record indicates that trade was substantial already in Predynastic times—even though such products as gold, linen, papyrus, and cereals, which are likely to have been important Egyptian exports, are more or less untraceable archaeologically. Despite these indications of substantial movement of goods and associated foreign contacts, the relative absence in Egypt of individual or local enterprises that conducted exchange reveals a significant difference with Mesopotamia. In pursuing such questions, it would be desirable to examine the nature of trade in the two areas and their respective degrees of dependence on imports and exports, as well as differences in the organization of foreign contacts; such investigations are beyond the scope of this essay.

On another level, Egyptian sources, many of them iconographic rather than written, may take us closer to understanding ideals of daily life than we can get in Mesopotamia, even if the ideals were those of a small fraction of the population who mostly prettified the life of the rest in the depictions they commissioned.

Despite this reservation, Egyptian art gives forceful impressions of the nature of labor, as do observations and calculations in relation to large monuments; in Mesopotamia the analogous evidence is mainly in large lists of laborers and their rations. But in Mesopotamia the many documents from "upper-middle-class" land sales, contracts, family law, and litigation provide

glimpses of activity only rarely attested in Egypt, principally for the Ramessid and Greco-Roman periods (c. 1300–1075 BC; third century BC–AD fourth century).

Terms of Comparison: Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth

Differences in the sources for Mesopotamia and Egypt tend to focus research along distinct paths in the two regions—toward somewhat more material issues for Mesopotamia and more ideological ones for Egypt. Whether or not this bias reflects genuine differences, the material from both regions amply supports the view that a balanced and fruitful comparison must integrate the material and the ideological, the pragmatic and the spiritual. Scholars of the ancient Near East have long argued against the “Oriental Despotism” picture of their societies’ evolution that would reduce much interpretation to ecological determinism; environmental factors are now mostly seen as enabling rather than dictating social forms. But within this more sociocentric perspective there is little consensus over the vital stimuli in the trajectory toward civilizations, or over the critical foci of civilizations once they formed. Here we comment briefly on the terms and foci we have chosen to chart through the material; we hope this terminological discussion is also useful to others.

In a temporal comparison with preceding epochs, what stands out about early civilizations is their rapidity of formation and relative instability. In view of the much greater instability of later societies and civilizations, this assessment may seem perverse, especially when applied to an Egypt that was characterized by Plato (*Laws*, 656) as seeing no change for “literally” ten thousand years. But here we fall too easily victims to an overly synoptic vision of our regions as single entities. The different, archaeologically distinctive periods of historic Egypt and Mesopotamia succeeded one another far more rapidly than the major subperiods of the Neolithic. The evolutionary course seems to be one of gradual change in the Neolithic, followed by an explosive period of political, economic, and architectural restructuring.

In this context of instability, and perhaps especially of the rapid process of state formation and consolidation, the issue of *order* is fundamental. Order is an insistent preoccupation of Mesopotamian literature and is consistently expressed in so-called law codes and (self-survivingly) in royal inscriptions. In Egypt this focus is still more evident, both in the largely visual complex we discuss in the section on “high culture” and particularly in the central concept of *ma’at*, a notion that is so fundamental to Egyptian ideology that a wide-ranging study of it was long lacking (Assmann 1990). In both cases, this centripetal “rage for order” (to quote Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Idea of Order at Key West”) stands against a pessimistic background that was overt in the Mesopotamian case and largely dissimulated in the

Egyptian. The terms of order, the negotiation of order, and its appropriation by elites are defining activities of civilizations. Order cannot be taken for granted.

The elite appropriation of order is one of many legitimations of inequality, which was perhaps most extreme in Egypt. It was far from natural or necessarily easy for ancient elites to achieve *legitimacy* in the eyes of others and of themselves. Elites sustain their self-image and transmit it down the generations both through their pragmatic actions in maintaining inequality and through their understanding of their own position and mission. These legitimizing activities and attitudes encompass the mission, one that the elite take upon themselves, to achieve and maintain order in their societies. Legitimacy, however, is most strongly expressed in the “dialogue” between the ruler and his superiors or peers, the gods. Ancient Near Eastern rulers or elites did not have exclusive access to religious life, but they did have access to more grandiose varieties of it and to more of its profound meanings, while others were excluded from some of its domains. A major thrust of religion, on which so much of society’s resources were expended, was legitimization.

In complex societies, *wealth*, especially conservable wealth, is a vital feature that sets elites apart from others. The division and administration of society enhance enormously the potential of wealth to be produced, differentiated, stored, and negotiated, while the organizational capacities of the new social forms allow great distances to be exploited in order to move goods and people so as to generate and mobilize wealth. All this is administered by the elite or their employees; so far as our sources allow us to gauge, these activities seem principally to benefit the elite. Yet wealth is probably not the prime motive force in the development and maintenance of complex social forms; rather, it is an enabling factor, one that has an extraordinarily powerful communicative and persuasive potential. Wealth and legitimacy are almost inextricably linked. Wealth, controlled and channeled, can sustain order. Destitution of wealth spells disorder or a reversal of order.

Thus, the three interrelated aspects—*order*, *legitimacy*, and *wealth*—cover much ground in the study and comparison of features distinctive of early (and other) civilizations, of their emergence, persistence, and eventual collapse. Below we survey the evidence according to more traditional subject divisions instead of these rather abstract ones, but in singling them out we emphasize the active role of the elite in constituting and, especially, transmitting the characteristics of a civilization. Our longest case study, of high culture, addresses most directly the nexus between these factors.

Finally, these three terms have the advantage of bridging analysts’ and actors’ categories. Although such terms and topics as politics and economics have no counterparts in the ancient evidence (which is not to say that they

are invalid as fields and methods of study), order is a central ancient idea, wealth is much mentioned in the texts and displayed in the record, and the theme of legitimacy has manifold and close correspondences in verbal and iconographic sources.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STATES

Mesopotamia

We begin a brief consideration of state development in Mesopotamia with the 'Ubaid (c. fifth millennium BC; Oates 1983, 1987), since this is the period to which significant elements in the character of later state development in Mesopotamia can be traced. It was once thought that the south of Mesopotamia was unoccupied in early prehistoric (Neolithic) times (e.g., Redman 1978, 1991), the land itself being the product of alluviation and progradation into the Persian Gulf (Sanlaville 1989). However, the site of 'Oueili near the ancient city of Larsa, which antedates the 'Ubaid, shows that southern Mesopotamia was occupied before the 'Ubaid (Adams 1981; Calvet 1987). Presumably, small sites in the south are alluviated and/or deflated. If there has been progradation into the Gulf, the amount of new land created in this way does not justify the traditional "unoccupied-niche" model of development.

The 'Ubaid has long been characterized as a "unified" culture (e.g., Perkins 1949; Porada 1965), mainly on the basis of similarities in temple plans, distinctive pottery, and certain artifacts that are found at the northern type site of Gawra and the southern one of Eridu (see also Henrickson and Thuesen 1989). After the 'Ubaid, and continuously into historic periods, the northern and southern regions of Mesopotamia (that is, Assyria and Babylonia) differ in aspects of their material cultures, form independent arenas of political struggle, and develop distinctive belief systems—in particular the "national" religion of the god Assur, which had no counterpart in the south. Nevertheless, overarching the two regions was a larger cultural sphere that one calls "Mesopotamia" (see section below on high culture); it is this regional Mesopotamian culture that can be traced back to the 'Ubaid (Stein 1991, 1994b; Yoffee 1993a).

In the fourth millennium BC, the Uruk period is marked at the beginning with a change in pottery from the 'Ubaid (Oates 1960) and ends (conventionally) in the decades after written tablets appeared. While the 'Ubaid, which is characterized by few and relatively small sites and by modest degrees of social and economic differentiation, represents a gradual development of Neolithic trends, the later Uruk period, known best from the city-state of Warka, constitutes a major "punctuated" change. The enormous size of the city-state at the end of the Uruk period and the appearance

of such features as cylinder seals, monumental art and architecture, and writing are hardly prefigured by the 'Ubaid.

The origins of writing are a good case in point for the dazzling innovations that accompanied the rise of the Uruk (and other) city-state(s). Although Schmandt-Besserat (e.g., 1992) has assiduously shown that a system of "tokens" preceded writing by millennia, many have criticized her argument that the tokens evolved directly into writing (Friberg 1994; Le Brun and Vallat 1978; Lieberman 1980; Michalowski 1990, 1993b; Zimansky 1993). The shapes of most tokens bear no relation to later cuneiform signs; the tokens are distributed over a much wider area than that in which writing later developed. In Elam, where some of the tokens and bullae enclosing them were found, the form of the writing and language were not the same as in Mesopotamia. And at Tell 'Abada, one of the few archaeological contexts from which we have tokens, the small clay objects were found in children's graves, not a likely locus for trade and business records, which Schmandt-Besserat has argued was their primary function.

Michalowski (1990, 1993b, 1994) has emphasized that the earliest preserved written signs are extremely complex and abstract, bearing little resemblance to the tokens. Tokens are part of a long process of signification that includes glyptic arts, pottery decoration, and potters' marks, but they cannot explain the nature or form of the writing system. Indeed, writing seems to have originated through invention (see Boltz 1986 and 1994 for similar views on the ancient Chinese script), perhaps the product of a single individual's work (Powell 1981:419–24). In Warka, the reasons (or at least the context) for the appearance of writing are reasonably clear. Upon the formation of a city-state with a central core of around 300 ha and a suggested population of more than 20,000 (Nissen 1988)—Warka was only one of a number of city-states in southern Mesopotamia—the ability to manage a burgeoning economy was greatly facilitated by a new system of record keeping and communication that could name names, specify obligations, and count resources. While most early tablets consist of such economic accounts, a significant percentage (c. 15%) are lists of professions and other matters that were aids for teaching the new scribal arts; these demonstrate the institutionalization and cultural import of this new technology. Writing is, however, only one of a series of rapid and dramatic innovations that occurred at the end of the Uruk period.

As noted, the nucleation of settlements at this time represents a demographic implosion in which the countryside was progressively depopulated over about 500 years while large urban sites grew. This process of implosion also led to a significant explosion, since, it is argued, the southern city-states sent forth expeditions to establish colonies up the Euphrates into Syria and Turkey, and also into Iran (see Yoffee 1995b). Although these colonies,

whose purpose was to serve as access and transshipment points, were easy to found in a countryside of relatively low political centralization or organized resistance, they were impossible to maintain in the medium term, and many disappeared within 50 years or less.

Since no political unity was present in southern Mesopotamia and neighboring Khuzestan, Algaze (1993a: 115–18) suggests that each independent city-state established its own colonies, as in the case of early Greek colonial expansion (Schwartz 1988). We know little about other city-states in the Late Uruk period. Furthermore, according to some (e.g., Stein et al. 1996), “Uruk colonies” may date to the Middle Uruk period. Stylistic criteria have been inferred to show that sealing motifs from these colonies resemble those from Susa as well as, or rather than, those from Uruk (Pittman in Stein et al. 1996). Although it is hard at present to test the hypothesis that individual city-states in middle- and late-fourth-millennium Mesopotamia and Khuzestan established distant colonies, it is clear that, aside from ephemeral conquests and alliances, no political unity existed in Mesopotamia before the imperial successes of Sargon (c. 2350 BC), despite the region’s self-image as belonging to a single civilization. If third-millennium city-states, thus, are the logical outcomes of rapid social evolutionary trends at the end of the fourth millennium, their destiny was to compete unceasingly for the best agricultural lands and for access to trade routes. Although political unification was a likely result of such endemic conflict among city-states, it was equally improbable that the independent traditions of city-states could be overcome and that they could be easily integrated into a regional polity.

Egypt

A quite different evolutionary story can be seen in Egypt. Around 4000 BC, the material culture and social forms of sedentary groups in different regions of Egypt and the Middle Nile was of a fairly uniform Neolithic/Chalcolithic character (Wetterstrom 1993); few signs of social complexity are to be found (Midant-Reynes 1992). Nonetheless, some material and ideological elements of inequality typical of later periods can be seen in the southern Nile Valley, in the Naqada I culture (e.g., Bard 1994: 68–75). Notable among them is the emphasis on elaborate burials and the realm of the dead. While the apparent prominence of this sphere owes much to the siting of cemeteries in the desert, where they could be excavated, the expenditure of resources is striking. Moreover, the crucial site of Hierakonpolis contains a small group of Naqada I tombs that are distinctively larger than anything else of that date, suggesting the prominence of a single leader and providing a topographical marker that was significant for the later, Naqada II inhabitants of the area (Hoffman et al. 1982: 38–60).

The Naqada II culture (from c. 3500 BC), which originated in Upper

Egypt, is a more important watershed (cf. Baines 1995a; Kaiser 1990). Naqada II was culturally distinct from the A-Group of Lower Nubia, as well as being no doubt politically separate, while the Ma'adi culture, which covered the region north from the Fayyum, disappeared in the middle of the period. Ma'adi had strong links with Palestine, which may have been a focus of southern interest in expanding northward. In a process whose political ramifications cannot yet be charted, Naqada II material culture, which probably encompassed several polities in Upper Egypt, spread throughout the northern part of the country, and all of Egypt had a single material culture by the final subphase of Naqada II or the beginning of Naqada III (c. 3200 BC). Around the same time there was significant contact with Mesopotamia, attested most tangibly at Buto in the Nile Delta and probably routed through the Uruk colonies in Syria. It is a moot question how crucial this contact was for Egypt. Since the chief stimulus to political and cultural development came from the south, which was farthest from Mesopotamian influence, it is not likely to have been decisive.

On the low desert bordering the Nile Valley, the sites of Hierakonpolis (in the far south), Naqada, and Abydos show the greatest expansion and differentiation. All have small separate cemeteries of rich tombs; Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 (mid-Naqada II) has wall paintings with royal content. At the end of Naqada II, an outlier of the culture appeared in the northeastern delta at Minshat Abu Omar (Kaiser 1987; Kroeper and Wildung 1994). Sometime around this date, the whole country probably was united under a single king buried at Abydos in central Upper Egypt, while the previously largest site of Naqada was in sharp decline (some scholars argue for Hierakonpolis as the unifying polity and others for a slower pace of unification).

Tomb U-j in the elite cemetery at Abydos shows a range of royal symbols, as well as the earliest use of writing in a secure context, on small ivory tags that the excavator suggests were attached to bales of cloth among the grave goods (Dreyer 1993; Kaiser 1990). This royal tomb is some generations earlier than those nearby in Cemetery B, which form a rough sequence, generally termed Dynasty 0, ending with the well-known Narmer. The phases before and after Tomb U-j could have lasted up to 250 years. Symbols of kingship from Dynasty 0 are found all over Egypt, and their motifs supply the principal evidence of a developing centralizing ideology. The archaeological phase Naqada III corresponds to this time and the early First Dynasty.

In this development, the strongest evidence of social complexity dates to the time after the country's material culture had become uniform, and much of it after the territorial polity had formed; but since the amount of evidence increases sharply with unification, this appearance may be rather misleading. There are indications of walled settlements and elaborate brick architecture.

Much else is beyond recovery; settlement sites are virtually inaccessible beneath the floodplain silt, whereas cemeteries were sited for preference on the low desert. Cemeteries evince massive consumption of luxury goods, involving the mounting of expeditions into the deserts for minerals; long-distance transport of goods, including many Palestinian imports and probably delivery of basic foodstuffs; and the presence of specialized artists and craftsmen alongside the nascent scribal group. The inner elite was integrated into a small group of administrative officeholders near the king. These people, who were almost certainly literate, were bound to the king both by office and perhaps by membership in a distinct group (the *p't*) that would have consisted of notional or real kin and who were qualified for the highest office. Even if this group once existed as a distinct entity, it quickly became a retrospective fiction (Baines 1995a: 133).

Elite and other cemeteries became numerous in the Memphite/Cairo region—which has been the focus of population ever since—and also are scattered through the country. These cemeteries demonstrate that in Dynasties 0–2 resources were by no means so narrowly concentrated on the king and inner elite as in the following period, and they probably attest to a gradual erosion of elite privileges that existed before and during unification and centralization. They set the stage for the foundation of the city of Memphis at the start of the First Dynasty, when administration and the requisite people were focused there, while royal burials and perhaps the ceremonial center remained at Abydos. In this period, burial and the realm of the dead consolidated their position as a principal mode of display and signification, as well as a consumer of resources. Burial sites were basic to Egyptian society, and especially to the elite who could aspire to a privileged afterlife denied to those who had no proper burial.

The Egyptian state's characteristic territoriality is evident at the frontiers. The First Cataract region was annexed during Naqada II and was henceforth the southern boundary. In the north, Egypt asserted a brief hegemony in southern Palestine, probably founding some small colonies there, but withdrew during a recession or consolidation in the mid-First Dynasty. In Lower Nubia, the royal cemetery of an A-Group polity around Qustul that imitated the style and iconography of Egypt was thoroughly vandalized (Williams [1986] sees Nubia as the source rather than the recipient of these styles), and the A-Group itself disappeared, leaving an archaeological vacuum—but probably not a complete habitation blank—spanning more than 500 years. It seems that Egypt wished either to incorporate and exploit a politically weaker culture in the surrounding area or to set up a cordon sanitaire, within which its unitary civilization long stood in isolation (for a Nubian-centered view, see W. Y. Adams 1977; O'Connor 1993). These features contrast strongly with Mesopotamia's treatment of its neighboring cultures.

The Pace of State Evolution

Although the Neolithic progression from the first sedentary agricultural villages in which sites and social institutions became progressively differentiated and stratified was protracted, political centralization emerged rapidly in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Apparently, the various aspects of rivaling and cooperating groups, both occupationally specialized and socially distinct; the complex routes of circulation of goods, services, and information from both local and long-distance ventures; and conflict with neighboring cities and regions all built up a head of sociopolitical and ideological steam manifested in the emergence of new leaders, new forms and symbols of centralized authority, and new demographic shifts. In detail these processes look very different in the two areas, and their phasing was complex. In Egypt, a cultural and political development with the elaborate forms of state and kingship emerged toward the end of the process; in Mesopotamia, forms of social and political struggle were never quite resolved by kings, and regional states were atypical and unstable.

POLITICS AND ECONOMY

The earliest political system in third-millennium Mesopotamia was the network of city-states that endemically vied for arable land and access to trade routes. Before the unification of Sargon of Akkade (c. 2350 BC) some ephemeral hegemonies were achieved by successful city-state rulers. Thus, it is not in Sargon's conquest but in his administrative and ideological innovations that a territorial Mesopotamian state was created (see below in the section on high culture as a vehicle for political and cultural change). The early Mesopotamian city-states, however, were also later the normative products of imperial breakdown and were the loci of political struggle, especially between the royal and temple estates (see earlier section on "kingship and other forms of rule"). In this section we delineate the contrast between the politics of early Mesopotamian city-states and the Egyptian tendency toward territorial centralization. Apart from temple and royal estates, community assemblies are prominent integrative institutions in Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the diversity of ethnic groups in Mesopotamia profoundly affected the modalities of social organizations and social and political struggle.

The centralized Egyptian state left much less evidence of how its political life and its regions were organized than can be gleaned for many periods in Mesopotamia. Internal conflict and disorder were largely suppressed from the record of all but decentralized periods, and signs of dissent that can be identified relate most often to personal antagonisms among the elite and to the disgrace kings inflicted on people or on their memories. But the

monumental record is very uneven. Given the favorable conditions for preservation of the chosen style of display in tombs, its variations must attest, even if indirectly, to fluctuations in royal power. The play of central and regional forces and the tendency of the country to divide in periods of weakness exemplify the fact that strong centralization, while more easily achieved in Egypt than in many countries, exacted a price from all but the inner elite. The way in which this price was claimed from most people in the form of production and the curtailment of freedom can be modeled to some extent. What is striking is the relatively small proportion of history during which the country was not united and centralized.

Local Power

Mesopotamia has produced important but controversial evidence for the organization of local power, in terms of controlling both institutions and social groups. In one of the classic articles on early Mesopotamian history, Jacobsen (1957) considered that secular kingship arose not from sacral auspices, but from community assemblies. His argument was that incessant warfare in the earlier third millennium, as documented especially from the Lagash archives, required the election or appointment of a war leader. Other sources used for his argument were epic compositions (especially the tale of “Gilgamesh and Akka” [Katz 1993; for further notes on Enmebaragesi of Kish, see Katz 1995; Shaffer 1983]) and myths (especially *Enūma eliš*, the “Epic of Creation”; Foster 1993), in which assemblies (or councils) are mentioned. Critics (e.g., Evans 1958) rejoined that these poetic works composed in the second and first millennia were too late to refer specifically to third-millennium events, and furthermore, that it was naive to think that what happened in heaven reflected what was happening on earth. In the “Epic of Creation,” moreover, it is at a banquet assembly of the gods that Marduk performs the magic trick of making a constellation vanish and then reappear, thereby convincing the drunken deities to choose him as their war leader. Whereas Jacobsen (1943) viewed Mesopotamian assemblies as a form of “primitive democracy,” others thought that they were residual institutions of tribal, nomadic groups that were being progressively assimilated in urban Mesopotamia.

Jacobsen’s argument received support from those studying land-sale documents (see earlier section on “kingship and other forms of rule”), in which the sellers of property were thought, especially by Diakonoff (1969), to be the “elders” of inferred third-millennium assemblies (see also Westenholz 1984, who discusses *ab-ba uru*, “elders of the city”). In Late Uruk and Early Dynastic lexical texts, the term “leader of the assembly” appears, and the sign for “assembly” occurs in economic texts from Uruk, Jamdat Nasr, and

Ur (Englund, Nissen, and Damerow 1993; Green and Nissen 1987. According to Englund, however, the sign conventionally assumed to be “assembly” is no more than the representation of a pot!).

Although references to assemblies are otherwise rare in third-millennium texts (Wilcke 1973), which mainly come from temple and palace archives, a term in the Ebla vocabulary texts has been interpreted as referring to an assembly (Durand 1989). In the early second millennium, from which there are many private documents, references in the texts to assemblies, elders, mayors, and judges are legion. Local authorities decide cases of family law and other matters not requiring royal intervention; headmen notarize the hiring of community laborers on palace estates; and it has been suggested (Yoffee 1988b) that the *babtum*, interpreted as a “city ward” by the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (University of Chicago 1992), might be a patrilineage. In a brief essay on the *kārum*, Kraus (1982), like others before him (Walther 1917), noted that the term was not simply a collectivity of merchants, as it was in the Old Assyrian texts, but functioned as a judicial assembly. In the Old Assyrian texts, it is clear that there were “assemblies/councils of big men and small men” and a “city hall” in the city-state of Assur (Larsen 1976), and that the council shared power with the king, at least until the time of Shamshi-Adad’s seizure of the kingship in the eighteenth century BC.

In sum, we may infer that political integration in Mesopotamia was not solely encompassed by the formation of centralized governmental institutions. Indeed, the evolution of the state government in Mesopotamia, which came to hold ultimate jurisdiction in matters of dispute among existing corporate groups, did not mean that the political functions of these groups ceased to exist. Such local organs of power typically represented both opportunities for the centralized state to channel local resources to its own advantage as well as arenas of resistance to the goals of the state—and thus were an essential locus of political struggle.

In Mesopotamia, the role of ethnic groups and their ability to mobilize personnel across the boundaries of city-states was one of the most important factors promoting political change (Kamp and Yoffee 1980). Thus, after Sargon’s coup in Kish and his foundation of the new city-state of Akkade as his capital of a united Mesopotamia, the Akkadian language was employed in place of Sumerian as the primary language of administration. This linguistic switch, formerly interpreted as evidence of a new group of people—Akkadian speakers—entering Mesopotamia, is now seen as a mechanism to privilege scribes who could write in Akkadian and who were trained in the new royal court. Akkadian had been spoken in Mesopotamia for hundreds of years before Sargon’s conquests, as is seen, for example, in the Akkadian names of scribes who copied Sumerian texts (Biggs 1967). In the Ur III

period, when the imperial bureaucracy was swollen to unprecedented numbers, scribes conversely were trained in Sumerian and owed their positions to the new royal system in Ur (Michalowski 1987).

In the second millennium, with the political ascendancy of various Amorite groups in Mesopotamian cities, the inference is again no longer that there was an Amorite invasion: “Akkadeians” were in “Sumer” well before Sargon, and Amorites were in Mesopotamia before 2000 BC, interacting in a multilingual, multiethnic population. Amorites made alliances with—and against—other Amorites, mobilizing kinsmen across the countryside in the struggle for power within various city-states (Whiting 1987). Down to the middle of the second millennium, civil order in Mesopotamia was fragile, and it was negotiated both within city-states and among them. During periods of extreme political decentralization, “solidarity” within ethnic groups could be the decisive force in the struggle for regional power. In this instance, language change did not accompany dynastic political change: no document was ever written in Amorite, and Amorite rulers were careful to present themselves as reproducing venerable Mesopotamian cultural traditions in order to legitimize their rule.

In Egypt, the center aimed to control local offices in a way that was hardly attempted in Mesopotamia. During most periods down to the Greco-Roman, the goal of government administration in Egypt was generally to take as much power and as many resources as desired for the personnel and projects of the center. But the long, thin form of the country, with significant concentrations of specific resources scattered over its length, required much transport of goods, as well as organizational structures that could handle both local and central affairs (Fischer 1977; Helck 1974, 1977). How far the concerns of the provinces or of provincials mattered to the center no doubt varied, but the lack of a developed urban ideology at the center in earlier periods may have militated against extremes of neglect of the countryside and its inhabitants. The frequent presence of a southern national center at Abydos or Thebes, in addition to the political and economic center in the Memphite area, may have had a similar effect. Suggestive of the opposite possibility (neglect of the provinces) is that in Egypt today—a country whose basic orientation is toward the north (in antiquity it was toward the south)—few venture away from the dominant direction and travel south of Cairo.

A local administrative structure of nomes (provinces), of which there were nearly 40, was set up in the first few dynasties. This system appears to have respected traditional settlement patterns and loyalties to some extent, but it was a centralizing creation. Most nomes were similar to one another in size, arable extent, or population, and in many periods they were not favored as major administrative or political units, except for the densely

populated Greco-Roman period. Some nomes therefore acquired significant roles while others are like ciphers. In several periods nome organization seems to have been passed over in favor of larger, more centralized groupings.

Two tendencies could disturb the efficacy of a centralizing administration: regional dissolution of the country, as in the First Intermediate period, and an overproliferation of central bureaucracy that stifled activity, as in the late Middle Kingdom. These two factors came together at times, but also could be distinct.

The state's essential strategy in creating the economic basis for administration was to found estates that were attached to central institutions or offices but geographically scattered (Jacquet-Gordon 1962). This pattern had the advantage, perceived by medieval centralizing rulers, of avoiding a concentration of landholdings controlled by a single beneficiary in a single place. It also probably brought economic and ecological benefits by exposing only small holdings to local risks of failure and diversifying forms of exploitation across regions. Important offices in the central administration (Strudwick 1985) were concerned with gathering and redistributing harvests and controlling animal wealth (less significant economically than in Mesopotamia). High officials held large numbers of titles, all of them providing sources of income or, as "ranking titles," marking positions in the elite hierarchy that were no doubt at least as important in the eyes of some holders as were substantive offices.

In addition to functions concerned with products of the land or of workshops and specialized production, important central officials had purely administrative duties, for example, running royal bureaus. There was much ceremonial and some seeming caprice, as during the mid-Fifth Dynasty, when a whole hierarchy of titles of "palace manicurists" briefly became prominent (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977:25–30). These functions or ceremonies centered on the person of the king and fostered contacts and networks that he may have exploited to shortcut elaborate administrative structures. In the later Old Kingdom there were frequent rearrangements of the hierarchy of rank (Baer 1960); the introduction of these no doubt helped the king maintain his dominance.

During the earlier Old Kingdom (c. 2600–2350 BC), this central, redistributive administration, one of whose principal concerns was to organize enormous building projects, was supported by a provincial administration (Martin-Pardey 1976), but the principal officials seem to have resided, when possible, near the capital—or at least built their tombs there. Little survives from the nomes themselves. This changed around the end of the Fifth Dynasty, when some officials began to be buried near nome capitals; toward the end of the Old Kingdom they increasingly displayed local loyalties. Unified

rule collapsed around 2150 BC. Although the semblance of a single kingship was maintained, regional centers competed until rival dynasties (the Ninth / Tenth and Eleventh) were set up at Memphis (deriving from Herakleopolis) and Thebes; this development is known as the First Intermediate period.

The consequences of late Old Kingdom decentralization seem clear in retrospect, but the processes leading to it are disputed. Earlier writers argued that there was a positive weakening and loss of control, whereas some recent scholars have seen the innovations as a deliberate central response to changing conditions (e.g., Kanawati 1980). These approaches have contrasting weaknesses, the older one in working largely from hunch and the newer one in keeping close to the inscriptions and probably taking too much at face value their assertion that all was well. It is uncertain whether the nascent regionalism of the late Old Kingdom derived from a politically motivated identification by members of the central elite with local areas, or whether the leaders genuinely originated from the areas they came to champion and use as power bases. Two such strategies could have coexisted.

Although the dissolution of the Old Kingdom must be ascribed to some extent to regionalism, that of the Middle Kingdom (c. 1980–1640 BC) seems to relate more to bureaucratic proliferation and stasis at the center. The Twelfth Dynasty kings gradually suppressed nome organization and nomarchs in favor of a division of the country into four large units. Mid-ranking administrative offices began to multiply vastly, and a few leading officials acquired great power. Under the Thirteenth Dynasty, about 60 kings ruled for an average of around two years each, while officials held office for much longer. Prosperity was maintained initially, but there followed a political decline that led finally to the division of the country between ethnic Asiatics (the Hyksos) in the north and a local dynasty (the Seventeenth) based in Thebes.

These intermediate periods exemplify local regionalism and the breakdown of the country into two units (cf. Franke 1990). Later periods show other patterns of struggle for power more clearly. In the New Kingdom (c. 1520–1070 BC), the priesthood and the military emerged as distinct forces. The military acquired their position through imperial conquest, and subsequently through a response to invasion and immigration that ultimately brought ethnic Libyan groups to political prominence (Baines 1996; Leahy 1985). The priesthood derived their influence from enormous royal dedications to the temples of the fruits of conquest in the form of sacred buildings, goods, and land for endowment.

These more recent foci of power acquired a dominant role in the first millennium BC, when political life was more fragmented than that of earlier times. By the late eighth century the country was divided into numerous

domains, only some of them ruled by kings. Yet Late Period (664–332 BC) and Greco-Roman (332 BC–AD 395) rulers were able to revive centralization and the nome structures, the latter perhaps through study of old records rather than through experience on the ground. Here, the maintenance of high-cultural and “scientific” traditions may have aided pragmatic government. The history of Greco-Roman Egypt, although known principally from the rural provinces of the Nile Valley and Fayyum, illustrates most strongly the ability of the center to dominate the country in its own interest (Bagnall 1993; Bowman 1996); in Roman times that center was Rome rather than Alexandria.

Economy

In the earlier Mesopotamian states (until c. 1600 BC, roughly the end of the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods), the major economic units were palace estates and temple estates. For all periods, however, there is evidence of “community” and/or “private” organizations and families that owned land, the chief form of enduring wealth; mercantile associations and entrepreneurial traders contracted with temples and palaces to supply distant goods and to manage facets of their economies. The economic history of Mesopotamia must be written in terms of the dynamic forces of struggle among these economic sectors, and of degrees of intersection and cooperation among them.

Both the palace estates and the temple estates were, in essence, households. They consisted of large tracts of land, numbers of laborers and managers of labor, residential and ceremonial structures, and facilities for the storage and manufacture of goods. Older interpretations held that the early third-millennium temple estate was the primary focus of economic, social, and political activity—the so-called *Tempelstadt* theory (Falkenstein 1974 (originally published in 1951, refuted by Diakonoff 1969; Gelb 1969)—and gave way to totalitarian control of the economy by the state under the Third Dynasty of Ur; recent studies find the nature of economic activity to be far more complex.

In the early third millennium, for example, the physical structures of palaces and temples were separate, as were the units of land and personnel managed by them; there also were endemic antagonisms over the wealth of these estates. The trend through the third millennium was the familiar encroachment by the royal sector on sacral property (an opposite tendency to that observed in New Kingdom and later Egypt). This struggle, however, was a subtle one: kings required ideological support from the clergy and were important players in religious ceremonies (although the evidence for this comes from much later documents, such as the New Year ceremony texts preserved from the later first millennium BC [Black 1981; Thureau-Dangin

1921)). Kings recorded their dutiful activities in building and refurbishing temples; Early Dynastic kings were nurtured by goddesses and, in the Akkadian period (beginning with Naram-Sin, grandson of Sargon) and Ur III, were themselves deified. A temple to the deified Shu-Sin (fourth king of the Third Dynasty of Ur), which was constructed in Eshnunna by the local governor during that king's reign, shows that worship of the royal figures must be taken seriously.

There is an ecological reason for the development of the great estates of temples and palaces in southern Mesopotamia, a trend that is thought to run counter to the general evolutionary logic of the breakup of estates owned corporately by lineages into nuclear family units (Netting 1990). With the need to leave irrigated and potentially saline land fallow every other year whenever possible, ownership of large amounts of land enabled the great estates to minimize environmental risk and to shift personnel across the countryside while housing them in central locations in cities. Thus, the nature of the soil and the exigencies of irrigation agriculture promoted both corporate ownership of large landholdings and also nucleation and urbanization. As already noted, if cities were in part the result of centralizing agricultural activities, the phenomenon of urbanization is simultaneously one of ruralization. Furthermore, the trend toward "enclavization" of the southern Mesopotamian landscape in the early third millennium resulted in regions dominated by the city-states. Each region was composed of an urban complex, along with its productive hinterland. This arrangement led to warfare among the city-states for control of the countryside, which progressively increased the central powers of the royal estate over the temples.

Land-sale documents show that in the third millennium there also were large and wealthy "community" estates, while the existence of assemblies demonstrates that there were forms of community self-government. Even under the extreme control of the Ur III state, private economic transactions occurred (Steinkeller 1989), although Diakonoff, for example, has supposed that the Ur III kings sought to limit such activities, perhaps under some right of eminent domain they had instituted.

In the collapse of the Ur III state and subsequent absence of tight political authority, the economy of southern Mesopotamia was, as it were, let off the leash. Large private estates were formed, and new ways of circumventing partible inheritance practices were employed to keep the estates intact in succeeding generations. The most interesting of these was the assignment of daughters to "convents," preventing their marriage and the alienation of property that was part of their dowries (Harris 1964, 1975; Janssen 1991; Renger 1967). These "nuns" (*nadītum*), however, also enriched by movable property they were given in the form of "ring money," bought, sold, and leased property and loaned silver to such an extent that they became great

real-estate entrepreneurs of the Old Babylonian period. Freed from the authority of husbands and fathers, they presumably led richer and more interesting lives than other women in Mesopotamian antiquity.

The increasingly wealthy “private sector” was further drawn into the economic activities of the royal and temple estates. Although no full picture of these interactions has yet been drawn, a number of detailed studies have appeared (Charpin 1980, 1986; Diakonoff 1985, 1990; Renger 1989; Stol 1982 [reinterpreting Koschaker 1942]; Stone 1987; van de Mieroop 1992; Yoffee 1977, 1982). While there were strong differences between north and south Babylonia (which cannot be enumerated here), an important similarity is that the great estates employed large numbers of outside people in addition to their own staff of dependents. These private contractors, members of the “community” rather than of the temple estate or the royal estate, supplied the estates with food (from fish to meat and wool products) and notarized the hire of laborers on the estates’ fields. In times of political centralization during the reigns of Hammurabi and Rim-Sin in the eighteenth century BC, the state naturally tried to control this independent sector, but in the time of weakness towards the end of the Old Babylonian period, the power of these private contractors grew enormously.

In the Old Babylonian period, the economic resources of the great estates were not small. On the basis of van de Mieroop’s study (1992) of the texts from Ur, dating to c. 1984–1864 BC, some figures can be cited to illustrate this point. Tablets from the warehouses attached to the Ningal temple complex record (mostly annual) deliveries (from various years) of 140,000 liters of grain, 50 tons of dates, a group of 31 shepherds managing about 20,000 sheep, 16,803 cattle inspected, 18,710 liters of ghee, 16,200 liters of cheese, and 1,498 kg of wool. The temple storehouse also purchased 9,600 liters of bitumen from a private businessman for 1 kg of silver. In one text a group of merchants delivers 4,123 kg of copper to the palace. During the same early Old Babylonian period, the royal estate controlled some 23 km² of land.

Such enormous quantities of goods were produced not only in the “redistributive” sectors of the temple and palace estates. In Ur, private entrepreneurs organized the fishing industry, engaged in long-distance trade, supplied bread to the palace, and functioned as money lenders. One individual loaned 1.03 kg of silver to a colleague at 20 percent interest that was due in one month! An individual sent 14,700 liters of bread or barley to the palace. Another businessman rented a boat with a capacity of 9,000 liters for a business trip.

It is not necessary here to repeat the importance of the private sector to the Assyrian economy in the Old Assyrian period. As numerous studies have shown (e.g., Larsen 1976, 1977, 1982, 1987a; Veenhof 1972, 1980), private

merchants transported tons of tin and textiles to central Anatolia and made huge profits on the silver and gold markets there. The Assyrians did not control access to any resources, but they were expert in moving goods from where they were plentiful to where they were scarce, transacting business, forming joint banking partnerships to accumulate capital, and taking advantage of the lack of political centralization in the areas they exploited. Finally, it is worth repeating Larsen's (1976) judgment that the merchants were important players in the Old Assyrian state, members of councils in Assur, and provided reasons for state military intervention in foreign lands.

We have unavoidably drawn a superficial and too coherent picture of economic behavior in earlier Mesopotamia. Research on the relations among the various sectors of the economy, especially the private economy; how these relations changed through time; and how economic activities were restrained and/or facilitated by political processes has changed our understanding not only of the production and distribution of goods and services in Mesopotamia, but of the structure of Mesopotamian society itself.

The Egyptian economy is neither as well documented nor as well understood as that of Mesopotamia. The best known periods are the late New Kingdom (c. 1300–1100 BC) and the Greco-Roman period, but the monetization and “colonial” character of the latter differs from the situation of earlier times. The general picture is an extreme one of a centralized, command-driven economy (e.g., Janssen 1975b), but one that, contrary to today's wisdom, worked acceptably for long periods (see Kemp 1989 for a contrasting interpretation). Much interpretation has been in the shadow of Karl Polanyi, but there is no consensus as to how viable his approach is. Both the overall context and the detail of its operation are poorly known (see, e.g., Helck 1975). In particular, the proportion of economic life that is covered by the sources cannot be well estimated—as is true also for today's command economies—and this unknown leaves the picture of subsistence strategies and private enterprise uncertain. Because of these difficulties, discussion tends to focus as much on issues of social organization and administration as on economics more narrowly defined.

There was no “money,” although various units of account and exchange were used. The highly administered sector of the economy may have touched the lives of most people relatively little, except to the extent that they had to pay rents or taxes. The fact that most organization was in terms of goods and the appropriation of labor, rather than of credit and such abstractions, may have restricted what the center and, in particular, what entrepreneurs could do. (This is not to say that the Egyptians could not work with abstractions: legal documents often record regularizing fictions [e.g., Eyre 1992; Lacau 1949], while grain was lent at interest in a local context [e.g., Baer 1962:45].)

The state's basic economic interest was in ensuring that the land was cultivated and in exacting taxation or rents from the produce. The state was then responsible for storage and redistribution, notably of grain, in particular to those who did not produce for themselves. The state and temples made many craft goods in their own workshops. Specialized workers were paid essentially in emmer wheat for bread and barley for beer, the two staples of the Egyptian diet. Much production was channeled through state institutions (e.g., Posener-Kriéger 1976). The elite appear to have received their remuneration primarily in the form of land, from which they could derive an income, and of other productive elements such as herds. The Old Kingdom elite presented itself in tomb decoration as enjoying vast estates that produced most of the necessities of life and many luxuries (e.g., Harpur 1987). This picture is idealized, but it is one pointer to how the monolithic character of the command economy might be tempered by a more complex reality.

Apart from securing what was needed for the daily life of the center and of specialists, major building projects, with their attendant requirements for expeditions into the desert to extract raw materials (including gold), were an important part of economic life and often of international relations. There is a clear correlation between monuments and centralization; hardly any major monuments were constructed in decentralized periods, but when the country was centralized the amount of construction varied in both the short and the long term. This pattern is anything but economically "rational" and clearly obeyed other dictates (e.g., Morenz 1969). Two periods when the resources invested in construction were at their greatest were the Fourth Dynasty, with the building of the largest pyramids, and the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Dynasties (c. 1400–1225 BC), with vast temple and tomb building by Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, Sety I, and Ramesses II (as well as major private monuments). Even during these periods, there were significant interludes without major construction. (Theories that the great pyramids, and the ziggurats of Mesopotamia, were constructed as some sort of unifying project for the country—e.g., Engelbach 1943; Mendelssohn 1974—founder on this difficulty.)

Land was held on a use-value rather than an absolute basis of tenure, although parcels might remain in the same nonroyal hands for centuries. Generally, the cultivator was not the owner/tenant; most land belonged to large institutions, including royalty, high officials, or perhaps wealthy individuals. Cultivators were not free to leave their land. If land, whoever controlled it, fell out of cultivation, the state assigned it to a new responsible tenant and collected revenues from that institution or person (e.g., Gardiner 1951). Those who fled and left their land uncultivated seem to have become vagrants who were then organized for labor by a state works department (e.g.,

Quirke 1988) and put to essentially the same tasks as those they had abandoned. In Greco-Roman times, it was temples that performed this resettlement function (Posener 1975). The reason for this regime—which is perhaps characteristic of command economies while having obvious analogies with feudal patterns—was probably that people were in shorter supply than land (see Baer 1962); such evidence as can be gathered suggests generally low levels of population density and life expectancy (Bagnall and Frier 1994; Baines and Eyre 1983:65–74).

Salient questions raised by this rather bleak picture include how major institutions meshed their economic activities together, how far the command economy could provide the requisite range of goods, and the extent to which there was an independent “private sector”; the latter two are closely related.

Relations between institutions have been discussed primarily for the New Kingdom (e.g., Janssen 1975b), from which numerous economic documents are preserved (Gardiner 1941–52; Gasse 1988). These sources suggest that the principal crown and temple institutions were not economically distinct, and that temples, in particular, could provide storage and supplies for state concerns and interests. The state also could use temples as administrators or as intermediaries in the transmission and import of goods. Nonetheless, the basis of temple power, which was in landholdings, allowed the high priest of Amun in Thebes to become politically autonomous at the end of the New Kingdom (c. 1070 BC; Jansen-Winkel 1992; Kitchen 1986:248–54). The region in which the temple of Amun was the principal landowner, which stretched from the First Cataract to about 150 km south of Memphis, with its northern border fortress at el-Hiba, became effectively independent during the Third Intermediate period.

Representations of marketplaces, where small numbers of perishable goods were sold, are found in Old and New Kingdom reliefs and paintings (e.g., Altenmüller 1980; Hodjash and Berlev 1980). A late New Kingdom administrative papyrus records the voyage of a ship belonging to a temple along the river. The ship dispenses clothing and honey, probably from the temple's estates and workshops, to women on the river bank; in return the women give these and other goods, the latter presumably ones the temple did not produce itself (Janssen 1980). This is one of the few clear cases of an interaction of “state” institutions and the private economy (on transport, see Castle 1992).

More detailed material, which shows the privileged artisans who built the New Kingdom royal tombs trading among themselves and selling their services, derives from papyri and ostraca (inscribed flakes of limestone and sherds) from their desert settlement of Deir el-Medina (Janssen 1975a). Among the most revealing aspects of their lives is that some of the artisans, who were amply salaried state employees, owned land in addition and

farmed it or employed people to farm it (McDowell 1992a). They were thus also small-scale entrepreneurs with diverse interests. Such a finding does not, however, warrant the more generalized assumption of Kemp (e.g., 1972, 1981, 1989) that the major institutions and principal officials of the land were “trading for profit” on the basis of the incomes they derived from cereals and more specialized produce. Evidence Kemp (1981, 1989) has cited from the size of storage installations at the short-lived city of el-‘Amarna may not support his case in the way he suggests (see Janssen 1983 for one alternative); more probably it relates to the vast numbers of dependents for whom such people were responsible, to conspicuous display of material resources, to the need to maintain massive stocks against crop failure and other contingencies, and perhaps to control of seed stocks issued in the form of loans (known from the Ptolemaic period; e.g., Crawford 1971:26).

Other aspects of individual enterprise fit more characteristically within the command-economy structure. People tried, notably in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, to set up endowments that would secure their mortuary cult in perpetuity (Goedicke 1970). This mechanism, which both king and elite members employed, created exemptions from general patterns of tenure and obligation; but the longevity of such foundations is uncertain, because the cults themselves seldom survived more than a couple of generations in anything like their original form.

Administrative and priestly offices were bought, sold, and made into family inheritances, at least from the Middle Kingdom, attesting to the success of officeholders in appropriating as personal property something to which they were appointed by the crown. In a grandiose example from the Second Intermediate period (c. 1620 BC), a high official “sold” to a kinsman the office of mayor of Elkab, a major town south of Thebes, for the equivalent in accounting terms of 5.5 kg of gold (Lacau 1949). The transaction was registered in Thebes, the capital of the day, and ratified by being set up on a stela in the city’s principal temple. The transfer itself was a fiction, devised to honor a debt that the vendor was otherwise unable to repay to the purchaser. The debt in itself has economic significance, as does the prevalent activity of tomb robbery, because both exemplify what one might expect, that substantial amounts of wealth were dispersed, in ways that are invisible to us, through what cannot have been official, command-driven channels. Nor can the materials derived from such activities have been secret: they must have formed part of the conspicuous display of the wealthy, as well as being recycled again and again in tombs. Such evidence illustrates that a high proportion of economic activity is not accessible to study; these gaps must be drawn into any overall model.

The best illustration of how little the Egyptian economy was oriented toward major private activity may be given by the intermediate periods, from which there is little evidence for significant entrepreneurship and

much for such local grandees as nomarchs taking over traditional royal functions of administration, military action, storage, and largesse. One also can contrast dynastic times with the progressively monetized Greco-Roman economy, from which there are attested such features as banking, forward sale of standing crops (Pierce 1972:81–93), and elaborate internal accounting on great estates (Rathbone 1991). Nonetheless, the essential thrust of the Ptolemaic economy, like its predecessors, was state control, which extended through taxation, ownership, or regulation to the most minor activities (e.g., Bowman 1996:56–121).

Insufficiencies of Political and Economic Analysis

Perhaps most clearly for Egypt, we have encountered areas where the data resist analysis in primarily political and economic terms. In a socioeconomic perspective, the essential difficulty is created by the scale of inequality in the ancient social systems and by the vast expenditure of human and material resources on such projects as pyramids and major temples, or simply the burial equipment of a minor king like Tutankhamun. In Mesopotamia, where the economy was more diversified and contested than in Egypt, the relation between politics and economy was itself very complex. Political goals were shaped through the forces of production, consumption, and distribution; rulers alone did not dominate these economic spheres. Also, while the economic activities of members of local groups were affected by policy goals of the state, one still needs to ask to what extent these political goals were motivated by economic factors.

Inequality, such as existed in both civilizations, created a large surplus for a small elite—the ruling group of high officials in Old Kingdom Egypt numbered perhaps 500 people (Baines and Eyre 1983:66); this required legitimation to the people from whom the surpluses were exacted, or so modern analysts tend to suppose. Although state formation created great economic potential, its consequences may have left those below the elite, after the exactions required of them, in an economic condition similar to that of their prestate forebears. Throughout the history of the early state, the majority of people hardly had alternatives or points of comparison beyond their own societal environment; this limited perspective would have reduced the requirements of legitimation, in comparison with those the outsider may feel to be necessary. Data on “lower-class” residential areas, nonelite burials, and the material inventory of people who are absent or depersonalized in writing (all of this more accessible for Mesopotamia than for Egypt) provide some evidence for the status of such people and of their social groups and the way in which they were integrated into society as a whole.

While traditional forms of local social organization and their “moral economies” may have retained some validity for the nonelite, precisely be-

cause the state (and/or large manorial estates) removed from them the means of storage and provision against misfortune, the state appropriated the salient discourse on the constitution of social order. Although we should not assume that those outside the elite always accepted the rhetoric of their superiors, state legitimations were generally designed so that elites could exploit rather freely the resources available to them. Elites were able to be profoundly separate from the rest of their societies. This separateness extended to the system of values, which was hardly accessible to those outside an inner social layer.

Despite the residual survival of the moral economy on which their inferiors relied for a legitimation of their dependence, elites had little regard for the human lives of those whose efforts they were eager to utilize for their own grand plans, taking huge disparities of circumstances between groups for granted. Only rarely and mainly in the later stages of these two ancient states did the moral economy appear to a significant extent in the texts. Since much of society was involved in the execution of the grand plans, additional values and interests must have held societies together both in these goals and more generally. But the analysis of those plans needs to focus principally on the elite groups and on the ways in which they created and sustained among themselves the mechanisms for supporting and ensuring the success of specific types of goals. These elite values were not only political; economics were a means more than an end. Political and economic analysis only partly addresses elite motivations. In the next section we outline a different approach to these issues, which are common to the study of many civilizations.

HIGH CULTURE

Context and Definition

The inner elite controlling ancient Near Eastern (and presumably all other) states and civilizations were few; during early postformative periods their numbers became further reduced. In Egypt, this process culminated in the Fourth Dynasty (c. 2500 BC), when a high proportion of the country's resources was devoted to the king's funerary monument. The number of the surrounding, less grandiose tombs of the inner elite suggests that this group consisted of no more than a few dozen male officeholders, in a population of perhaps 1–2 million for the entire country. These men formed the central decision-making group, who together with their families controlled and enjoyed the fruits of the country's labors. The group was larger in other periods, but it can never have numbered far into the thousands.

The more populous and numerous city-states in Mesopotamia did not gather resources to a single center in the same way, but in Mesopotamian

civilization, too, wealth and status were highly concentrated. The urban implosion that began in the late fourth and reached its apogee in the mid-third millennium accentuated the formation of an urban inner elite that is reflected in extravagant practices, such as the mid-third-millennium royal tombs of Ur and other cities. The lexical “list of professions” shows that many bureaucratic titles already existed in the late fourth millennium, as well as names of occupational specialists and community officials (Civil et al. 1969; Englund, Nissen, and Damerow 1993; Green and Nissen 1987). Few of these, however, can be described as privileged elites. In all periods, these Mesopotamian elites, which included high temple officials, private landowners, community elders, and wealthy traders as well as high military and administrative officials, however numerous they may have been, formed a minuscule percentage of the population, as can be seen by comparing lists of officeholders in later third-millennium texts with the vastly greater numbers of people who received rations during that period.

The formation and maintenance of elites, and then of elites within elites, lie at the heart of civilizations: inequality is fundamental. For these two ancient civilizations, the option of equality or of a serious search for an integrating “moral economy” hardly existed (contrast with Classical Greece; Morris 1997). Cosmological elaborations and “political economies” are among the features that can distinguish civilizations from noncivilizations. The formation and entrenchment of such inequalities set the evolutionary trajectory toward civilization apart from trajectories that led to less differentiated and stratified societies.

In the most ancient civilizations, elites controlled material and symbolic resources but were scarcely subject to cultural requirements to disburse them in fulfillment of social obligations. The distinctive achievement of archaic civilizations is as much to transform the meaning of wealth as to create more wealth. Elites control symbolic resources in such a way as to make them meaningful only when it is they who exploit them. This appropriation of meaning is complementary to, and at least as important as, other legitimations available to controlling individuals or groups. There is also the “religious” affirmation that cosmic order is maintained only by the activities of leaders, typically of the king and the central priestly officiants or, if religious imperatives are acted out in the wider world, of the military.

These elite activities are characterized by the massive appropriation of material resources, which are put to use in the enduring forms characteristic of ancient states. Such resources are due to the ruler and elite because they are the carriers of exclusive and expensive cultural meanings that require such exactions for their maintenance and development. Elites, as the principal human protagonists and prime communicants to the deities who

are the supreme members of the total society, require the highest products of culture (cf. Chang 1983). High culture, therefore, is one of the essential loci, even the essential locus, in which order exploits wealth for legitimacy. Here, high culture becomes self-motivating and self-sustaining, while its meaning-bearing acquires a measure of autonomy through the expertise and internal discourse of the specialists who maintain it.

These points are not new. As is widely accepted, if not in precisely these terms, high culture is a central phenomenon of most civilizations from the ancient Near East until today. Large-scale democracies and social movements, among others, redefine high culture in terms different than those of the ancient civilizations we are considering; few dispense with it. Cultural pluralism, however, turns the question of what constitutes high culture into an issue that appears to have been largely absent in our cases. This point will become salient for Mesopotamia, where the existence of many ethno-linguistic groups tended to promote rather than fragment high culture.

Despite the significance and centrality of high culture, it often does not receive its share of attention as a factor in the creation and maintenance of elites and civilizations. It is ironic that, while archaeologists acknowledge the importance of high culture when they recover elements of it in the physical record, they tend, for understandable reasons, to place more value on evidence for less exclusive social phenomena. The general public, with its interest in "treasures," may here be closer to the ethos of ancient elites than are socially aware archaeologists.

We take high culture to be characteristic of civilizations rather than simply of states, and we see the boundary between one form of high culture subscribed to by local elites and another as the boundary between one civilization and another. We define high culture as *the production and consumption of aesthetic items under the control, and for the benefit, of the inner elite of a civilization, including the ruler and the gods*. The phrase "aesthetic items," rather than "works of art," is intended to encompass a wide range of domains including visual art, visual, verbal, and musical performance, garments, perfumes, and the most highly prized food and drink. The phenomenon also extends to such extravagant forms of "traditional" practice as big-game hunting, the keeping of exotic animals, and the breeding of highly specialized ones. At the extreme, the whole lives of the ruler and elites are aestheticized, as well as strongly ritualized—the two aspects being mutually supportive. The range of high culture is such that it can accommodate a diversity of interests and aptitudes among rulers and inner elite.

The aesthetic character of high culture does not imply that works of art are ends in themselves. Many scholars object to the term "art" as applied to non-Western cultures, and we do not wish to engage this issue here (see

Baines 1994; Hardin 1993). Works and practices of high culture are strongly aesthetic, but the aesthetic element is mostly integrated into some broad context, such as the conduct of royal and elite life, religion, festivals, or provision for the dead.

Communication, Expertise, and Restriction

High culture is a communicative complex: it enacts, celebrates, and transmits meaning and experience. It incorporates writing systems as well as artistic production, and in doing so, it may mark a distinction between writing as a specialized medium of expression and as a broad instrument of social control. The spiritual, moral, and intellectual content communicated in high culture may be realized in visual art and architecture, in which case it can be largely independent of verbal form, although in Egypt the verbal and the visual are very closely integrated (e.g., Baines 1989b; Fischer 1986). We discuss some issues relating to writing below, while noting here that because of writing's verbal character, the content of its less materially extravagant manifestations is in theory available through language to anyone and is more difficult to control and integrate into the high-cultural complex than is visual art. Literature, initially no doubt in its oral forms and integrated with other elements of performing art, contains the most complex and multi-valent responses to the exclusive character of high culture (Parkinson 1998). Literature may, on occasion, be subversive of the high-cultural order, but in our two cases such tendencies were mostly kept in check (Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992). Even what is superficially subversive can be incorporated into a richer pattern that confronts the complexities of human experience and reaffirms the established order, as we illustrate in our discussion of each area.

Yet the communication of high culture appears as if subverted. It addresses itself to very few. Many richly communicative objects are deposited in places where no one could ever apprehend their communication. In this regard, past, future, and the world of the gods are as important as producers or recipients of the communication as is the present world. Part of the extravagance of high culture is that its message should be fully received by few or none.

The exclusiveness of high culture requires formalization, probably because simple wealth is always too crude a criterion for access to elite activities and concerns. Thus, access to high culture is controlled not just by wealth but also by social hierarchy, rank, initiation or the holding of specific offices, kinship or other group adherence, or a mixture of these. Moreover, the forms that are crystallized in high culture are vital to the institution as a whole. We consider formalization and access under the categories of knowledge, style, and the maintenance of tradition.

Knowledge is a vital element in the control of cultural resources. Crucial parts of high culture itself, or of the meanings that sustain and motivate them (Baines 1990), may be secret. Such restriction of knowledge is common to all societies, but it has special ramifications for inner elites. Much of what is involved may be recondite without being secret, as may be true notably of conditions surrounding works of art. Obvious aspects are the amount of learning involved in becoming a provider of high culture, either as a specialized artist/craftsman or as a performer, and the special and restricted settings in which such activities take place.

There is a corresponding, if less onerous, investment in being a full consumer. Only those who have the time and inclination are in a position to appreciate the products of high culture, and even they may not do so, being “philistines” who are wealthy enough to consume without appreciating. These possibilities vary with social forms and, no doubt, with individuals. Thus, the professional, literate elite of Egypt may have been more directly involved in the production and the meaning of works of art than were nonliterate elites in Mesopotamia (where literacy was restricted to scribes who were not necessarily members of the controlling elites), or other semi-independent and landholding elites in such places as medieval Europe. But because of the great significance of high-cultural items, the elite almost always exercise some control over them, even if its members lack relevant expertise. Members of elites use high culture and access to it in mutual competition for status.

Style is produced within the broader elite and consumed principally by the inner elite. Style is vital to a civilization’s definition and to its demarcation against what lies outside. High culture has specific carriers and a particular status as a tradition, and it is integrated in particular ways into a civilizational, cultural, and stylistic context. Typically, the visual forms of a civilization are so distinctive that an informed onlooker can identify them at a glance. While this applies especially strongly in Egypt, one easily discerns “Mesopotamian” styles from “Syrian,” “Iranian,” or “Anatolian” ones.

In most cases, a civilization’s style (which is different and more encompassing than pottery types or lithic types as “styles”) is more or less coterminous with its extent in space and time. The style is created in a high-cultural context, is sustained by an elite that commissions and consumes the works that transmit the stylistic tradition, and incorporates fundamental values. In the case of Egypt, this fusion of style and values is central to a system of decorum circumscribing and sustaining high-cultural artifacts and activities (Baines 1985:277–305, 1990:17–21). The values may often be submerged or tacit, but they are no less powerful for not being expressed in verbal form. This value-laden stylistic complex is crucial to the transmission of the civilization’s essence through time (Assmann 1992).

The aesthetic character of high culture is a powerful legitimizing force, because works of art and architecture involve great material outlays, and often or mostly require activities that can neither be expected of the consumers nor provide directly for more than a small proportion of society. Both in the dedication of high-cultural products to deities and to the ruler, and in the consumption of those products by the elite, there is little questioning of the view that it is impossible to do things in a less extravagant way and that the necessary labor is provided by a dependent workforce.

The transmission and interpretation of high culture is a significant preoccupation of the elite, reinforcing their status as a community of discourse. This community, with its many shared interests, diverts attention from the effects of the attendant inequality on the rest of society. To the members of the group commissioning, consuming, and creating the works, those outside are hardly of account.

As indicated, the producers and the consumers of high culture are normally not identical. Despite the importance and scale of artistic and high-cultural production, the executant mostly has the status of, at best, a privileged member of the broader, as against the inner, elite. The existence of specialized craftsmen among this larger elite, and the privileged position of the overlapping group of the literate, create subgroups who share concerns both with the inner elite and with the rest of society, partially bridging the gap between the two poles. This limited involvement of producers with elite concerns strengthens the position of high culture, because several interest groups are involved directly in its propagation. No doubt even the broader exploited society—which is itself not a homogeneous whole—has an interest in the maintenance of the high-cultural complex because it is seen as a stabilizing institution and, ultimately, as an almost unalterable given.

But these mitigations of the divisions introduced by high culture do not alter the fact that the phenomenon itself necessarily encompasses only a small proportion of society, and that its prime intent is to remain restricted. Moreover, in the absence of advanced technology or gross exploitation of outsiders, the production of elite high culture adversely affects the material culture and living standards of the rest. Thus, high culture contains an inner dynamic and a paradox: it seeks to legitimize the whole order of society, along with the role of the elite, as cosmologically just. If it is to do so without simply imposing authority from above, it must offer real or perceived benefits to the rest of society, but those who count most in perceiving the benefits are once again the elite.

Civilizations must *maintain their traditions* if they are to persist for long periods. These traditions form complex entities. The complex of high culture, whose full extent can be modeled from the archaeological and historical

record, is ideally perceived as an entity but tends not to be transmitted as one. Its precise range, the style of its components, and their development and potential all change, but either at a slow pace—which may seem faster to the intense and informed interest of the actors—or in a “punctuated” phase of innovation or reform, the latter often being presented as a revival of the past. Revivals, too, may not seem to the outsider to be such, because what is done appears sufficiently new for the notion of revival to appear out of place. In Western art, phases of renewal have often gone under the banner of return to antiquity, and calls for such returns are often more artistically genuine than a nonartist may accept. Their essential aim is to distance the artist from immediate predecessors, for which purpose a good point of reference is the more remote past, with the degree of remoteness depending on various factors (Baines 1989a:135–40; such uses of the past are generally the opposite of the modern ones described by Lowenthal [1985]). What is less conceivable for the ancient context is the creation of an altogether different style, or still less a different representational rendering of nature (see next section).

Some writers on Egypt who do not use art-historical methods or are concerned more with a theoretical abstraction from the works than with specific analysis take the slow pace of artistic change as indicating that the purpose of the art forms—and hence for our purposes of the high-cultural complex—was to stifle change (e.g., Assmann 1992:169–74; Davis 1989). Such a view is difficult to reconcile with phases of significant change, as seen in Egypt with the new literary and artistic forms in the Twelfth Dynasty (c. 1900 BC) or in Mesopotamia with the production of “wisdom literature” (Lambert 1960; see conclusion) and the development of relief carving in the first millennium BC (e.g., Winter 1983), and with the ample high-cultural evidence for interest in novelty and its display. High culture persists in a fruitful tension between maintenance of the status quo and renewal or change, and readily incorporates both. The notion that its aim is stasis may be influenced by its suppression of radically different alternatives, which is integral to the identification of civilizations with their high-cultural styles. Only when that link is broken, as it was in the eastern Mediterranean with the civilizationally heterogeneous Persian Empire and its successors, does a more rapid rate of change come to seem normal or desirable.

One way in which the high-cultural complex does have restrictive tendencies is in the primacy of visual forms. In our cases, this primacy should be connected with the tendency to anchor cultural forms and central values in symbols that are more readily recalled and more stable than are verbal modes. The complexity of the artifacts carrying these meanings in a high-cultural tradition is one factor that favors the elite and the executants most strongly in their role as guardians of a tradition. Here, we see no need for

a particular explanation of Egyptian civilization as striving especially after permanence and opposing change and competition (e.g., Assmann 1991:5–92); for Mesopotamia, Irene J. Winter (e.g., 1983) has elegantly developed a case for the existence of intraelite competition.

The Persistence of High Culture: “Two Cultures”?

The division between elite and the rest leaves open the question of whether the rest have a different culture or values from those of the elite (not the same as Assmann’s [1991:16–31] “two cultures”). So far as archaeological and epigraphic evidence in Egypt and Mesopotamia goes, that does not seem to be the case. Rather, elite high culture appears to stand in contrast to a poverty or an absence of distinctive materialized ideology for others (DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle 1996). Of course, our sources are desperately biased in the attempt by ancient elites to assert and propound just such a state of affairs, since both the cohesiveness and potency of high culture are compromised if it is divorced from the culture of the rest of society.

Nonetheless, the social conditions in which ancient states and civilizations formed appear partly comparable to more modern ones in which social historians have seen a drawing apart of elite and other culture (e.g., Sharpe 1987:122–23; Thomas 1978:3–24; Wrightson 1982:220–21). Enormous disparities in wealth create ample opportunities for difference and legitimize the need for cultural elaboration among the elite. At the same time, major disruptive social movements and changes in settlement patterns result in the extensive displacement of older social forms and their moral economies (cf. Scott 1985). These changes all could and did lead to the self-conscious formation of rival ideologies in some ancient states—and in the modern world. But this evolution did not happen in ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia; “Axial Age” cultures (after Jaspers, see Eisenstadt, ed. 1986) were a later development.

Essential factors favoring the persistence of high culture in Egypt and Mesopotamia seem to lie in the lack of available effective alternatives within the same culture and, until the first millennium BC, even in neighboring cultures. The assumption that only the native culture had validity appears to have applied in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, where the civilizations persisted for many centuries after foreign rule had become the norm (Yoffee 1988b). The view that one’s own polity constituted the cosmos existed in both large and small states (Liverani 1990).

The Formation and Exploitation of the High-Culture Complex

Since the main focus of our work is not on origins, here we need only to recall the speed with which high cultures appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Although the changes of the late fourth millennium built on what

came before, the transformation of art, the introduction of writing, and the centralization of symbolic structures all suggest that new meanings and values were arising from the cauldron of state formation. We further infer that the evolution of centralized government and an inner elite was seen as having the mission of enhancing the new order through its exploitation of the wealth it created. In the new social and cultural hierarchy, the invention and elaboration of high culture become self-legitimizing. We explore below how this happens and how the high culture is maintained.

This legitimization also relates to the issue of change versus stability, since both are goals of elites. Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilization endured for longer than any of their successors and achieved great consistency and stability of primarily high-cultural style. This style was adhered to by ruling groups, and it was maintained and transmitted by them and by specialists on the edge of the elite. In considering Egypt one can set aside short-term political instability, which often affected only the inner elites. The pace of change in any period could have been almost imperceptible to the actors (whose generally short lifespans render change more difficult to perceive than it is for us); this imperceptibility was no doubt deliberately sought, for it reinforces the image of the high-cultural order as given and immutable. In Mesopotamia, the high culture was maintained in the face of numerous episodes of political and other change, and it was reproduced to render such changes orderly and legitimate.

An illustration of the value of restricted transmission incorporated in works of art is the early Egyptian complex of representation and writing (Baines 1988a, 1989b). Egyptian writing divided from the beginning into a cursive variant used for administration and the “monumental,” hieroglyphic form used in works of art. In early times neither encoded full syntactic forms of the language, yet the limited forms endured for some centuries. Writing was an adequate and valuable tool of administration, even with little expression of syntax; in art it essentially supplied captions and was not needed for continuous text. Captions were integrated with figural representation to form a genre of record and display of such things as royal exploits; in combination with the power of the visual image, this created a form that was probably more effective for being laconic. Moreover, the visual qualities of the hieroglyphs, and their interaction with fully representational images and with an intermediate emblematic mode of representation (Baines 1985:41–63, 277–86), created an enormously powerful complex; the best parallels may be in Mesoamerican artistic practices (e.g., Marcus 1976c, 1992c; Reents-Budet 1994). These features were embedded in the system of decorum already mentioned.

Most of the surviving early objects that bear hieroglyphs and pictorial representation are quite small (e.g., Adams 1974), many of them dedicated

in temples that were accessible only to those qualified by office and by induction into the cult. The larger pieces, such as royal mortuary stelae, were set up in the desert, far from settlements, where only mortuary priests would see them. Their communication cannot have been addressed to people at large, or even to a large proportion of the elite. Rather, they addressed society in the widest sense, which included the gods and the dead; their creation was a focus of elite interest and discourse; and they related to a broader past and future. The cultural complex of which they formed a central part became self-sustaining and value laden.

The centrality of artistic forms was reinforced by the way in which they defined the cosmos and implied its maintenance, celebrating the world's order and arranging it into hierarchies in which god and king were central. Somewhat paradoxically, even the elite play a relatively modest role in early works. This reticence may have a legitimizing force: what are most significant are the gods, the cosmos, and the king. These essential components can be seen as important for all of society and not just the elite, even though the rest could not have had access to the objects that codified these conceptions. Probably few of them were aware of much of what the artistic hierarchies and system of decorum implied.

The domains of early Egyptian art had a specific configuration that reinforced their high-cultural character. The most characteristic surviving products from around the beginning of the dynastic period are small-scale relief carvings, decorated ivory objects (e.g., Quibell 1900: pls. 5–17), and stone vases (e.g., el-Khouli 1978), some of which almost constituted sculpture in the round. All have precursors, even though there are gaps in the inventory among types of objects that might be expected to survive, notably high-quality, three-dimensional stone sculpture. Stone vases were complemented by copper and possibly precious metal containers, of which few survive (for copper, see Emery 1949–58[I]: 18–58, pls. 4–7).

Already in Predynastic times, stone vases, most of whose raw materials had to be fetched by expeditions into the Eastern Desert, were vehicles of conspicuous consumption, finished to a high level through great expenditures of labor. The First Dynasty brought a vast increase in production that must have required huge numbers of craftsmen. The sculptural qualities of the vases (e.g., Fischer 1972) are superior to anything in other media from the period. By the late Second Dynasty, major royal stone statuary appeared. Apparently at a stroke, the Third Dynasty innovator Djoser buried tens of thousands of vases from the First/Second Dynasties under his Step Pyramid, the first such monument to be constructed; not all these deposits have even been surveyed (Lacau and Lauer 1961–65). Stone vases never again had the same importance as prestige products.

The vases have been found in temples and in nonroyal and, especially, royal tombs. The most significant indications of their function come from

inscribed examples from Djoser's monument. It is uncertain whether their uses were also typical of the uninscribed vases, but the inscriptions show that they were used in temple rituals. A number were inscribed with names of phyles, elite social groups evidently involved in major rituals (Roth 1991: 145–95). They seem to have been significant artistic furnishings of structures that might otherwise appear to be culturally less important than the mortuary monuments (but see O'Connor 1992). Some vases also could have been destined for royal or elite ceremonial use.

Two points emerge from this example. First, genres of high-cultural materials were pervasive in all attested contexts of elite action. It is not clear whether any of these actions involved public display of the objects, or whether the objects were accessible only to their immediate users; temple and tomb contexts were in any case semisecret. Such large numbers of people participated in the manufacture of the vases, however, that their status in the high-cultural sphere must have been well known. Second, high-cultural genres could belong in any domain: the emphases among them cannot be taken for granted. This genre, to which a rather wider elite probably had access in the late Predynastic period, was annexed by the small central group. Emblematic stone vessels, whose meaning could only be comprehended by those who knew some writing, point to the completely high-cultural character of the whole genre; they were not marginal, and the significance of their Predynastic precursors was transformed.

The best-known early relief sculpture is on palettes and maceheads from the late Predynastic period and Dynasty 0 (c. 3200–3000 BC; Asselberghs 1961). The latest exemplars, the Cities and Narmer palettes and the Scorpion and Narmer maceheads, convey normative values that endured through dynastic and Greco-Roman times. Their principal organizing features are strict register composition and the hierarchical system of decorum, whose crucial aspect here is that it centered on representations in human form of king and gods (often with animal heads) interacting equally, without other human participation. Such scenes characterize temple relief, which is not attested until the late Second Dynasty although it very probably existed earlier, as is suggested by parallels in the partially pictorial year tags of the First Dynasty. The palettes and maceheads ceased to be made at the beginning of the First Dynasty, leaving a gap in the range of “monumental” genres. The finest First Dynasty stone reliefs are carvings of royal names on royal mortuary stelae from Abydos (e.g., Lange and Hirmer 1968: pl. 6). Rather more informative nonroyal stelae, which ranked far below royal reliefs, appeared by the late First Dynasty but are artistically inferior (e.g., Emery 1949–58[III]: pls. 23b, 39).

Thus, stone relief carving, which was vital in the artistic development of central ideology, seems to have disappeared from public contexts in the First Dynasty. The general absence of high-quality work, in contrast with the

representational mastery exhibited in stone vases, cannot be due to lack of competence; it must relate to production in lost contexts—perhaps small-scale temple reliefs within the floodplain—or to the transfer of skills into other media and genres. Whichever was the case, these genres were appropriated to the largely invisible context of decoration within temples, and they focused on scenes of king and deities that continued to form the core of the system but did not become publicly visible for 1,500 years. Artistic skills were divided into the more public, but still high-cultural, component of stone vases and the largely secret one of temple relief, so that hierarchies within the supernatural and the elite were reinforced artistically, with the gods and the king as the ultimate authority that provided the core of meaning. State formation, legitimation, and hierarchization were thus played out in art, to the shorter-term detriment of its availability even to the inner elite. Although the communicative core of high-cultural forms remained, negotiation with them was thus essentially through restriction of access.

This restriction can be exemplified in writing, the most ostensibly expansive domain of high culture. Developments in writing, architecture, and artistic style exemplify ways in which the high-cultural complex is elaborated. It is typically Egyptian that the first known major changes in the writing system, in the late Second and early Third Dynasties (c. 2700 BC), extended its use to speeches of deities to the king, as well as being used to proclaim the king's receipt of a favor from a god on a seal inscription, and thus do not focus on general human utility or display. Nonroyal use of continuous writing in prestige contexts did not develop significantly until the Fourth/Fifth Dynasties (c. 2550 BC), during and after the period of maximum centralization and construction of the grandest monuments. Until then, visual forms of very limited currency, rather than verbal ones, remained the most important expressions of cultural values.

These developments share with wider historical processes the characteristic of being “punctuated” changes identifiable in subtle high-cultural shifts such as the status of stone vases, as well as in grosser features. In the complex of high culture, superficially minor changes or innovations can be profoundly important. Limitations we may discern in the initial complex, such as the absence of continuous written language or of topographical rendering in pictorial representation, may not then have appeared as such. The complex as it was must have been adequate for the demands placed upon it, since it received the enormous material and cultural investment required for its maintenance (arguments in Cooper 1989 and Michalowski 1994 touch on this point for Mesopotamia).

The way in which developments appear to mirror change in power relations, and to document the maneuvers of different interest groups, is probably too neat, because the integrated artistic system acquired its own momentum and detailed execution was in the hands of subelites rather than central elites.

Nonetheless, the high-cultural complex was so important that the main elite must have participated in changes.

The general development of the First–Fourth Dynasties was toward ever more extravagant and elaborate monuments for the king and for a diminishing proportion of the inner elite. There is a striking contrast between the extensive and widespread cemeteries of the First/Second Dynasties and the central Fourth Dynasty, when almost all major tombs were at Giza, surrounding the king's massive pyramid (for a provincial exception see Garstang 1904).

The Giza tombs were broadly separated into two groups. The highest-ranking tombs were sited between the Nile Valley, on the east, and the Great Pyramid, while the slightly less prestigious were sited to the west of the pyramid (e.g., Dunham and Simpson 1974–80). All were massive and, for the first time, constructed in stone, and they partook in a grandiose undertaking that projected elite hierarchies into the next world. The secondary, western group lacked public decoration and, thus, marked a step back from the finest tombs of the previous generation. The concealed stelae and sculptured heads found in the tombs (e.g., Smith 1949: pls. 5–9, 32) show that art of the highest quality was available to these people (see also Russmann 1995: 118). Even though relief decoration may not have been carved in earlier tombs of the same status—which belonged to extremely few people—its absence in these Giza tombs constituted a severe restriction of choice in the context of a generally increased potential of writing and an existing decorative repertory. This restriction conveyed in high-cultural terms the appropriation of all major symbolic means to the king and his immediate group, most of whom were members of his family. It also may have related to a wider use of such media in lost temple contexts. An aesthetic aspect of the development is visible in the contrast between the full decoration of the temple of Snofru at Dahshur (Fakhry 1961) and the remarkably austere and abstract style of the Second Pyramid complex of Re'kha'ef (Khephren) at Giza (e.g., Arnold 1992: 198–202; Baines 1994: 77–78).

This development was reversed by the end of the Fourth Dynasty, and more clearly in the early Fifth, when both royal and nonroyal monuments became smaller but richly decorated, and the beginnings of a nonroyal “literature” appeared in the form of inscriptions in elite tombs containing extended titularies and brief narrative passages (Baines 1998). This change was political as well as cultural. A narrative preserved in a literary work from a millennium later implies that the transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Dynasty had the sanction of the sun god Re', the principal deity, and was in some sense subversive (Lichtheim 1973: 217–22). Yet both dynasties accorded Re' great prominence, and an explanation in such terms does not appear evident. Rather, there may have been struggles between elite groups that mildly disfavored the kingship, which never again had quite the same

control of symbolic and material resources, and favored a strongly entrenched elite that was not closely bound to the king by kinship. This development restricted the role of the royal family, while probably enlarging the general ruling group. A crucial point of contention appears thus to have been the restriction of display and high-cultural resources. Those associated with the Fifth Dynasty spread these resources a little more widely, at least in semipublic display on the monuments.

The broader society did not participate to any great extent in such transitions; rather, high-cultural resources were exploited both for their own sake and for their political potential. The nature of the material at issue is also significant: the eventual development toward a more widespread literate high culture was very difficult to reverse. No later reversal comparable with the progressive restriction of the far less literate First–Fourth Dynasties is known, although there was much variation; the indigenous temple culture of the Greco-Roman period, which was significant in many ways for the whole country, was accessible only to tiny numbers.

As before, those outside the inner elite appear not to have had a significant historical role. What becomes visible is the existence of different factions within the elite; one of these factions evidently offered benefits to somewhat more people than did the tiny central group of the Fourth Dynasty. Later in the Old Kingdom people exploited their old and secret religious knowledge in the play of status (Baines 1988b), again indicating a diversity in the inner elite, which was then probably larger, if not wealthier. Such displays, which rely upon shared high-cultural values, are part of the currency of status competition in all ancient states.

In Mesopotamia, writing lies perhaps still more at the heart of high culture than it does in Egypt. Mesopotamian high culture crystallized at about the time of the formation of the first city-states, but its *raison d'être* cannot be explained simply as part of the political and social transformations of the Uruk period (Yoffee 1993b: 64–68, 1995). Writing was from the start concerned not only with economic recording but also with the re-creation and standardization of Mesopotamian cultural “encyclopedism”—the description and systematization of titles of people and things that became part of the high-cultural complex. Although writing as a semiotic system was invented in the late Uruk period (Boltz 1994; Michalowski 1990, 1993b), and “lexical lists” appear among the first tablets (Englund, Nissen, and Damerow 1993) and were used as part of the scribal curriculum, Sumerian writing did not achieve much standardization until the mid-third millennium BC. It is remarkable that such standardization owed little to political developments, since the early third millennium was a time of endemic warfare among city-states. It was in a multilingual environment of independent city-states that systems of measurement and mathematical notation became regularized

(Friberg 1978–79; Powell 1989–90); indeed, it was because of the need to write Akkadian names that the Sumerian script became increasingly phoneticized.

Emblematic of the formalization of systems of communication and education across independent polities is a particular corpus of cylinder seals (mainly attested in the form of sealings), called “city seals.” Their decoration, which consists mainly of the names of city-states, has been interpreted in various ways. Jacobsen (1957) thought the names implied an early Sumerian “amphictyony” (Hallo 1960), a league of cities bound together as a community of worshippers. Wright (1969), Nissen (1988), Matthews (1993), and Michalowski (1993c) consider the cities listed to document trade routes—the seals to have been applied to vessels whose movement and storage were thus charted. Another view holds that the names on the seals do not reflect either a political grouping or an economic purpose, but are signs whose playful combinations were charged with symbolic meaning (Yoffee 1993c, 1995b). It is suggested that the names of cities are written not with some functional goal in mind but as a metalinguistic reflection of the cultural interaction that also included the process of linguistic standardization that was occurring in the Early Dynastic period.

For Mesopotamianists, more emphasis has always been placed on the linguistic than the artistic in the preserved Mesopotamian record. This apparent dominance may depend to a considerable extent on the media used in ancient art, many of which are poorly preserved in tells; nevertheless, the “limited” character of Mesopotamian art (Porada 1979) is easily contrasted with the far more extensive artistic record from Egypt. Egyptian high-cultural forms that found material expression were primarily mixed visual-verbal. In contrast, Mesopotamian ones were more strongly verbal. Although even this weak generalization breaks down if one reviews evidence for, and scholarship of, the first-millennium states, we concentrate on the high-cultural complex as it can be read in the cuneiform sources.

Whereas some Mesopotamian texts—for example, private letters—relate to informal speech, most tablets are administrative or private records or school texts. Indeed, the formal education required for scribal proficiency (Civil 1992; Sjöberg 1975) included belletristic compositions, lexical lists (lists of gods, official titles, vocabularies), ritual texts, and other compendia (Civil 1975) that Oppenheim (1977) and Machinist (1986) have called the “stream of tradition.” While the nature of the “canon” (a term perhaps misappropriated from biblical studies but in wide use) changed over time, it is significant that such texts were consciously collected, edited, commented upon, and copied to the end of Mesopotamian civilization (Falkenstein 1951, 1953; Hallo 1962, 1963; Lambert 1957; Michalowski 1993c).

As the context of the scribal schools themselves changed from the Old Babylonian period (early second millennium), when “school texts” are

found in private houses (Charpin 1986), to the first millennium, when private libraries were owned by priests (Parpola 1983) and schools were affiliated with temples, so the context of the texts themselves changed. For example, epic compositions of the early second millennium such as “Atrahasis,” which contains a creation story, were part of a ritual in the first millennium, when the text was used to cure barren women (Lambert and Millard 1969). Although social and economic records and certain correspondence (especially in the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods, when the writing system was the simplest; Larsen 1987b:219–20) were written at the behest of elites, the art of writing was inaccessible to the population at large. Written texts spoke to other written texts, and a high-cultural corpus of written matter reinforced the separateness of the inner elite and scribal class. Although scribes themselves did not often achieve the status of elites, they were themselves not independent of the institutions of palaces and temples and never became semiautonomous guilds of *literati*, as Hsu (1988) describes for Han China. As in Egypt, some written texts faced walls or were placed in mountain aeries: these impediments to sight, however, mattered little to the intended divine readership.

Again as in Egypt, high culture was mobilized in, and formed a leading part of, major political and cultural changes. It is a commonplace in Mesopotamian scholarship to note that Sumerian texts were learned well after the time when Sumerian was actually spoken (c. 2000 BC), and indeed until the end of Mesopotamian civilization. This continuity of an aspect of high culture illustrates well the power of the textually denoted Mesopotamian discourse community (Cooper 1993). By this term, at least for Mesopotamia, we obviously do not mean the vast majority of Mesopotamians, who could neither write nor understand the arcane language of *belles lettres*, religious texts, or royal pronouncements. Rather, it was the inner elite (and their scribal dependents) who sponsored and reproduced the texts that delineated the hierarchies composing the world and defined the critical roles of rulers and gods. There were, however, enormous changes in political systems throughout Mesopotamian history, and it was the role of high culture to be flexible enough to legitimize and naturalize those changes.

In the middle and late third millennium, official writing systems changed at least twice. With the conquest of the House of Akkade, Akkadian became the normal language of the administration, and scribes/bureaucrats were trained in new ways in Akkadian as well as Sumerian. In the Ur III period, Sumerian was again the language of the bureaucracy, and scribal schools were reoriented in the new imperial structure (Cooper 1973; Michalowski 1987). Ur III rulers, however, sought to depict themselves as descendants from the heroic past, avowing their kinship with Gilgamesh and other kings of legend from the city of Uruk. In scribal schools, as well as in the inculca-

tion of new administrative language, tales of these kings were copied and/or composed. High culture was thus manipulated in order to legitimize new kings, a new bureaucracy, and new imperial rule.

In the second millennium BC, after the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the governments of city-states in Mesopotamia were progressively seized by Amorite leaders, and the number of Amorite personal names in the texts also increased. By the end of the seventeenth century BC, one royal edict describes the population of Babylonia as “Amorites and Akkadeians” (Kraus 1984). Naturally, scholars (beginning with Clay 1909) have sought to identify Amorite social institutions and systems of beliefs that ought to accompany these political and demographic changes. However, ascriptions of new levels of private enterprise as a reflection of the business mentality of Semites (Pettinato 1971)—whatever that might be—or new marriage customs deriving from a tribal past (Falkenstein 1956–57) are oddly juxtaposed against the absence of any texts written in Amorite. Indeed, it is the lack of large-scale culture change in early second-millennium Mesopotamia, other than those economic and social changes that can be accounted for as internal historical developments (Yoffee 1995b), that can be explained as a conscious policy of the new rulers of Mesopotamian city-states.

Seizing political power in city-states, Amorite leaders contested not only with local elites but also with other Amorite elites. One mechanism that advantaged Amorite leaders was their ability to mobilize support across the countryside, that is, beyond the borders of the autonomous city-states. In a letter from the king of Uruk to the king of Babylon, the former appeals for help against enemies because the kings of Uruk and Babylon are of “one house” (Falkenstein 1963: 56), presumably of one particular Amorite group (the Amnanum Amorites). These Amorite rulers, having successfully gained power in Mesopotamian city-states, made sure that Mesopotamian high culture was reproduced faithfully. The Akkadian language of Hammurabi of Babylon (descendant of the same Amorite ruler of Babylon mentioned in the letter cited above from a king of Uruk), as embodied in his “Law Code,” is regarded to this day as a classical text to be assigned to first-year Akkadian students; most of the Sumerian poetic compositions that were presumably composed in the late third millennium are known from schoolboy copies discarded in Nippur and Ur in the Old Babylonian period.

After the collapse of the Old Babylonian order in the mid-second millennium, the Kassites, who spoke a non-Semitic language (an isolate, possibly evolved in remote valleys in the Zagros Mountains), established a new dynasty in Babylonia. Their family structure, composed of landholding lineages (Brinkman 1980), seems distinctive in this period. The *kudurru*s (boundary stones) of the Kassite period are similarly distinctive, and the Kassites were endogamous (Maidman 1984). Yet the literary and high-cultural

corpus of the period is traditionally Mesopotamian. Inscriptions on cylinder seals are written in Sumerian (Limet 1971), and the great scribal guilds of the first millennium traced their origins back to the Kassite period rather than to earlier times (Lambert 1957). The “author” of the late version of the Gilgamesh epic lived and worked under the patronage of Kassite kings.

In the last days of the Neo-Assyrian period (late eighth century BC), when the population of Assyria included many thousands of subjects who had been forcibly resettled, especially from the Levant (Oded 1979), and the language of the Assyrian empire was becoming progressively Aramaicized, the Assyrian warrior kings appealed increasingly to venerable Mesopotamian cultural traditions. In a famous example, Assurbanipal, the last great Assyrian king, was obsessed with collecting all possible texts from Babylonia, including those arcane ritual texts that were incomprehensible to Assyrian kings, citizens, and subjects alike (Machinist 1984/85). Similarly, in the sixth-century-BC Neo-Babylonian empire, kings like Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus faithfully emulated the styles of Babylonian kings who ruled more than a millennium earlier and launched “archaeological” expeditions to recover their Mesopotamian past (Beaulieu 1989).

The composition of the *Enūma eliš*, the “Babylonian Epic of Creation,” represents a major change in Mesopotamian religion. Although one still finds arguments that the work was written in the Old Babylonian period (e.g., Dalley 1989:228–30), none of the manuscripts dates before about 1000 BC. Lambert’s argument (1964) that it was the return of the statue of Marduk to Babylon at that time from Elamite captivity that provided the inspiration for the text remains plausible. The text’s major point is, of course, not the creation of the world, but the accession of Marduk as paramount among the gods. Threatened by primordial monsters, the fearful gods give a tremendous banquet, become drunk, and, after witnessing the performance of a magic trick, sign over to Marduk the supremacy of the universe. Other texts imply that the personalities and powers of all the gods are now simply parts of the ineffable nature of Marduk (Sommerfeld 1987–90).

Through this movement toward henotheism (or perhaps monotheism), Marduk (Bel) became the most important divinity in the Babylonian pantheon. This religious change, however, was cast in the most conservative possible terms, squarely within the high culture of Mesopotamia. The *Enūma eliš* borrowed its motif of a god competing with monsters from much older Sumerian compositions, especially the contests of the dragon-fighter Ninurta (Lambert 1986; Machinist 1992). Whereas a former generation (Kramer 1944) thought that all Mesopotamian literary compositions ultimately went back to Sumerian prototypes, the reason why such older motifs were used in the *Enūma eliš* was precisely to cast religious change within

the idiom of high-cultural conservatism. The very unoriginality of the poem's structure, and its ultimate mid-first-millennium *raison d'être* as part of the New Year ceremonies, suggest that those who composed it were trying to achieve the maximum Mesopotamian orthodoxy for their new theological doctrines.

Ethnic groups in Mesopotamia, far from fractionalizing Mesopotamian high culture, served to promote it and safeguard it (Yoffee 1988b). Precisely by appealing to high culture, new political elites could legitimize their participation and leadership in Mesopotamian society. Even large-scale theological change represented no challenge to the high culture, but could be molded as part of it.

Examples of the significance of high culture, of the concept's analytic utility, and of its application to various contexts could be multiplied. Those we have chosen are intended to illuminate comparisons and differences between Mesopotamia and Egypt, especially by marking differences in the manipulation and reproduction of a textual "canon" in the former and the salience of visual modes in the latter. It is worth citing one further case that exemplifies points we have been arguing.

In Middle Kingdom Egypt (early second millennium) *belles lettres* were introduced and a retrospective golden age of civilization was created and sited in the Old Kingdom (e.g. Baines 1989a: 135–38). The late Old Kingdom was the artistic point of departure, whereas *belles lettres* looked to the reign of Snofru, its first great king, and to famous names of the period as wise men (Helck 1972). Perhaps a little later, works that fictionalized more recent times were composed. None of this literature was "popular"; it was written within the elite for the elite (see McDowell 1992b for a later, slightly more "popular" local perspective on the past).

In Mesopotamia, too, Ur III kings looked back to Early Dynastic heroes, and Old Babylonian scribes copied panegyrics to the Ur III kings. For Mesopotamia the existence of a "popular" literature is also debatable. While "wisdom texts" (Gadd 1963; Lambert 1960) presumably reflect aspects of daily life and occasional street language, most of the texts use rare words, arcane grammar, and difficult signs that were accessible only to scribes.

Summary: High Culture

In brief, several distinctive features of change in high culture have been noted here. First, novelty legitimized itself not as something new but by its creative negotiation of an older, putatively timeless tradition (the "revolution" of Akhenaten in Egypt is the major exception; Baines 1997b). Invented traditions are archaeologically recoverable because they are sustained through visual forms that afford, among other things, the periodization and

objectification that archaeologists mark in the material record. Such traditions are made feasible by writing and material high culture, which recursively enhance their meaning and which can be shaped by inner elites. In the cases we have chosen, then, change is particularly warranted in times when new political leadership requires stabilization and legitimation.

Major innovations in high culture were fundamentally important for the self-image of Egyptian civilization; later times looked to the Middle Kingdom as the “classical” epoch. Despite the continuing significance of the visual arts, the clearest later focus of this classicism was language and literature, so that the Middle Kingdom reforms of written language and genre acquired a retrospective conservatism that protected the continuity of Egyptian self-definition. In Mesopotamia, scribes in Hellenistic and later times were doggedly half-learning languages and textual traditions that were of little meaning or importance to anyone but themselves. Singing the praises of antediluvian sages (Klochkov 1982; Reiner 1961), they appealed to a tradition that now was totally divorced from any inner elite or high culture and was soon to disappear even from that marginal condition.

CONCLUSION: COMPARISONS, CONTRASTS, COLLAPSES

Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth: Coda

In this comparison of Egypt and Mesopotamia, we have attempted to delineate some critical institutions of these civilizations and to investigate what made these civilizations distinctive and what allows them to be compared. We have devoted little space to origins. In conclusion, we review our findings and consider still more briefly the collapse of the civilizations.

In the rapid crystallization of states in both regions, we see the rise of a new kind of order that reformulated the cosmos so that a new form of leadership and the principle of hierarchization were proper to the continuance of that cosmos. In all aspects, from the material and economic to the religious, the institutionalization, continuance, and, on occasion, expansion of the new order are the essential tasks of the leaders.

Although this ideological principle of order evolves or is invented in both civilizations, in Egypt the cosmos is firmly connected to one head of state and one organized system of values and beliefs; office and values are inextricably linked. Even the much discussed diversity of such conceptions as creation myths proves to apply principally to later periods (Bickel 1994). The manifestations of values and beliefs, which in the archaeological record begin with artistic forms, spread very slowly to extensive verbal forms and to texts of the type known from many civilizations (but are hardly preserved,

for example, from Mesoamerica) as transmitting central concerns; the artistic forms are maintained for as long as the civilization.

In Mesopotamia there was no single political system, but a strong cultural sense of unity was manifest in the material culture and in standardized language and school curriculum. In part, this order was originally imposed because of the necessity to keep track of people and commodities, which is the logical outcome of trajectories toward differentiated societies that result in centralized administrative institutions. Nevertheless, the early trends toward standardization of written expression across separate and independent city-states and the counterfactual conception (especially vivid in the Sumerian King List) that there should be political unity in the land bespeak the existence of an overarching cultural sphere of interaction (Yoffee 1993a) that cannot be reduced to economics.

Order is more than a political necessity. It is the logic of a new way of thinking about society and about the cosmos, one that justifies the association of people who are not kin, especially those in the service of the inner elite, and establishes the principle of stratification and of limited access to wealth. Insofar as order itself creates a “natural” progression toward increased order, complexity, and hierarchy, especially in its high-cultural manifestations, it must exploit wealth for this self-enhancement; it cannot be generalized to everyone.

Wealth, together with its restriction to certain groups, is one of the most obvious facts of civilization. The acceptance of agreed measures of wealth and the creation of storable and to some extent convertible forms of it transform its social potential. The move toward imperishable forms is especially significant, even if fashion may bring an opposite effect by devaluing the wealth of the recent past. Wealth is displayed, and such displays require further stratification because it is obtained through the labor of others, from networks in which the negotiants are not kin, or from organizing the procurement of materials, some of them from remote regions, on a scale not feasible for kin groups alone. Wealth therefore requires new codes of communication that establish the ability to trade with foreigners and connect these distant people in a community of interests. Such activities assume a scale and importance hardly seen outside complex societies. “Interaction spheres” in the archaeological literature usually denote such elements of elite negotiation that interconnect people and regions above any commonality in ethnicity, language, or politics. Alternatively, wealth may involve “raiding” on a scale that is feasible only if highly unequal relations can be imposed on surrounding groups. In either case, civilizations contend in their search for wealth with other groups whose values and organization may be quite different from their own. In doing so, they must achieve more than a simple

material domination; in ambivalent fashion, they must moderate and enhance their comprehension of those with whom they deal, assigning negative values to the world defined as outside and thus further limiting access to their own values.

The internal elaboration of order and its exploitation of and expression through wealth involve significant legitimation. The ruling elite must return benefits to the rest and to posterity. This return is made in matters of war and defense, economic security, and legal procedures, but above all in perpetuating the cultural patterns that establish and maintain order. These patterns include sacred rites, which may sometimes be the irreducible focus of elite activities, but they also extend to the entire high-cultural complex within which the rites have meaning. Kings and rulers must show their concern with the whole population by promulgating “laws” and edicts that present such concerns and by staging events in which spectacle and ceremony define the state’s role. Through the common definition and labor of ruler and ruled, the arenas of temple, palace, city, and country in which the ruling elite act out their role, their concerns, and their privileges are constructed as interlocking representations and enactments of the cosmos and its maintenance. All these activities emphasize the dispersive ties between ruler and ruled, interweaving order, wealth, and legitimacy into the civilization’s fabric. What they do not do is enact any legitimizing requirement that the elite redistribute the wealth created by order throughout society.

State and Civilization

We have insisted on the utility of employing the term “state” in the sense it took on in the European Renaissance: as the central, governing institution and social form in a differentiated, stratified society in which rank and status are only partly determined through kinship. We use “civilization” to denote the overarching social order in which state governance exists and is legitimized. As such, civilization includes the possibility of social resistance from groups both apart from and within the elite, since all participate in a community of interests within the civilization. Cohesive tendencies, disruptive tensions, and enduring continuities were played out in different ways in our two cases.

Although we have hardly discussed nonurban folk, peasants, and the nature of dependency, or kinship and how it is affected through time (Adams 1978), we have attempted to assess both centripetal tendencies and modes of local authority through assemblies and provincial and supraprovincial groupings. If we have dwelt less on the differential access to agricultural property than on the power that accrues through control of knowledge and values, that is because there has been far more study of obvious matters of political

control and economic differentiation in ancient states than of what mattered most to those who led and motivated those states: cosmologies. It is a relief that some colleagues who study New World civilizations also have come to this conclusion (e.g., Demarest and Conrad 1992).

Mesopotamian states, which used to be considered centralized and stable or totalitarian monarchies (depending on the politics of the observer), are now regarded as inherently decomposable, incapable of instituting a region-wide form of administration. They sowed the seeds of dynastic destruction in the very act of conquest. It is suspected that ideals of Mesopotamian political unity and claims to control foreign territory are mainly attempts to justify ephemeral conquest and political rhetoric (e.g., Liverani 1993; Michalowski 1993a). The cultural ideals of a single civilization (as opposed to state), while easily incorporating diverse ethnic groups, languages, and social strata, could not be converted effectively to political ends. Separating political ideologies from cultural ones may at times seem odd to an onlooker from a large nation-state, but that seems precisely to have been the case in Mesopotamia. It would probably seem more natural to an inhabitant of pre-1870 Italy or Germany.

The Egyptian case differs from the Mesopotamian. Egyptian ideology focused on one or two centers, the administrative and religious capitals that were sometimes the same and sometimes not, and strongly on the frontier, especially to the south, which was in Egyptian terms the "front" (Posener 1965). The ultimate defining concern was with the dualities of Egypt and with what was within the Egyptian world and what was not. This interest in demarcations and boundaries that responded to the Egyptian environment was elevated into a general principle, powerfully visible in the architecture and iconography of temples (e.g., Arnold 1992:40–44; Baines 1997a; Winter 1968). Temples formed microcosms, enacting and symbolically encapsulating in nested layers a model of the order they defended and celebrated. The city around them could give that model enormous extra resonance (Kozloff, Bryan, and Berman 1992; O'Connor 1998). Each major temple, while following a similar architectural and cosmological model, was dedicated to a different group of deities, so that gods encompassed the land. Yet, just as the model of the temple dominated the diversity of gods, so the centralizing impetus dominated tendencies to regional variety (see Seidlmayer 1996 for administration, Bickel 1994 for ideas). As we have noted, Mesopotamian civilization, with its lack of sharp, permanent, internal boundaries and manifold interactions and interdependencies with the surrounding regions, was vastly influential as a totality throughout the ancient Near East, whereas Egyptian civilization, like Egyptian script and language, was far less disseminated except farther up the Nile.

The Collapse of Egyptian and Mesopotamian Civilizations

While the difference between the convergence of state and civilization in Egypt and their extreme divergence in Mesopotamia is enormous, it is the commonality of an active inner elite that defines these civilizations (perhaps all civilizations) as such. Another way of shedding light on their role is to look to periods of dissolution.

We suggest that political and economic change are not the decisive forces that determine dissolution and collapse. Here, we restrict our discussion to a single fundamental point: as we hope to show, it is the eclipse of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmologies, and especially the subscription to them by elites, that defines collapse.

If alternative value systems were present in these civilizations, they were so weak that they neither had a major effect nor are visible archaeologically. In Mesopotamia even the most radical changes, in ruling groups and in religious orientations, did not take the form of systematic challenges to the core values of venerable traditions, but instead used such traditions to cloak and to legitimize change. However, after the conquest of Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, when new rulers accepted all possible belief systems as legitimate and deprivileged the Mesopotamian tradition from its connection with government and especially the bureaucracy and those contracting with it, Mesopotamian culture became progressively attenuated. Ultimately, only a few temples maintained it, and finally none. Mesopotamian civilization thus collapsed hundreds of years after the Mesopotamian state (see Yoffee 1988b).

Some reasons for the withering of Mesopotamian high culture and decomposition of the inner elite may have had less to do with political conquest by others. As Larsen (1992) has discussed, in a number of first-millennium-BC "wisdom literature" texts (Lambert 1960), it is the very orderliness of the universe that is in jeopardy. In a world in which any action or feature of the universe can and must be interpreted for the ruling elite, especially through the skill of the divination priests, uncertainty and even nihilism now became evident (Jacobsen 1976:226–39). Although it is unclear how much these learned texts reflect public feeling, it would require undue skepticism to propose that such emotions were felt only by scribes. No breakthrough to moral systems that would replace ceremonial ones, rationality that would supplant magic, or transcendental philosophies appearing next to state religions occurred (Garelli 1975; Machinist 1986; Oppenheim 1975; Tadmor 1986). The world had changed and Mesopotamian high culture, which had endured for minimally 3,000 years, could not.

The Egyptian case offers a clear ancient outsider's perspective on what mattered to a civilization (e.g., Bowman 1996). The Macedonian and Ptolemaic dynasties (332–30 BC) were culturally alien to Egypt, and in some respects lacked cultural self-assurance. They sought such assurance principally

in the Hellenic world, but within Egypt the kings worked through the traditional elites, temples, and general cultural forms. The Greco-Roman period saw the greatest expansion of high culture in the numerous large and small temples constructed throughout Egypt and Lower Nubia (e.g., Arnold 1992), and for Ptolemaic times in widespread artistic and literary production. This cultural provincialization—since native culture was not strongly represented in the capital Alexandria, and Hellenistic culture was in second position outside it—had a partially leveling effect, because the entire native population could be set as provincials against the Greek incomers. There also was broad religious participation of a kind poorly attested from earlier times. Yet the main temples were even more elite products than their predecessors, with inscriptions carved in an arcane elaboration of the script that few could read. In relation to central patronage, it is characteristic of this development that the peak of temple construction in the south—financed by the ruler, not the local population—was around the time of the Roman conqueror Augustus (30 BC–AD 14). The Ptolemies and the Roman emperors made Greek the official language, and the Romans suppressed the traditional elite politically, but they had to use the core symbolic forms of the ancient civilization (it is said that only Cleopatra VII [51–30 BC] ever learned Egyptian, but also that she learned a host of other languages).

If we are not to follow Voltaire's Brahman interlocutor (see Müller-Wollermann 1986:1) and say that Egyptian civilization died because it had lived, it is difficult to explain its demise and inappropriate to attribute this to any single cause. So far as one can speak of demise, the notion that a civilization is an interconnected entity remains valid. While the world within the temples never accepted the Ptolemies as fully as it had accepted native kings (Quaegebeur 1989; Winter 1976), the changes imposed by the new rulers were not irreversible and are insufficient to have set the scene for dissolution. What seem more serious are the disappearance of a wealthy native elite in early Roman times, reduced integration of the temple high culture into local communities (Baines 1997a), and the difficulties of the Roman Empire in the late second and third centuries AD, which led to a worsening of general conditions (Bagnall 1993). This was when Christianity began to spread, being taken up in Egypt by both the elite and others (Frankfurter 1998). At this point, a reversal of interests is very suggestive. Although traditional Egyptian religion maintained a hold in the extreme south into the mid-sixth century, when pagan cults had already been suppressed in the empire, Christianity gained ground by accompanying a revival of the Egyptian language written in Greek letters (now known as Coptic) and was thus both a religious and a cultural rallying point for Egypt against the foreign rule that was now almost a millennium old. Thus, Egyptian civilization was long able to maintain itself in the face of foreign rule through its focus on

the high-cultural concerns of religion. It was a new religion that provided some renewal, but in the idiom of a successor civilization.

These continuities and transformations—which focus on high culture even though Christianity aimed to reach more widely than its predecessor religion—appear far more significant in the long term than the vagaries of political and economic life. Egyptian high-cultural evidence also supports this view. In the religious ferment of late antiquity, numerous Gnostic, Hermetic, and related texts were composed in Egypt (mainly in Greek). Some of them eloquently formulated the connection between the maintenance of traditional culture and of what they saw as Egypt, turning to apocalypticism in presenting what would happen when the cult ceased to be observed (Fowden 1986). These developments were influential even among elites in very remote communities, as is documented by new finds in Dakhla Oasis. Some of these ideas can be traced in Ptolemaic Egyptian texts (Derchain 1990:25–28). Here again, the same preoccupations of ancient elites are at the fore.

Civilizations of the Ancient Near East and Ancient Civilizations

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that these two civilizations, emerging at roughly the same time and with some mutual contact at crucial stages, offer no justification for any concept of a unitary “civilization of the ancient Near East” (cf. the title of Sasson 1995). The two civilizations are profoundly different in mode of emergence, shape, nature of kingship, and avenues of resistance and change. In these differences we have found certain analytical concepts useful, notably that of an “inner elite” that provides an “order” to the civilizations, exploiting wealth and aspiring to be self-legitimizing through its role as the carrier of the civilization.

Even though our approach derives from thinking about the ancient Near East, we have formulated our initial statements on this point in an abstract, quasi-axiomatic form. This is deliberate, not because we can claim to have established patterns for, or still less studied, the whole possibly relevant range of civilizations, but because the enterprise of comparison may be served by a model that can, we hope, be assessed against other material, among which early China offers an obvious possibility (e.g., Schwartz 1985:1–55). We have alluded to modern civilizations that could not be described adequately in such terms; Classical Greece is another society with a different orientation, as probably are most major empires. Yet even in such cases, the positions of elites and the role they allot to high culture and to wealth may offer important elements of comparison.

In view of the central significance we give to cosmologies, an obvious point should be made, even though its role in distinguishing our cases from others is uncertain. In civilizations with autochthonous character that

looked to no outside influence for their formation (whether such influence played a part or not), the ideologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia did not need to come to terms with a cosmology that would relativize their own presence as one society among many that could not claim global centrality. Many other states and civilizations—not just those that are often seen, following Karl Jaspers, as being on the other side of an “Axial Age” divide (e.g., Assmann 1990; Eisenstadt, ed. 1986)—are secondary in that they relate to an older civilization of the same general type and region. Yet the lesson of other examples seems to be that in this area elites and whole cultures can incorporate an overarching ideology and still have a local focus or a “galactic,” regional one; the Buddhist and Hindu polities of India and Southeast Asia studied by Tambiah (1976; see also Geertz 1980) illustrate this phenomenon (for the ancient Near East see Liverani 1990:33–78). Universalism may be valuable for aspiring world empires, but otherwise it is something states and civilizations find uncomfortable, not least, perhaps, because it sits uneasily with the high culture of a particular civilization.

The principles we have outlined are not recipes for analysis, but they do allow certain kinds of comparisons to be pursued beyond the cases we have studied. We would ask, for example, what Mayanists may think is comparable to Egypt in the realm of an encompassing royal ideology that orders the universe. In Maya civilization, despite the prominence of the role of rulers, one finds no overall political state like that of Egypt; rather, in the political dimension, the Maya city-states (large and small, hegemonic and resisting hegemony) resemble the Mesopotamian ones—independent and fated to military and other rivalry under the belief that there should be one order that binds them all.

While we conclude that Egypt and Mesopotamia differed profoundly in their political and cultural organization, we wish to reaffirm strongly the value of the act of comparison. Through comparison we see exemplified what is unique in a civilization, why what works in one state does not work in another, and what is the more general shape of a civilization. We believe that “shape” and “style,” although nebulous and hard to define, are vital to the actors, operating at deep levels and in the focused concerns of elites. We, too, apprehend them in our objects of study and wish to render them accessible. Contrasts allow such characteristics to emerge for analysis. Finding contrasts among ancient states and civilizations, therefore, is an enterprise that suggests more comparison is warranted, not less.

NOTES

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This essay is argued principally on a theoretical level. In the frequent absence of syntheses, the argument could not be supported with references without extending the bibliography beyond reasonable bounds. Citations are selective; where possible, we have chosen items that lead to additional material. Our text was composed in 1992 for the seminar at the School of American Research and revised for publication in 1993. Since then we have not extended the number of citations significantly.