

THE ORIGIN OF THE TRIBE AND OF 'INDUSTRIAL' AGROPASTORALISM IN SYRO-MESOPOTAMIA

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI¹

BY THE 19th century BCE, most of Syro-Mesopotamia had come under the political control of dynasties whose rulers, as well as many of their subjects, had common onomastics and presumably a common ethnic origin. The people behind this movement are known to us as 'Amorites,' an English gentile derived from the Hebrew version of the original name *Amurru*.² The spread of Amorite presence marked a significant break between the third and the second millennium BCE and has been explained in the literature as the result of demographic pressure originating in the Syrian steppe. The Amorites are universally understood as a population in one state or another of nomadism, who came as invaders from the steppe into the fertile valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris to the north and the east, and of the Orontes to the west. It is part of the generally accepted scenario that the Amorites were a very distinct group, linguistically, ethnically and socially, from the populations of the river valleys. It is further the *communis opinio* that this difference was rooted in their historically having hailed from an equally distinct geographical region, the steppe if not the desert. In other words, they were nomads at the origin, and they went through a progressive series of developmental stages that led eventually to their complete sedentarization. In a series of publications I have

¹ In line with the central topic of this volume, I will present my thesis from the perspective of the origin and development of nomadism in an essay format, without entering into details or providing documentation and without a proper confrontation with the literature. For the evidence that underlies my thesis please see my earlier publications listed in the references (Buccellati 1977b, 1981, 1988, 1990d, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2004; Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1967, 1986). In this chapter, I will only occasionally refer to these titles.

² The Sumerian equivalent is MAR.TU (Wilcke 1969).

presented an alternative interpretation of the data, from the point of view of history, philology, archaeology and geography. My interpretation revolves around seven major points.

First, the Amorites were originally not nomads but peasants of the long river corridor known today as the *zôr*, the Syrian middle Euphrates from the confluence of the Balikh to a point south of the confluence of the Khabur, where the valley floor becomes extremely narrow and where the current border between Syria and Iraq is situated. This area corresponded to the kingdom of Mari, the only city to control the entire river corridor. Through the early part of the third millennium BCE these peasants had sufficient land for farming and herding within the river valley itself. During that period the steppe remained largely uninhabited.

Second, as the peasant population increased, the limitation of the *zôr* became a major obstacle to any further development. Geography played a significant role: the valley floor is set in a rather deep and narrow canyon that makes it impossible for irrigation to reach the plateau above it, while rainfall is so limited as to render any type of cultivation impossible. As a result of demographic pressure, the peasants took to the steppe, discovering its suitability as a vast rangeland for their donkeys, sheep and goats. Such a 'domestication of the steppe,' as I have called it, began in the first half of the third millennium BCE and reached a level of systemic organization around the middle of the third millennium BCE.³ In other words, occasional and local exploitation of the steppe would certainly date to earlier periods, while the systematic and macroregional scope that characterizes the agropastoralist system, the domestication of the steppe as a region, would be coterminous with the later expansion of the urban state. This was in turn influenced by the early experience in the steppe of an important segment of the social group.

Third, in the process the peasants developed the potential for an almost total autonomy from the control of the state and its central institutions. At first, this was primarily economic autonomy: the peasants could remain for indefinite periods in the steppe, where the brackish water of the shallow water table, adequate for the animals if not for humans, could easily be tapped through a

³The earliest systematic body of evidence pertaining to the Amorites dates to the Ur III period in the last century of the third millennium BCE (according to the middle chronology). Apart from significant, if scattered, attestations in the centuries immediately preceding, several considerations point to an earlier presence of the Amorites. The Ur III evidence comes from southern Mesopotamia, a peripheral area from the point of view of the Amorites, which they must have reached in the later phase of their expansion. Their dialect, in my interpretation, is an archaic form of Akkadian and as such must go back to the period before Akkadian became well established.

network of wells that the peasants learned to dig. A few springs provided enough drinking water for the small human groups of shepherds that accompanied the animals. By remaining with their flocks in the steppe, these groups could easily avoid the taxation that the central urban government was intent on imposing.

Fourth, what followed was a growing military and political independence. Besides taxation, the peasants could avoid conscription as well, all of which is amply attested in the texts of the royal administration of Mari. As they had been trained as soldiers, they would retain these skills and use them for their own needs. This was all the more feasible as the formal urban army of the central government was quite unprepared for the steppe. It is not attested that it ever ventured there, all the military events entailing a confrontation between the regular army and the Amorites taking place in the valley floor.

Fifth, instead of the sedentarization of a nomadic group, we must read these events as a process of nomadization of peasants. Clearly, this nomadization took place under special circumstances: the new nomadic lifestyle developed while its carriers retained strong ties to the 'homeland,' the valley floor, where families and properties were located.⁴ Just as important, the *raison d'être* for the whole process was the expansion of economic opportunities, and these could only be realized if the interaction with the cities remained in force. As a result their nomadization could never be complete.

Sixth, eventually the Amorites swelled back toward the river valleys as invaders from the outside. This is the point where my reconstruction rejoins the traditional view of things: there was indeed an Amorite conquest of the entire arc of urban Syro-Mesopotamia, so that by about 1800 BCE the whole area had come under the control of what are known as 'Amorite dynasties.' The difference is that, in my view, the Amorites are returning to what had always been their original homeland rather than conquering it as total outsiders.

Seventh, linguistically the Amorites remained clearly distinct from the other Semitic populations of Syro-Mesopotamia, and this has universally been considered as reflecting their presumably distinctive geographical origins. In my view the difference can more easily be explained as reflecting a difference in socio-economic background: just as the Amorites are in effect Akkadian peasants, so Amorite is the rural version of the same urban language spoken by the Akkadians. As expected, it retains archaic features that were lost in Akkadian under the influence of Sumerian, a language with which the Amorites had no reason to come in close contact.

⁴A qualification of nomadism and mobility is the central theme of this volume, and it is not my purpose here to contribute to the pertinent theoretical discussion. See Porter 2000 for a lucid exposition of the basic principles, and the discussions in the literature, as they affect the Amorites.

Against this background I will develop two particular points that I consider of interest for the topic of this volume because they offer a paradigm that is quite at variance with other current models. The first point is the origin of the tribe seen as a political counterpart to the city-state, and the second is the concomitant development of what I would like to call ‘industrial nomadism.’ First, however, I will briefly review some salient aspects of urban political institutions against the backdrop of which the remainder of this chapter can best be understood.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE URBAN REVOLUTION

The ‘urban revolution’ had taken place about a millennium before the events that I propose to consider here. It was the crystallization of a series of phenomena that we like to view today in the light of a process of increased complexity. Long ago I argued that this process is coterminous with the establishment of the state (Buccellati 1977a). In other words, the city is radically different from the noncity (the earlier settlements and their communities) because of its sociopolitical organization. Power was held through vastly different mechanisms and the perception of power so articulated impacted deeply on the worldview of the people who supported it. I will summarize my argument under two headings: functionalization and fragmentation.

First, *functionalization*: the archaeological evidence that signals great changes at the turn of the third millennium BCE consists of three classical phenomena: the vastly expanded size of settlements, the appearance of monumental architecture and the introduction of writing. But how did the transformation that we can so clearly read from what we retrieve in the ground impact the mental template of the people that made it possible? What was the perceptual response of the people affected? Consider the following, for each of the three phenomena just mentioned.

Human groups expanded in size beyond the limits that would make face-to-face association possible, typically placed at 3000 to 5000 individuals. Thus, a new sense of community developed, one based not on personal acquaintance but on territorial solidarity. An individual would identify with another because of assumed shared interests, even if the two individuals had no previous personal knowledge of each other, and this sharing rested on the physical contiguity within the boundaries of the same residential settlement. The tensional factor that made this linkage possible, and desirable, was the awareness that the ‘other,’ if unknown at the personal level, was known on the level of functionality: if one needed the services of a carpenter, it mattered little whether he was already known as a person or not (Buccellati 2005). Functionality was a new overriding bond, and its efficiency was based on the notion that one would

quickly come to expect the availability of, for example, a carpenter, whoever he may be. In this regard the perceptual response to increased community density is the awareness that one can rely on somebody filling any given slot that might be required to achieve a certain end.

The construction of massive new structures entailed a leadership that could identify and, if need be, explain what the intended final result was. It also, of course, entailed the control of financial means that could sustain the operation over protracted periods of time when the end was not in sight. It required, in other words, political will and economic resources. The success of the operation (for instance when a city wall was eventually closed, or a single roof would eventually cover a sprawling building) helped to propel the person who had conceived it onto a pedestal that set him apart from those whose communal effort had in fact made it possible. The single individuals within this anonymous mass would, again, recognize themselves as components of a mechanism that in fact functioned and produced the intended results. Coercion would go hand in hand with a sense of communal, if impersonal, accomplishment.

Writing would codify and project onto an impersonal carrier, a clay tablet, the web of relationships that held this human mass together. The written document is the outward, extrasomatic embodiment of an abstract image that does not as such occur in reality. The subdivision of the human mass into crews, their work assignments for disparate tasks, and the coordination of compensation over long periods of time are nowhere found together in reality. They are found together only as a mental template that acquires a physical embodiment in the written lists. The functionality of the interrelationships is made all the more apparent by their representation as graphic slots in a matrix.

This progressive functionalization of human relationships goes hand in hand with the second major point that I want to make here, which I have called *fragmentation*. There is, in the process of functionalization, an intellectual dimension that comes to the fore, especially in writing, but that is in effect present throughout. Things that in the reality of the physical world are noncontiguous, whether in space or in time, are made contiguous within the framework of a single overarching vision. The seed is seen as the plant, the mud as the brick, the wall as the structure, and so on. Single things that, in their singularity, do not add up to any larger thing are seen instead as potentially constitutive of a meaningful and efficient whole. They are seen as fragments of a larger, as yet unrealized, entity. The emphasis here is on 'seeing': the potential for cohesion among the fragments is not imposed; it is discovered. Hence it is that the fragmentation about which I speak has a twofold dimension. On the one hand, noncontiguous elements are identified as potentially contiguous; and, on the other, mechanisms for bringing about their latent contiguity are set in motion. The perceptual impact of fragmentation is that of widening the hiatus

between humans and nature, which had begun the moment the simplest tool was created. When *homo faber* becomes *homo civis*, direct knowledge of nature becomes less important as one learns to rely more and more on an ever greater array of individuals who identify what are, in nature, but fragments and know how to reconstitute their wholeness for the benefit of the community. But the more active the control of fragmentation on the part of some individuals, the tighter their grip on the process that extends their benefit to the other members of the community. The cost of solidarity is the surrender of individual control.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL HORIZON: THE STEPPE AS A PERCEPTUAL MACROREGION

For a proper understanding of the argument that I want to develop with regard to the tribe and the industrial nature of its economy, I must also present some considerations about the landscape and, more specifically, about its perceptual impact as we can presuppose it. My central point is that the geographical horizon of the Amorites, as they were ‘conquering’ the steppe, came to encompass the landscape not as a marginal area but as an organically perceived macroregion. The landscape is highly differentiated within itself, characterized by prominent mountain ranges, by springs and oases in the piedmont area, by *wadis* punctuated by trees, and, as the single human event that did impact the landscape, by wells. It is, I submit, a major contribution of the Amorites to have introduced this new element of perceptual geography in Syro-Mesopotamia, which impacted not only their own historical development but eventually that of the urban-based states as well.⁵ For it is at Mari that the first proper Mesopotamian macroregional urban state came into being. It is characterized by the vast heterogeneous territory that the state controlled only vicariously, as it were, through the Amorites in their dual role as, on the one hand, more or less nominal subjects of the king and, on the other, as those who had discovered the steppe as a region and de facto controlled it. This is reflected in the royal title of ‘king of Mari and *Khana*,’ where the tribe gives its name to the macroregion. It is the perception of a macroregion that served eventually as the springboard for the dynamics of political development in Mesopotamia from the second millennium BCE onward.

⁵ ‘Perceptual geography’ is a concept that I have briefly discussed elsewhere (Buccellati 1990b). It refers to the way in which geographical phenomena acquire a physiognomy of their own, which one might call *-emic*, in the mind of the individuals who confront them, potentially different from their objectively measurable, *-etic* dimensions. Thus a given feature in the landscape may be perceived by some as a ‘mountain’ even if the elevation is objectively minimal.

The notion of a ‘macro-region’ is important and needs some clarification (Buccellati 1996c). In contrast with it, the landscape of a territorial state established around a city, specifically a city-state, is univocal in the sense that it is homogeneous in terms of geographical features and is dominated by the built environment of a single structural complex: the city with its ziggurat and city walls. It is also perceptually present as a whole to all its inhabitants, since each individual can easily walk across the whole of the urban center and its hinterland while having the ziggurat visible from most points within the territory. Not so with the landscape of the steppe. It is too vast to be viewed as a whole from any given point of view, and it is too differentiated internally to be comprehended univocally. The concept of contiguity is useful in this respect. The spaces within a city-state are all perceived as contiguous because they can be so viewed physically through a minimum of dislocation and because they are uniform. Even a vast space, such as the river valley dominated by Mari, can fit this description because its geographical features remain the same from one end to the other of the long trough. But one cannot perceive of the steppe as contiguous in the same vein, not only on account of its much greater extension but also on account of its greater internal differentiation. That it could nevertheless be so perceived was the accomplishment of the Amorites.⁶ They unified in their perception a landscape that the city only sensed as a world beyond. It was through them that the steppe could become an organic whole because of their intimate knowledge of its diverse features. The term *macroregion* refers to just such an organic, unified perception.

It is significant in this respect that there is in Amorite, as there is in today’s Syrian Arabic, a proper name for the steppe. In fact, there are two names: *yamina*, for the steppe to the right side of the Euphrates; and *sam’al* for the left side (Buccellati 1990c; the terms are otherwise understood as referring to south and north, respectively). The two areas are known today as *shamia* and *jazira*.⁷

⁶This bracketing of noncontiguous perceptions I have defined as “meta-perception” (Buccellati 2005). In the case presented here it refers to the vast and internally differentiated expanse of the steppe ‘perceived’ as a single entity, even though its constituting elements cannot be visually grasped at once as a single unit. The same concept applies to time, as well as space. For instance, the spring season is perceived, or ‘meta-perceived,’ as a season only because of the juxtaposition that humans can make with the other seasons, which are not at any given time copresent with spring. The concept, if not the term, is a central theme of Porter (2000:32–45, 216), who speaks of the “transcendence of space.”

⁷I have argued that the terms “sons of . . . (*banū* in Amorite, *mārū* in Akkadian) . . . the right (*yamina*)” or “. . . the left (*sham’al*)” steppe are not to be viewed as tribal names but as common nouns equivalent to the English *nomads* or to the Akkadian *mārū ugāarim*, meaning peasants or literally “sons of the irrigation district” (Buccellati 1990c).

This split into two steppes is determined by the Euphrates, perceived not only as a major feature of physical geography, which hinders the movement of the large herds from one side to the other, but also as the locus where the urban world resides, with all of its state controls. In contrast, the proper names for the right and the left steppe are not found in the Sumero-Babylonian south, where even the common noun *ṣērum* has a much more limited use and a more restricted semantic range than in texts relating to Syria.

The territory is seemingly limitless, yet it can be perceived as a whole because of its unhindered openness. Movement along given paths, with stops at fixed and well-known points (especially wells and oases), gives a physiognomy to the landscape that can be grasped as a single entity in spite of its vastness. It can safely be assumed that the peasants in the southern agrarian plains would have hardly any personal knowledge of urban landscapes other than their own. Most of the peasants we are here considering, instead, would travel long distances and subsume the wide expanse of the steppe within a single overarching perception of its geographical features and resource potential. While no single individual ever had the whole territory immediately within his or her field of vision at any given moment (the way this could happen in a southern city where the ziggurat provided a point of reference visible from most places within the urban territory), people had a relational perception in that they had seen most of it with their own eyes. Such a perception of the steppe was crucial for the impact it had in the political sphere. Control of the steppe's resources rested on the unified perception of its organic quality as a macroregion, and in turn this called for the establishment of new political structures that could match the macroregional challenge. The answer was the tribe.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE SOCIOPOLITICAL PROCESS: THE ORIGIN OF THE TRIBE

It is against the backdrop of the above phenomena that we can appreciate the broader institutional significance of the Amorite movements. Just as the 'urban revolution' coincided with the origin of the state, so the 'steppe revolution' coincided, in my view, with the origin of the tribe. And accordingly, this explains how the tribe emerged as a political institution alternative to the territorial state. The very brief outline above provides the context within which the first proposal, concerning the origin of the tribe, makes sense. The progressive distancing from the urban environment induced an effective state of autonomy from the coercive institutions represented by the central urban government. In the steppe the shepherds could avoid primarily taxation and conscription, yet there were two major ties that remained in effect and kept them bound to their urban origins.

First, they had personal interests they could not possibly jettison, from cultivated land to which they held rights to the family network that retained an essentially agrarian dimension. Second, and more important if less immediately apparent, there was a tensional factor that conditioned their incipient nomadization, namely their factual dependence on the institutional complex found in the city. A significant point to be stressed in this connection is that the villages as they existed in the orbit of the city were by no means 'a-urban.' They were instead fully immersed in urban reality as an institutional complex, however different they may have looked in terms of the built environment in which they lived. Their real estate was secured by deeds sanctioned by the central government; the effective use of resources, from availability of traded goods to control of the river waters by means of canals, was regulated by the state; conflict resolution was ultimately attributed to royal judgment; access to a reality beyond the tangible world, in the form of both communal cultic events and private apotropaic rituals, was in the hands of temple institutions that were essentially urban; and even such a mundane fact as communicating with distant correspondents was in the hands of a few specialized scribes. I have defined this situation as 'para-urban' (Buccellati 1996c). Quite unlike prehistoric settlements, the historical village could not exist apart from its urban context.

As these para-urban peasants began to move away from the villages, the immediacy of the wider urban context was threatened, and the fragility of their situation emerged. How could these para-urban peasants protect property in the steppe? How could they co-ordinate access to resources such as specific pasture grounds or springs and oases? How could they adjudicate conflicts without courts and judges? How could they relate to the divine world without access to either the religious technicians who could perform omens or the organized cultic events unfolding in the temple? How could they send written messages if no scribe was available? These were institutions they had come to depend on but would have had to forgo if wholly isolated in the steppe. As long as their absence from the village was temporary, the problem was all but nonexistent. As nomadization began to develop as a temptingly permanent mode of life, however, its consequences were felt at an ever deeper level. To put it differently, the new situation was undermining the functionalization that the urban revolution had ushered in. In that context it served as the mechanism that made it possible for urban society to retain its cohesiveness and efficiency in spite of its demographic growth. If the pendulum would now swing away from this context, and encourage the development of a properly nonurban, rather than para-urban, society, how could the aggregative power of the new human group be secured? How could group solidarity be maintained beyond the level of face-to-face association, but without the scaffolding of the territorial contiguity that was at the basis of the urban revolution?

The answer, in my view, was the establishment of the tribe. The city had shown that some form of functionalization was necessary if large-scale aggregation was to be achieved and maintained over time. People had come to identify themselves as components of an organism higher than their personal awareness of each other might allow. Each recognized another member of the group not necessarily because of personal acquaintance but because a particular ‘other’ member would fit a particular functional slot, understood to be of service to the community as a whole. The perceptual link that remained was that of territorial contiguity: all members of the community lived within a single city, whose physical integrity was signaled, among other things, by its city walls or in its immediate hinterland so that each member of the group had a direct perceptual link with the central city. The territory was a perceptual reality that helped the individuals to coalesce into a unified whole.

The tribe emerged as an alternative, in some ways mirroring the city-state, or modeled on it, but in other ways greatly at variance with it.⁸ It was modeled on the city-state in that it aimed at serving the same basic needs of political aggregation beyond the level of face-to-face association. But it replaced the perceptual basis of aggregation from territorial contiguity to institutionalized interpersonal relationships. The aspect of mobility, or nomadism, was secondary in this respect on two grounds. First, it was not pervasive, because many members of the groups remained *de facto* sedentary. Second, it was not permanent, because those who followed the herds in the steppe would retain their roots in the settled areas, to which they would return on a regular basis. Even if partial and occasional, the dislocation of a sizable portion of the group in the steppe did propose an alternative apprehension of what could serve to assure group solidarity. Thus kinship, rather than territorial contiguity, became the bond: a kinship that was not necessarily biological but could be ascribed through social mechanisms.

The sources document an interesting phenomenon that has been much discussed in the literature and that, I believe, can best be interpreted in the light of what I have just said about the origin of the tribe, namely the appearance of people identified as *ba-pí-ru* in the cuneiform sources. The word has been read in a variety of ways and has been related to the Hebrew term *‘ibrîm*, from which the very English term *Hebrew* derives. I have proposed to read the Akkadian term as *hābirū*, standing for the Amorite *‘ābirū*, meaning “those who cross over to the clan” (Buccellati 1990b, 1995). I will briefly present both the linguistic and the historical sides of this argument, because it ties in with the larger issue of the origin of the tribe. Linguistically, I view the term as a participle from the same (Amorite) root *‘br*, from which *‘ibrum* (*hibrum* in

⁸ In this sense, viewed as a state, an Amorite tribe is quite different from the prehistoric ‘tribal entities’ (Bar-Yosef and Bar-Yosef Mayer 2002:360–361).

Akkadian) derives; *‘ibrum* is the word for ‘clan,’ and it can be understood as a noun of action (much like *ilkum*, literally ‘the going,’ comes to mean ‘service’). It can therefore be understood as ‘the ingathering,’ from which the specialized lexical meaning ‘the clan’ would have developed. The participle *‘ābirum* would then mean ‘the one who ingathers.’ Given the special lexicalized meaning of *‘ibrum* as ‘clan,’ we can then understand *‘ābirum* as ‘the one who joins the clan.’ The Hebrew correlate *‘ibrî* would retain an alternative adjectival formation: instead of a participle, it would be (in its original formation) a gentilic derived from the same word, *‘ibrum* and would have the slightly different meaning of ‘the one who belongs to the clan,’ ‘the clansman.’

In my view the term refers, in its Akkadian and Amorite contexts, to those individuals who are outside the original family nexus of the village but who nevertheless aim to join the tribe, which is perceived as a gathering place alternative to the territorial state to which otherwise those individuals would belong. They are, as it were, people in transition between two states, territorial and tribal, taking advantage of the de facto interstices that exist between the two institutions. To this extent they are displaced persons in the process of being assimilated into an alternative, and still rather fluid, sociopolitical institution. This fits quite well with all the references in the texts to the *ba-pí-ru*, in the second millennium BCE, not only in the early part of that period, at the time of the Amorites, but also in the latter part, the so-called Amarna period. The Hebrew usage fits in as well, though semantically the term stresses the result, rather than the starting point, of the process. This is quite consonant with the pertinent historical moment.

In terms of our current interests, the phenomenon of the *‘ābirū*, as I understand them, is significant in that it highlights the dynamic pull of the new institution, the tribe. It is quite frankly an escape, an aspect that is presented in particularly vivid terms in the so-called Amarna letters but an escape that has a positive destination. While the motivation would have been in most cases economical, we may also assume a sociopolitical and even a psychological dimension. The tribe embodied a certain nomadic ideal, which is even romanticized in Akkadian literary texts from Gilgamesh to the so-called ‘Theodicy.’ The escape to the tribe would have appeared to some as a way of eluding not only taxation and conscription but also the deeper and in some ways dehumanizing effects of the urban revolution, the urban functionalization of human beings, and the fragmentation of the relationship with nature. The institutional dimension of this process lies in its serving as a mechanism for the effective ascription of outsiders into the new sociopolitical aggregate. It is interesting that no such mechanism is found for the older state model, that of the city-state, where presumably a simple transference of residence would have been sufficient to qualify a person as a member of the new community. In the tribal state, on the other hand, what was expected was not just immigration but true ‘naturalization.’

THE CONCOMITANT ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: THE NATURE OF 'INDUSTRIAL' NOMADISM

The notion of 'industrialization' within such a temporally remote context as that of the third millennium BCE makes sense if we look at it from the point of view of the fragmentation briefly described above (Buccellati 1990b:98). In this light, industrialization is the process whereby the moments of a production sequence are perceived as discrete segments, often at considerable remove one from the other. The urban users of a bronze object are not necessarily aware, much less do they individually control, the long chain of events that has led to the manufacturing of the object. They may know the smith who fashioned it but hardly ever the tradesman who brought the ingots, the craftsman who smelted the component metals, or the miners who extracted the ore. It is only the very few who are aware of the whole sequence who can in fact control it. The impact on perception was enormous. Think of another even more ancient case, the introduction of agriculture. To understand the relationship between the seed and the plant entails precisely such an understanding of, and control over, a fragmented chain of events. It was as if human perception could collapse in one single perceptual moment two very distinct segments that are not in and of themselves perceptually contiguous, temporally (seed and plant) or spatially (ore and object). There is, as it were, an artificial perception (or 'metaperception'), which suspends the rules of natural perception by going beyond them: humans can now bracket in their abstract vision what is not bracketed in their concrete apprehension of things.

The economic impact was equally momentous. It was for the first time that one could give a numeric value to aspects of the human world that previously did not seem to have one. The seed was worth more than what would normally be associated with its immediate use. The seed was now worth the plant that would eventually sprout from it. Thus it was that long-distance trade developed not only for finished products, or for materials in which one could easily see the finished product, such as an obsidian core, but for materials such as raw metals, the potential of which could only be fully realized through a complex series of intermediate steps. And obviously those who could control these intermediate steps would stand to reap benefits incommensurate with the value that one could attribute to each intermediate step by itself.

How does this pertain to our topic? The shepherds who took to the steppe ended up controlling precisely such a chain of discontinuous segments in the utilization of their herds. And they could do so without the interference of third parties, such as merchants, or of the state. The interference of third parties would have come from individuals who, as in the case of the metal trade, would have identified points of origin and organized the transshipment

and partial transformation of the desired goods. The Amorites controlled the entire chain, from the breeding and the caring of the animals to the shearing and the supply of dairy products. In fact, they were able to extend, in the process, their mercantile role to the only other critical good found in the steppe, namely salt.⁹ The ‘Amorite salt,’ as it is called in the sources, was the major source of this new commodity so critical for the new urban economy for its use not so much as a dietary supplement but rather as the main preservative of perishable foodstuffs.

The interference of the state had typically taken the form of taxation. This was a way to draw an income from the intermediate steps by assessing a value on the finished product. Hence it is that the pertinent Mesopotamian texts speak at great length of the concern of the state to control the time of shearing, because that was when the finished product, the wool, took concrete shape. But the state had no control over, had in fact no inkling of, the steps that preceded the shearing. This involved a knowledge of the steppe territory, the development of a network of wells, the care for the animals over long periods in these areas of otherwise difficult access. The very remoteness of the territory allowed the shepherds to eschew such interference to the extent that they could avoid returning to the urbanized area of the river valleys.

This vast and autonomous Amorite trading system is what I call ‘industrial nomadism.’ It was born in the settled areas, and it irresistibly gravitated toward them. It could never have entered in the mind of these shepherds to cut off the ties with their own markets. Quite the contrary, they nurtured the market that they had in fact created and for which they had all interest in maintaining, since they were the only ones who could effectively run it. When these urban markets failed, with the urban demise of the Middle Euphrates (after the collapse of Mari and Terqa), they still did not cut their ties with the cities. Rather, they re-oriented their aims to the west, remaining inescapably linked with the urban dimension. The tribal structure that had developed in the process served as the institutional backbone that kept the system going for centuries, throughout the second millennium BCE. Outsiders, the merchants and the state, were effectively excluded as the tribal organization allowed the Amorites to serve as their own merchants and their own state. The new functionalization provided by the tribe consisted precisely in providing the scaffolding for the ever greater expansion of the economic interests of the group and, in effect, for its ever stronger affirmation of political autonomy as well.

⁹ Truffles are another product indigenous to the steppe, as prized today as in antiquity but obviously not as critical for the urban economy as salt or the produce of the herds.

THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE: THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Of central interest to the issue of Syro-Mesopotamian nomadism and mobility is the question of the archaeological evidence, by which one understands in a general sense the material culture emerging from the ground. The evidence on which I have relied so far comes almost entirely from written documents, and although it is true that these themselves have come from the ground, except for the biblical references to the *ibrîm*, they are not typically considered part of the material culture or the archaeological record.¹⁰ We may then ask the question whether, given that we know the actual situation relatively well from the written sources, we can use this as a privileged situation to identify correlative elements in the material culture that can explicitly be linked with the nomadic culture of the Amorites? There are three areas at which to look. The first is the steppe itself, where we might seek evidence of nomadic presence. The second is the reflection of a possible Amorite influence in the material culture of the urban populations. The third is the impact of the geographical environment and the ways in which it conditions today the lifeways of analogous human groups.

The first line of research has proven singularly sterile. We still do not have sites in the steppe that may be called Amorite, not by the numerous wells that dot the steppe, not in the oases where springs provide fresh water, not in the areas of the salt playas of Bouara, Palmyra or the Jabbul. It is interesting that there are no Amorite cities similar to the Aramean cities from the first millennium BCE. One reason behind the research project that centered on my excavations at Terqa was precisely to explore the possibility that this might prove to be some sort of an Amorite border town between Mari and the Amorites. Could there be evidence of a distinctive population that exhibited different traits from those known to us from the excavations at Mari? Nothing in the results could have been farther from this initial hypothesis. In fact, it was especially the evidence from Galvin's (1981) analysis of our archaeozoological remains that started me on a different track, as this suggested that the treatment of the herds was not in keeping with what one would expect if the herders had been large-scale pastoralists originating in the steppe (Zeder 1995). The most probable candidate for the status as an Amorite city is Palmyra, where there may be evidence of an urban settlement as early as the first part of the second millennium BCE (al-Maqdissi 2000) and which would indeed appear to have been structurally quite different from the other urban settlements of Syro-Mesopotamia. An interesting new development is the discovery of a whole new type of evidence, that from petroglyphs in the

¹⁰ Although I disagree with this understanding of the nature of the archaeological record, I retain it here as a premise for my considerations about the relevance of the record for the Amorite question, on account of its being the generally held opinion.

Hemma region (Van Berg et al. 2003). There is no indication that they may be specifically Amorite, and in fact even the date is uncertain, but it is plausible that these may be the work of shepherds who were familiar with the general themes and motifs of the urban world. If so, the petroglyphs would offer a resonance of the iconography that we otherwise know only from the high achievements of the urban workshops. On the other hand, one cannot simply link the Amorites with monuments isolated in the steppe only on account of their location. Thus the stelae of Jebel el-Beida are more likely to be associated with a political program of the Hurrian dynasties of piedmont cities like Urkesh than with the steppe pastoralists (Dolce 1986).

The second line of research has also limited success, as the interpretations proposed, however plausible, cannot be argued on archaeological evidence alone. Apart from references in the texts to artifacts qualified as ‘Amorite,’ we have no artifacts in the archaeological record from the pertinent urban settlements that can be interpreted as coming from nomadic populations at home in the steppe, nor is there much in the same record that could be associated with a nomadic origin were it not for what we otherwise know about the broader situation from contemporary textual evidence. Let us consider briefly three specific cases. The diffusion of the iconography of the god Amurru, who became very popular in the early second millennium BCE and who on the face of it would appear to be the eponymous tutelary deity of the Amorites, does not reflect an Amorite religious tradition at all but is rather the projection of the urban perception of their social reality (Kupper 1961). The construction of an ‘Amorite wall’ (BĀD MAR.TU; Buccellati 1966:327–328) by King Shulgi toward the end of the third millennium BCE attests to an awareness of threat translated into a defensive measure important enough to be the argument of a year name. If there indeed was a wall running along a defensible border, one might expect to find a trace of it in the ground, but none has been found so far. But if it was a string of fortresses, or even a single fortress, strategically placed to confront the incomers, then any archaeological trace of it would be hardly distinguishable from that of other small settlements. The most successful effort at connecting archaeological data from the settled areas to the pastoralists is the one undertaken by Porter (2000, 2002), who attributes to them the building of mortuary monuments serving as markers of tribal territory and social identity. Her insightful interpretation builds on a careful analysis of archaeological data, though it still remains tied to textual information for the finer interpretive points. It is interesting, in this respect, how another segment of the written tradition suggests that the Ur III Sumerian perception of the Amorites was at odds with the self-perception by the Amorites themselves as interpreted by Porter, since a Sumerian cliché about the Amorites is that “on the day of their death they are not buried” (Buccellati 1966:331).

The third line, centering on geography and ethno-archaeology, is productive but limited in its final import. A careful analysis of the landscape shows differences that are not immediately noticeable on maps. This is what I have called “perceptual geography” (Buccellati 1990b), a study of how the perception of the geographical features, assumed to have been the same in ancient times, may legitimately be projected in the past and throw light on the reaction of the ancients to their environment. In our case it is especially the nature of the valley trough, for which the modern perception has a name, *zôr*, that is matched, I have suggested, by the ancient *ab Purattim*. Analogously, a careful consideration of the lifestyles of the shepherds that take to the steppe, in particular the different ways in which they adapt to the winter season, is instructive in showing how the territory can best be exploited by small groups that retain strong ties to a base in the river valleys (Bernbeck, this volume).

DISCUSSION

In point of fact, the archaeology of the material culture in Syro-Mesopotamia, in and of itself, tells us very little about the Amorites. Without the information derived from the cuneiform texts, we would know nothing today of their name as a group and much less of their names as individuals, nothing of their interaction with the urban areas on the valley floors, nothing of their use of the steppe, nothing, in fact, of even their existence. There is, in my understanding of events, a very good reason for this. However ‘nomadized’ the Amorites may have become in the course of time, they had remained essentially rooted in the rural para-urban areas from which they hailed. The Amorite homeland remained in the alluvial plains, even though they carved out for themselves an ecological niche in the steppe that could be considered as an alternative, or transitional, heartland.¹¹ Their presence in the steppe was thus not only an extension of village life, but it was also quite ephemeral even by nomadic standards. The herds were tended by minuscule human groups, whose extended family remained in the alluvial areas, where they were eager to return and from whose material culture they amply drew. That they could have given rise to the tribe as an alternative political institution, as I have proposed, is not in contrast with this picture. The tribe echoes the central goal of the city as a territorial state to the extent that it provides effective aggregative means for

¹¹ As I have argued elsewhere (Buccellati 1990a, in press), it was only in the latter part of the second millennium BCE that the central position of this heartland was established as a whole new type of tribal-territorial state, namely the kingdom of Amurru that I consider to have been centered around Palmyra, resulting in the first proper ‘steppe kingdom.’

a population that is larger than the sum of persons known to each other on the basis of face-to-face association. But it does not derive, in our case at least, from a purely endogenous expansion of a family nucleus that is nomadic in origin. Rather, it results from the secondary co-alescing of small human groups that seek effective aggregation outside of the contiguous territorial formula: an aggregation higher than the village but distinct from the state organization that controlled the village from an urban perspective. Hence the very fluid situation that characterizes, in my view, the Amorite movements: they were peasants turned nomads turning urban.

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