

The economy in  
ancient  
mesopotamia: palace  
versus oikos essay  
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The economic systems which acted in Mesopotamia throughout its history have long been debated. Was it was a temple, palace (in this case taken to be the seat of the ruler) or oikos economy, and was it was an embedded or market economy? Such questions as to the nature of an economic model are apparent in the study of all ancient Near Eastern civilizations, but due to limitations in space this study will focus on the palaces of Mesopotamia in the third and second millenniums B. C. The answers to these questions have been made complicated by the evidence which the archaeologist, historian, anthropologist or economist have at their disposal.

The existence of palaces in Mesopotamia, at least after the middle of the third millennium, is now beyond debate<sup>1</sup>, but what part they played in the intricate working of the Mesopotamian economy is a different matter. Debate verges from a perspective of a palace-dominated society where a majority of the population were dependents of the palatial economic structure, to that where the palace was simply the largest of a number of households with independent production and consumption strategies. Does either of these scenarios constitute a palace economy in Mesopotamia?

If not, where is the line between its presence and absence drawn? There are many problems with the archaeological evidence from Mesopotamia which must be considered when taking any questions about the society into consideration. Mesopotamian archaeology has long been dominated by ideas of the urban nature of the society. It has focussed on monumental architecture such as temples and palaces, which means that much of the archaeological evidence is religious or elite in nature. Little information on

either the general urban population or rural peoples is available, resulting in a strong bias in the record.

A similar trend is apparent with regards to the textual evidence, which has come mainly from temple and palace contexts. Due to this biased record, both archaeological and textual, what we possess is not a complete reflection of the societal and economic systems of Mesopotamia. This must be kept in mind when considering any conclusions as to the nature of Mesopotamian social order, particularly when they favour the perspective of elite dominance. There are many examples of ancient societies which had active economies which were to some degree dominated by the palace.

Heltzer argues that in Ugarit the economy was almost completely controlled by the palace<sup>2</sup>. The large palatial building which was excavated at Ugarit contained hundreds of texts detailing the everyday economic activities of the crown. The texts suggest that the countryside was dominated by *gt*, which were tax collecting posts as well as administrative and redistributive centres. In Egypt it is argued by Janssen that the economy had two spheres, the lower being the subsistence sphere, or non-economically active sector of society and the second, the upper sphere, being the redistributive field dominated by the pharaoh<sup>3</sup>.

In the Egyptian system the temple was a tool in the palace's economic system, working in some areas in much the same way as the *gt* in Ugarit. Mesopotamia's economic system seems to fit well with the Egyptian and Ugaritic models, having a dominant ruler who levied taxes and practiced

wide scale redistribution, although there was a level of the population which functioned outside of the system living in a self-sufficient manner.

But Mesopotamia seems to have had another feature to its economic system; the oikos or 'household' economy, which allowed for some degree of privatisation and interplay of market forces. The complicated dialectic which can be seen between temple and palace in Egypt is also apparent in Mesopotamia; there has been a long-running debate as to whether the palace or temple was the dominant political and economic force.

As there is little evidence for the existence of palaces in early Mesopotamian history it is thought that the temples acted as the administrative centres in the Ubaid and Early Uruk, with palaces taking precedence in the Early Dynastic period, when both the king and the palace are seen in a fully developed form<sup>4</sup>. The palace at Kish from this period has a large number of rooms of varying shapes and sizes which seem to have served different functions; tools of bureaucracy such as seals and cuneiform texts were found in the palace context<sup>5</sup>.

As stated above there is substantial evidence for the existence of large and economically active palaces from the mid third millennium. While there is evidence for the palaces having been places of administration and bureaucracy there is a contentious debate as to the extent to which these palatial houses dominated the Mesopotamian economy. There seems to be textual evidence that, at least in the latter part of the third and the first part of the second millenniums, palaces owned vast amounts of land and organised large amounts of industrial activity.

They had a sizeable proportion of the population under their direct control and were responsible for maintaining them through a system of rationing. Archaeological evidence for such a system can possibly be seen in the large urban storage facilities such as those at Shuruppak which could store enough grain to feed 20, 000 people for six months<sup>6</sup>, or the vast amounts of bevel-rimmed bowls which have been found in palace and temple contexts. It is thought by many that these represent a standardised system of rationing<sup>7</sup>.

The sheer size of the Mesopotamian temples, palaces, irrigation systems and walls suggest that the ruler must have had a large amount of control over the population. A text from the reign of Sargon II details the construction of a city, stating that each region under his control was ordered to produce bricks based on a quota system<sup>8</sup>. This demonstrates that Sargon had high levels of administrative control and that he could exact tributes from his peoples when needed, so exerting a high level of economic dominance over the population.

Mieroop suggests that the economic power of the crown can be seen in the Wool Office texts from Ur<sup>9</sup>. The texts claim to have regulated huge herds of sheep and the production of cloth, for instance the texts claim that over 13, 200 weavers were employed by the state<sup>10</sup>. Further labour would have been needed to mind the flock, shear it, and partake in the other steps of cloth production. Every individual occupied in the steps of the woollen industry would have needed to be provided with rations, yet more people would have been involved in the procurement of these.

While such texts as the 'Wool Office' documents seem to suggest that the state was controlling a large industrial economy, archaeological evidence does not completely support this. While workshop areas have been found in palace contexts, they are not on a very large scale. In fact there is little evidence for any large scale industrial activity on any of the excavated Mesopotamian sites<sup>11</sup>. It is however possible that industrial activity was taking place in rural areas and this is an example of the archaeological bias.

If the 'Wool Office' texts can be relied upon as realistic references to the extent to which the palace was undertaking agricultural activities and production, then they seem to show that the palace was an active economic machine with large amounts of dependents. One of the main counter arguments to the idea of a palace dominated Mesopotamian economy is that there was a social system in Mesopotamia in which the 'household' was the basic economic unit; the *oikos* economic system.

Diakonoff was one of the first proponents of the *oikos* system, where households, possibly based on a system of kin-ties practiced independent production and consumption<sup>12</sup>. In this case the Mesopotamian palace or temple were simply large and powerful *oikoi*. Such an economic system allows for privatisation which it seems there is evidence for in cuneiform texts. Private enterprise can be seen in the Code of Hammurabi, a palace text, which sets out regulations for the amount to be paid for services rendered by craftsmen. <sup>13</sup> This suggests that the craftsmen were independent and not owned by a palace.

Such activities as monetization, the private sale and purchase of land, investments and loans as well as long-distance trade also seem to be represented<sup>14</sup>. Archaeologically there also seems to be evidence for production on a small, household-unit scale. Lamberg-Karlovsky argues that in almost all sites with large areas of horizontal exposure there is evidence, in domestic contexts, for production zones where the manufacturing of ceramics, stone and metallurgy were taking place<sup>15</sup>. A house in level 17B of Susa had the entire range of administrative apparatus, suggesting that the household was involved in complicated economic transactions<sup>16</sup>.

Frangipane further argues that the distinct absence of large communal storage areas in early Mesopotamian contexts suggest the existence of self-sustaining independent units with private storage areas<sup>17</sup>. It was from these units that the palace developed, slowly centralising Mesopotamian life, as one household formed a hegemony over the others, but the oikos foundations while weakened were not lost. There has been some disagreement with the dismissal of the palace's role in the oikos system theory.

Yoffee argues that the semantics of the word for palace show that it was thought of in terms of an economic system rather than simply a palatial building<sup>18</sup>. The Sumerian word for palace, ekallum, refers not to the palace building itself but to the administrative institutions which the palace embodied; its activities left little room for economic contributions from independent persons. Yoffee also contends that many of the texts which have been seen as records of private transactions, such as those from the Old Babylonian period, are actually palace records.

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The individuals detailed in them undertaking economic activities are actually in the service of the palace<sup>19</sup>, therefore there is really very limited reference to private fiscal actions. Renger also firmly argues against the idea of private 'multi-national' family firms involved in long-distance trade and industry for monetary benefits. He argues that the merchants which are mentioned in texts were bound up with the royal estates, it was only the palaces which had the ability to maximise production for surplus and so undertake other economic activities like long-distance trading<sup>20</sup>.

For instance, the case of the merchant Ur-e-e is often quoted as evidence for the existence of privatised firms but Renger argues that Ur-e-e was the head of a household associated with that of the palace; his actions were under the palaces supervision and for the benefit of the ruler<sup>21</sup>. The presence or absence of a dominating palace economy has implications for whether there was a market system in action in Mesopotamia<sup>22</sup>. If production and surplus was mainly in the hands of the palace and there was little or no private ownership then an active market economy would be difficult.

If on the other hand the Mesopotamian economy was characterised by the existence of an interlinking 'household' system then a market economy would be possible. It does seem that there was some kind of self-regulating system relying on supply and demand in Mesopotamia, for example there is evidence for loans and investment based on a system of interest, and money usage, attested to in land sale documents<sup>23</sup>. Yet, it does not seem that this had pervaded the entire society.



Much of the Mesopotamian population was under the care of the palace as dependents, or were self-sufficient independents. It was a small part of the population which did partake in an active market system. This study has only brushed the surface of what is a complicated mess of contradicting interpretations of evidence. It seems that modern ideas of economic systems may not be totally applicable to the past but it is likewise equally erroneous to dismiss past economies as simplistic, as the palatial model does.

It seems evident that Mesopotamia had a well developed economic hierarchy in place, with both the palace and oikos playing a part. Yet, it seems that popular thinking has tended toward reducing the palaces role in the economy to a minimal, one which is not supported by the available data. Possibly this will change as our record becomes more complete by future archaeology, but until this happens we must be wary of the dangers of over interpretation and extrapolation.