

THE « URBAN REVOLUTION »  
IN A SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE (\*)

I. INTRODUCTION

The evidence for the first « cities » in Mesopotamia is relatively rich and well-differentiated: in addition to the archaeological record, which shows a clear pattern of physical growth from smaller to larger settlements, we have the first known written documents which begin, precisely, in the wake of the « urban revolution ». We are, according to the traditional approach to periodization, at the beginning of history—so much so, in fact, that some would argue that a discussion along these lines belongs more properly in the domain of prehistorians and archaeologists than of historians. Yet as one works on the problem it becomes apparent—and it is one of the purposes of this paper to show—that the problem is exquisitely historical in terms of the approach one can take, from the point of view of both the substantive problems involved and the methodology to be followed. As for the problems involved, we are confronted here with a distinct case of institutional change

\* This paper was first submitted to the Fourteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences, held in San Francisco on August 24-31, 1975, and is published here without substantial revisions. Conceived as an essay, the paper does not call of its own nature for a documentary and bibliographical apparatus, which I intend to provide in later studies on the subject. I may just refer here, for general information, to two recent works which give a fair picture of current research on this topic. *Man, Settlement and Urbanism*, edited by P. J. UCKO, R. TRINGHAM and G. W. DIMBLEBY (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), is a collection of 86 articles which tend to stress especially the archaeological documentation and the anthropological approach. *The City in the Ancient World*, by M. HAMMOND assisted by L. J. BARSTON (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), provides a summary of the research from the historian's point of view, and includes a rich bibliography, arranged topically and well annotated. A more specific study, dealing in the introduction with the immediate problems raised in my paper, is the book by G. A. Johnson, *Local Exchange and Early State Development in Southwestern Iran*, Ann Arbor, Mich. 1974.

over a fairly well defined period of time—a change which is instructive in itself and in relationship to the chain of events it set in motion. As for methodology, we can meaningfully combine a variety of primary sources, from original texts to artifacts, and focus on the interplay between short term change (« revolution ») and long term change (« evolution ») within a given society.

The ramifications resulting from the establishment of the first « cities » are staggering for the historical development of human society in the later periods. The very notion of « city » is crucial to an understanding of the social and cultural make-up of given historical traditions—a notion, incidentally, which will be clarified in the course of the paper for the purposes of our argumentation, and which can be taken for now in its common sense acceptance. In point of fact, my own interest in the phenomenon called the « urban revolution » stems from my concern with later stages of the political development of one of the earliest urban societies—more specifically, second millennium Mesopotamia, when cities are already well established, and the political development centers around expanded territorial states, on their way to becoming even larger, multi-national organisms (« empires »). When the question arises, in connection with these later periods, as to the nature of the city, and specifically its role within the broader social and political systems, it is natural that the line of reasoning should go back to the problem of origins. It is then from the viewpoint of a historian concerned with the later periods that I am studying here the urban revolution. To elaborate this point for a moment, and thus to delineate more clearly the scope of the paper, I might add that three interrelated considerations have steered my attention in this direction. *First*, early urban periods in Mesopotamia have been studied with greater attention for institutional developments than most other periods in Mesopotamian history. This circumstance is partly due to the interest brought to bear by anthropologists on the subject matter, an interest which extended only feebly to later periods when the documentation is richer but the analysis tends to be more philological and antiquarian than truly historical. From a methodological point of view, then, a study of the early periods is especially meaningful and heuristically fruitful. *Second*, the city is one of the most visible phenomena in the process of political transformation of human groups—and by « political » I mean the way in which power is wielded in the interplay of individuals and sub-groups. In other words, the study of the city is an important factor in the study of the state, so much so, in fact, that instead of urban revolution one might perhaps more properly speak of « state » revolution. It is certain that for a sharper understanding of the Mesopotamian state we must acquire a better insight into the political nature of the city; we must then look back toward

the beginnings in order to see what were the initial stimuli that made the city a channel for the consolidation of given power structures. *Third*, without planning in this paper to systematically follow a given theory of urbanism, it seems useful to probe the data by means of questions raised in the general literature on the subject. If propositions of a general nature can be made relevant to the Mesopotamian case by verifying them against the evidence, this will be in itself a meaningful result of our analysis. Thus, while I do not intend to test a specific and unified model, I do intend to use individual concepts which may be effective in helping us to perceive a new and valid meaning in the sources.

The foregoing considerations already suggest that the present paper is conceived more as a probe into a larger question than as a comprehensive treatment of a closely circumscribed topic. Outwardly, it will take the form of an essay, with emphasis placed on the nature of the argumentation, rather than on documentation drawn from primary sources or on the critical assessment of modern literature. Whatever evidence is adduced, by way of exemplification, will be drawn exclusively from Mesopotamian materials. This limitation in scope is not reflected in the title of the paper precisely because my main concern is with the line of reasoning followed, and because the Mesopotamian material used as supporting evidence is among the earliest and most important available, so as to give a certain generalized and typological value to my conclusions. I should also point out that I will draw for documentation on the broad temporal span from late prehistoric (neolithic) to early historical periods (down to the end of the third millennium), though focusing in general around the turn of the fourth millennium, and will refer here to the conclusions for some general observations on the distinction between prehistory and history.

## 2. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION:

### THE CITY AS AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CLUE TO THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN GROUP

#### A. *Sociological Value of Settlement Size.*

The criterion of size in defining a city seems at first more practical or expedient than theoretical. In the analysis of prehistoric societies (i. e., in the traditional sense, societies without an effective system of writing) size becomes often more important than one may be willing to admit. In fact,

I believe that size is a theoretically valid criterion, if one were only to make explicit the reasons which are behind the intuitive acceptance of it by archaeologists and prehistorians. Here I will propose two such reasons.

The internal unity of a human group is signified by a variety of symbols and institutions, such as the definition of a common territory, the recognition of a common name or the acceptance of a common ruler. Territorial definition is expressed by means of boundaries, which may be natural or artifactual, but are in any case cultural or symbolic, i.e. are the reflection of an interpretation shared in common by a human group. Boundaries may obviously extend beyond the limits of the city—and we have written evidence for boundary markers in the open countryside at least as far back as the second half of the third millennium. Such markers have not been identified in the archaeological record of preliterate periods. But, for these earlier periods, we have the evidence of larger settlements, where the perimeter itself, whether or not identified by surrounding walls, serves precisely as a boundary. We cannot say whether the boundary of a large prehistoric settlement coincides or not with the boundary of the state; but the fact remains that such a settlement gives evidence of a large human group conceiving of itself as a unit, delimited and defined by a specific physical horizon. A large settlement, therefore, and a surrounding wall defining its perimeter (when one such wall exists), acquires a symbolic value which signifies internal solidarity of the human group, whatever institutional forms such group might take. This is a case where purely artifactual evidence, without the support of written records, can give us an eloquent reading of the internal structure of a given society. Later written texts will naturally provide greater specificity in the matter, especially in that they show how the city could be conceived as a legal person fairly soon in the development of urbanism (at least by the early second millennium B.C.). From the archaeological record we can safely assume that the social and institutional cohesion presupposed by the notion of the city as a legal person goes back to the very beginning of the existence of large settlements; for, architecturally and urbanistically, ancient settlements are generally strongly unified (to the extent in which we know their horizontal layout), and we do not find evidence of internal rifts and juxtapositions as is the case, in a contemporary setting, with Jerusalem or Berlin.

A prehistoric city then is the very first documentation we have of a large settled human group recognizing with external, physical symbols the internal solidarity of the group itself. The factor of size (a «large» human group) needs now to be investigated further. The notion of boundary to which I have just referred implies territorial contiguity of the members of the group. From the nature of the stratigraphic deposition we can add a temporal dimension to the spatial one: territorial contiguity is not accidental

or ephemeral, but planned and prolonged through time. The acceptance on the part of the group of its own identity through space and time becomes all the more remarkable the greater the size of the group itself. Size, in fact, implies internal differentiation; in turn, integration of differentiated elements implies a powerful cohesive or tensional factor which makes interrelation, and thus solidarity, possible. The statement that internal differentiation is correlative to size needs explanation. Normally, differentiation within a social group is understood in terms of social stratification and professional specialization. These dimensions are indeed favored by close spatial juxtaposition within the boundaries of a city, but we cannot simply postulate them on the basis of size—and in fact the literature on the subject has articulated a separate argumentation based on distinct documentation. There is, however, another type of differentiation which I consider sociologically meaningful and which can more safely be postulated on the basis of a purely quantitative correlation to size. In its quantitative growth the human group reaches a threshold beyond which personal contacts, or face-to-face association, are no longer possible among all individual members of the group. In other words, the group becomes larger than the sum total of the individuals known personally to a single member of that group. Where exactly such threshold is to be placed is not too relevant in terms of numbers, though a figure of a few thousand would seem to be a convincing approximation; I will also forego here any discussion of the relationship between physical size and population density. The main point is that in a given developmental stage there are in the group individuals who are foreign to each other on the personal level, and yet recognize a common and reciprocal bond on the level of a supra-personal association. The meaning of such a supra-personal association is proportional in value to the intensity of the tensional factor which holds together the members of the group. If the tensional factor is weak, the resulting association is loose (e. g., with a group of tribes), and its sociological value less considerable from the viewpoint which concerns us here. The opposite is true in the case of a city—and that is why a city, in terms of the physical or archaeological evidence, is an important clue to social reality: territorial contiguity, defined spatially by the notion of boundary and temporally by the nature of stratigraphic deposition, implies a very strong tensional factor, and therefore a well integrated association, based on firm roots of solidarity; and at the same time the size of the settlement implies the interaction of individuals foreign to each other on the personal level, and yet held together by the recognition of a common bond. In this sense, Wirth's notion of heterogeneity becomes meaningful in the context of archaeological documentation. Evidence of large sites, in Mesopotamia as elsewhere in the Near East, goes well back into late prehistoric times,

and shows that the development of such settlements was a widespread phenomenon, and as such a part of a sustained and general trend.

*B. The Nature of Intra-Urban Contacts.*

The interaction of individuals within an urban context may now be defined on the basis of the heterogeneity just described. Naturally, this is not a comprehensive definition of intra-urban contacts, but simply one which is based on the considerations made possible by the present argumentation—an elementary definition, therefore, which aims at utilizing the basic data supplied by the sources. I have argued above for the validity of the concept of heterogeneity on the basis of size. I have also referred to the conclusion, convincingly argued by other scholars on the basis of evidence other than size, that social stratification and professional specialization can already be seen in the earliest, pre-literate, urban settlements. On this basis we may draw a picture of early urban society as of a group which includes individuals who are unknown to each other on the personal level, but are related to each other through the medium of the human group to which they belong. This relation may be made explicit at any moment given the proper circumstances: then the individuals who have thus come in reciprocal contact relate through a common background which makes them «co-citizens» or «compatriots» — they discover the existence of a corporate bond which approximates the ties of kinship and friendship among people who know one another personally. It is as if co-citizens had a corporate knowledge of one another, mediated through the fact of belonging to the same group, and analogous to the personal knowledge which exists among members of sub-urban groups (e.g. kinship groups or sodalities).

Association within the same group is, however, graduated by the fact that social and professional differences exist among individuals. Thus at the same time that two individuals, personally foreign to each other, recognize their common participation in the same group, they also recognize the particular level where they fit in that same group, i.e. the level of a given profession and/or social status. To put it differently, we may say that urban individuals recognize one another not only as individuals, but also as parts of a whole performing a given function within the group. An individual may be recognized primarily for his service as a potter or as a scribe, for instance, rather than as a personally relatable human being. Recognition of function, in other words, may become the main ingredient in given relationships. This category of human behavior may well have existed in pre-urban societies, perhaps at a more elementary level and outside the group:

a foreigner, whether friendly (e.g. a trader) or hostile (e.g. an attacker), may well have been conceived primarily in terms of his function as an outsider to the group than in terms of his being a fellow human being. But it is perhaps only with the advent of the city that this categorization of human beings according to their function enters within the texture of a single human group. Here again the tensional factor about which I spoke earlier is an important consideration: the members of the group are held together in spite of their partial reciprocal unknownness or foreignness and on the strength of their recognizing the validity of the functions different individuals perform within the same group. Naturally, we have no direct evidence of this in the earliest documentation. Inferentially, however, the argumentation seems valid. In some respects, the preceding considerations were based on the size of the human settlements: to that extent, the simple physical evidence of large cities, as provided by excavations already for prehistoric periods, is a meaningful indicator which ought not to be underestimated. Similarly into prehistoric times extends the archaeological evidence for social and professional differentiation, argued by others on the basis of ostensible differences in degrees of wealth and technical complexities in the type of workmanship. The evidence from written texts appears only at a later stage though still in the formative period of urban consciousness—and given the nature of the evidence, it seems likely that part of it at least could safely be telescoped into the earlier past. Some of the earliest texts contain, for instance, lists of individuals arranged according to their profession or occupation, showing that this category was an operative and effective criterion of identification within that society. In some cases, terms denoting profession came to be used as personal names, almost as if an individual were primarily known from his particular function within society.

It is implicit in the logic of the argument that this process would lead to the introduction of an element of depersonalization in human contacts. Positively, this may be understood to mean that as the range of human contacts increased for any given individual with the growth of the human group of which he was a part, some of these contacts were not based on direct personal relationships, but were rather made possible through the medium of social institutions. In other words, institutional, functional and impersonal contacts among individuals came to play a greater and greater role in urban society. A special case in this development is to be noticed in the economic sphere. Generally, it may be said that the increase in wealth on the part of a few individuals points to the conclusion that the profit motive was becoming stronger and more concrete than in pre-urban society. When conceived as an end in itself, the profit motive leads to the maximum possible exploitation of the means of production, even to the point that the com-

mercial function may stand in antithesis and negate at least in part the value of personal human relationships. The extreme case of this is naturally the institution of slavery. Unquestionable evidence for it comes only with written sources from the middle of the third millennium on, and the exact nature and extent of such an institution is still under discussion. But the important fact remains that slavery, this extreme functionalization of man-to-man relationships, flourished in an urban setting, and seems likely to be primarily connected, in its origin and development, with an urban society. More generally, one might say that intra-human responsibility decreases with reduced face-to-face contact. Individuals begin to relate to one another as remotely connected islands within an archipelago, rather than as closely joined parts of a single fused continent; as a result different levels of reciprocal moral commitment are introduced within the texture of human relationships, the measure of intensity being proportional to the degree of proximity.

### *C. Nature of the Man-Artifact Relationship.*

Clearly evidenced in the archaeological documentation of the earliest urban settlements, even in their prehistoric phase, is the overwhelming richness of the artifactual inventory in terms of both quantity and quality. The complexity of the execution leads safely to the assumption, already stated above, of the diversified professional specialization which alone could have led to such accomplishments. Clearly, different types of production were restricted to skilled craftsmen, in such a way that a spectrum of mutually exclusive activities resulted. Such professionalization implies a fragmentation in the ability of single individuals to perform given tasks, and a resulting complementarization among specialists which could only be justified within the wider framework of a large human group as a whole. Specialization, in other words, was based not only on the determination and ability to achieve technical perfection, but also on a specific social structure which allowed for fragmentation at the level of the individual and complementarization at the level of the group. This aspect of professional specialization as characteristic of incipient urbanism has already been clarified by several scholars, beginning with Gordon Childe. Here I wish to call attention to another set of considerations which suggest themselves when we analyze the nature of the relationship between man and artifacts as we know it for early urbanism.

As a result of technical specialization, contact between man and the process of production was increasingly reduced. Compartmentalization of the techniques of production meant that larger sections of the human group, in their function as consumers, came to have less and less contact with the

genesis of the goods they were using. Such a loss of immediate and personal experience of the process of production on the part of more and more individuals within the group would increase the distance between man and man-made objects. The artificial object in its finished form came to be a « given » much like a natural object, inducing an equation of sorts between nature and culture, and calling in consequence for a readjustment to nature. The difference between artificial and natural objects was that the former could be observed as they were being made and the underlying process could be understood, if not repeated, by most observers, whereas the genesis of natural objects remained unknown and in fact even unobserved. (It may be noted that the next step in this evolution is perhaps provided by the industrial revolution, as a result of which man has effectively isolated himself from most aspects of the production process itself, so that in most cases a man-made object is genetically as obscure to all non-specialists as a natural object is.)

The nature of man's relationship to his own artifacts was made even more complex by the fact that many artificial objects were planned and understood as permanent. The city itself, as a physical entity, had achieved such a magnitude that it could not be perceived simply as an ephemeral shelter: monumental architecture, which goes hand in hand with the earliest cities, is an expression of a belief in the durability of the city alongside the major phenomena of nature. In point of fact, the historical and theological reflection which will take place in historical times (in part already within the third millennium) voices a constant concern for the problem of the origin of the city, connecting it with a divine act of creation similar to that which established the basic features of the natural and of the cultural world. Other works of art, such as sculpture, or cultural products, such as writing, also share with architecture the claim of being permanent artificial objects—as is shown by the care taken in the execution, the intellectual complexity in the underlying creative concept, the expense (of time and materials) in the production. The point about permanence is that it strengthens the observation made earlier about the loss of direct experience of the production process: both by its genesis and by its future a man-made object comes to rival the place of natural objects within the framework of man's mental universe. This is like saying that culture rivals nature, and that man has to make certain adjustments to both as they make such new claims on his intellectual awareness.

The city, in other words, and the culture it fostered, could emerge as a barrier to nature, and create psycho-ecological problems; or else it could be integrated in man's overall appreciation of his environment and become an instrument of harmony rather than of discord. The Mesopotamian tradition

is very firm, committed and unrelenting in its dedication to integrate the city in man's mental and psychological universe. Clear evidence for this begins only with the appearance of written records. For prehistoric times, we can invoke the creative vigor which transpires in the formative period of city building and which seems to imply a firm commitment to the new dimension of a man-made cultural world. We can also invoke the element of continuity in urban architecture between the period of the origins and the later historical periods. Whatever the case may be for prehistory, the fact remains that in historical times the Mesopotamians articulate very lucidly a bourgeois ideal of culture from which very few deviations can be detected—for instance the Rousseau-like depiction of a natural garden of Eden in the Dilmun myth or the nomadic ideal in Gilgamesh and the Teodicy. (It should be noted that in the latter two examples the aversion for the city is temporary and is redeemed, as it were, by the conclusion of each of the stories. In contrast see the stronger objections to urbanization in the Israelite tradition as reflected, for instance, in the curse of Adam when he is forced to till the soil, in the characterization of Cain as an agriculturalist and a city builder, in the negative representation of the Tower of Babel, in the anti-dynastic traditions of the early monarchic period, in the nomadic idealism of the Rechabites, and so on.) One of the key elements of the Mesopotamian endeavor may be characterized as their strive toward a sacralization of culture (here too the contrast with the Israelite experiment will be apparent). Man-made objects acquire a sacredness of their own, a very special value which is praised in hymns and accepted as operative in daily practice. From the temple to the pick-axe, from sacramental figurines used to release a spell to the stylus which makes writing possible—many human objects are sacralized. Mythologically, this is expressed by connecting their origin with direct divine initiative, signifying, by this, affinity not only of worth but also of genesis with natural objects.

### 3. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION:

#### THE CITY AS A VEHICLE FOR THE FORMATION OF POWER STRUCTURES

The social conditions described in the foregoing section provided a whole new platform for the exercise of power within the human group. The tensional factor which held the group together could be made even stronger given the impetus of adroit leadership. And the institutionalization of human relationships and of technological innovation could provide the scaffolding for a tighter management of available resources, both human and natural.

The political dimensions, understood as the administration of power within the human group, will appear to be, in my estimation, a determinant factor for the understanding of the nature and success of the early cities.

*A. Articulation of Power: Bureaucracy.*

The functionalism which we have noted with regard to social relationships would provide the most natural humus for the development of mechanisms suitable for the exercise of power. If political be understood as the ability to coerce people into given actions without the use of physical or economic force, it is clear that institutionalization of man-to-man relationships would be a most important channel for the implementation of such an influence. It is the inherent rigidity of the social system that lends itself to this utilization. The existence of disparate functional levels within the same social group requires the development of other specialists whose task it is to keep the lines of communication open among all levels. These new specialists are the bureaucrats. They keep track of the internal workings of the human group, accounting for the interaction of the various functional levels and recording the unfolding of their activities. The *raison d'être* of the bureaucrat is wholly in function of the institutional system. He does not perform a primary service by producing goods, such as a potter or a baker, but a secondary service by accounting for the relationships between, say, the potter and the baker. Thus he owes his existence to a system which requires not only the separate existence of potters and bakers, but also the overall correlation of the activities of potters, bakers, and the like. This secondary type of service is therefore dependent on a specific type of social system, i.e. a complex urban system as sketched partly above. Reciprocally, the urban system is dependent on such a type of secondary service, if the system is to function in an orderly manner. Because of this two way need relationship, the bureaucratic apparatus acquires a position of special importance: there is an inherent possibility of control in the accumulation of the overall information about the various individuals who belong to the human group. Thus public administration can easily become, from a service function, an instrument of political power.

A few corollaries may be added to these considerations. The bureaucratic system provides the clearest institutional consolidation of the functional type of man-to-man relationship which have been characterized above as typically urban. On the one hand, administrators may function without ever being in face-to-face contact with the individuals who are part of their sphere of responsibility. In fact, administrators carry this type of social

contact to its logical extreme by combining the principle of the delegation of authority with the development of adequate technological means for conveying personal messages through an impersonal carrier—writing. Through a chain of command, a clear hierarchical system is set up which equates individuals with functional slots. Communication from one level to the other is conditioned by the nature of the office more than by the personal characteristics of the office-holder: and communication is expressed by means of stereotyped formulas, which are fully predictable in form and leave little or no space for personal innovation. The important consequence of all this is that the system becomes selfsustaining precisely as a system rather than as an operation based on the personal initiative of various individuals. The functional advantages of this structure are apparent. The principal one is stability, which derives from the fact that the system is relatively immune to unpredictable and unchartered innovations. What is also apparent is how such a structure becomes a suitable instrument for the deployment of political power: since the system works of its own momentum, and since it is articulated hierarchically, the individuals at the top of the hierarchy can more easily control the system as a single unit than they could control, on a one-to-one basis, the single individuals who are part of the system.

The establishment of the bureaucratic system is further advantageous to the human group as a whole in that it maximizes the pool of resources and human talents available. The secondary type of service provided by the bureaucratic apparatus is one which requires special skills, less practically oriented than those of other professions; a wider range of applications is thus available to the individuals within the group, as specialization becomes more and more diversified. One important consequence of the development of such new, bureaucratic skills is that they further affect man's relationships to nature. Administrative work does not result in the production of tangible and concrete objects as is the case with other professions: the latter produce specific consumers' goods, while the former provides something more abstract and less easily quantifiable. Bureaucratic administration exists in function of an abstract system of correlations, and as such it introduces a new dimension in the scope of human activities. Man is now working full-time to create something different both from natural objects and from his own artificial products: he creates a system—and creates it completely *ex novo*, i.e. not only by defining its inner workings, but also by providing the initial *raison d'être*. This implies an even greater juxtaposition with nature than in the case discussed earlier, since here man posits not only the end result, but also its rationale.

The evidence for the Mesopotamian bureaucratic system is rich once the

written documentation begins. Even though there is no simple term which covers univocally the semantic range of such English terms as « bureaucracy » and « administration », there are terms which can analogically be used in this sense. More importantly, the texts show a clear picture of (1) a hierarchical system with well-defined ranks, and (2) a rich set of formalized and stereotyped documents for administrative use. The non-written primary sources which can be utilized as evidence for the existence of a bureaucratic system are more difficult to identify, but are especially important because they allow us to trace the analysis of the phenomenon farther back in time than is possible with written texts.

One of the elements which is closely connected with the written system of book-keeping is the use of seals, the impression of which serves the purpose of identification and authentication (they identify the owner of the seal and authenticate the object to which the impression is affixed). The seal then is an extension of literacy to non-literate segments of the population. Now, seals and seal impressions are attested also in pre-literate times (though they are of a different type than the seals current in literate times), and it is likely that they served a similar function of identification and authentication as the later seals; while obviously they do not occur within the framework of a written tradition, they are however ideally suited to serve as identifiers in virtue of the unique design proper of each seal and the suitability for multiple impressions. In this respect the seals would seem to provide, in a pre-literate framework, an example for an impersonal extension of the notion of personal identity, such as is characteristic of, and necessary for, an administrative system like the one described above.

Another type of archaeological evidence which can be traced back to preliterate times is the presence, in larger settlements, of clusters of rooms, centered around public buildings, which may be interpreted as service rooms. Without even considering the question of the nature of the service (for instance, whether it was administrative or cultic) the more general but equally important conclusion can be drawn that a variety of activities was centrally coordinated and planned. Such coordination and planning may be inferred from the physical layout, which presents us with a central monumental building and peripheral smaller rooms, all enclosed within the same perimeter and set off as a unit from the rest of the settlement. A centralization of this type is not likely to occur accidentally on just the physical level, without an underlying administrative structure serving as a unifying factor; and the cultural continuity with later times, when similar buildings are indeed known to be connected with such an administration, contribute to making the assumption likely. In line with the architectural evidence, the presence of mass produced objects may also be introduced in this discussion.

A typical example, from protoliterate times, is provided by the bevelled rim bowls, which occur in very high quantities (more than a quarter million, including sherds, at Chogha Mish) and are quite standardized in the manner of execution and the content capacity. The actual use to which they were put is still uncertain—they may have served for doling out rations or for an industrial type of production and redistribution (of cheese, as has been suggested, or, to submit here another possibility, of salt cakes). But what matters in our context is the simple fact of finding evidence for a standardized approach to the mass production of utilitarian objects, which again presupposes coordination and planning such as can be performed by a well articulated administrative system.

### *B. Culmination of Power: Kingship.*

The hierarchical structure of the administrative system is pyramidal in nature: from a broad basis it leads up to a single point of control. The state as we know it historically in the period under consideration is essentially monarchic. This is amply documented by the early written texts, and by the later historiographic reflections into the earlier periods, which derive kingship from heaven and make it co-terminous with the emergence of the state. It is also documented by the archaeological record, for instance in the representation of outstanding single individuals in early figurative art or in the evidence of special distinction as signaled by marks of unique economic wealth. The points which will be developed here concern two aspects of early Mesopotamian kingship: first, how the urban system described so far was a suitable platform for the centralization of power, and second, how kingship contributed to balance some of the depersonalizing elements of the same urban system.

I have already referred to the fact that a bureaucratic system of administration was an important tool for the exercise of power. The inner consistency of the system was self-sustaining in the sense that its component parts were justified by their functional interrelationship. The criterion for the validity of the system at any point of its development was due in part to its inner momentum, in part to a separate assessment of the system's performance. Such an apex of the system could more easily control its overall efficiency. It does not matter whether the assessment was conscious and articulate or, as is more likely, intuitive and pragmatic; the important point is that the person at the top could control the system and steer it in whatever direction was most consonant with his goals. Leadership in this sense meant the ability to estimate correctly the internal character of the

system, maximizing its potentials and anticipating its needs. The leader emerged therefore both as the initiator of activities affecting the group and as the spokesman for its inner drives: hence the adoption of public channels for the communication of the king's goals, policies and accomplishments—from figurative stelas in the pre-literate periods to the written accounts incised on stone in the historic periods. Leadership was not exercised only through force, but also through the political means of persuasion: the king would influence public opinion and contribute to create the conscience of a common purpose when one was not already present. That in so doing the king would serve his own purposes goes without saying: his political success would in fact depend partly on the ability with which he could mould existing conditions to suit his own interests. The difficulty in achieving this goal increased in the measure in which existing conditions became more complex—and here is the key for understanding the innovation introduced by the urban system in the role of central leadership. Naturally, monarchic government need not be associated with the city, and it is quite likely in fact that it preceded, in one form or another, the establishment of the city. But the development of the city introduced a whole new dimension. The control of the bureaucratic administration required an altogether different type of political skill than was necessary in whatever type of chieftanship there might have been earlier. The skills had to be different because the nature of the controls was so different: the bureaucratic set-up not being based on face-to-face association, effective control required the ability to deal not only psychologically with individuals but also technically with the system. In return, control of the system provided a geometric increase in the leverage of the leader, since his platform of power consisted not only of his subjects as individuals, but also of the office holders as institutional portions of an administrative machinery. The human group was tighter and more compact to the extent in which it was larger in size, due to the institutional ties which held the group together, and royal power grew proportionately in effectiveness and range. It is in this sense that the city was an important element in the growth of kingship—through the institutions it developed, and the way in which they could be used for the consolidation of a well defined power structure. The political potential of urban institutions is in fact so great that it seems quite likely that political will might have been an element in the process of the origin and early growth of the city. Though one cannot perhaps provide explicit documentation for this, it seems only probable that political leadership would have exploited the situation as incipient urban institutions began to show their potential to serve as a power base. If so, the spirit of organization of a few entrepreneurs, who foresaw the political as well as the economic advantages of the urban system, would

share with other factors the responsibility for having set in motion one of the most momentous developments in human history.

Earlier I stressed the fact that the political control of the urban system implied a political ability to influence the persuasions of the human group. This role of kingship points to another series of considerations which are pertinent at this point. Kingship appears in historical times not only as the fulcrum of power but also as a main source of motivation for the human group. The king fulfills such a motivation role personally as well as institutionally. Personally, he can address directly his subjects and provide, as circumstances require, the needed inspiration and moral drive. Institutionally, he appears as the embodiment of the system in a concrete individual person. It is a way in which the system tries to reestablish the role of the person at the very apex of its function-oriented, depersonalized, bureaucratic hierarchy. There are many connotations to this aspect of kingship. With regard to warfare, the king is the symbol of the internal unity of the group in front of hostile attacks on the group as a whole. With regard to social conditions, the king is the good shepherd who cares for the weaker elements of society and the equanimous judge (in this sense, also a lawgiver) in whom all can put their trust. With regard to economic prosperity, the king initiates and maintains public works, and he represents the community vis-à-vis the gods through his active and unique participation in cults designed to foster fertility. Thus the ideological, ethical and sacral attributes of the king contribute toward making him a point of convergence for the expectations of the individuals in the group, giving a special validity to the image of the group as a family and the king as a father. The nature of kingship appears in this light as a built-in device which balances what there is of impersonal, mechanistic and rigid in the bureaucratic structure. That all this would further contribute to the strengthening of royal power goes without saying; in turn the loyalty to the royal office would naturally contribute to foster the internal cohesion of the community. An early example of royal awareness for this set of conditions is to be found in an inscription of Sargon who boasts that « 5400 men eat daily in his presence »; what he boasts of is both the numerical size of the group (presumably functionaries and bureaucrats) who are directly dependent on him, and the fact he has a personal contact with all of them on a permanent basis. That the phrase « in my presence » may have to be taken symbolically is irrelevant—or rather, it is relevant in that it would show that the ideological role of the king mattered most, quite apart from the actual implementation. Ample documentation of this type may be adduced from the early written sources.

*C. The Impact of Urban Power Structures: the Public-Private Dichotomy.*

One of the distinctive features of the earliest Mesopotamian cities, evidenced by the archaeological record long before the appearance of written texts, is the presence of monumental architecture. There are obvious political implications in this, particularly with regard to the effectiveness of centralized authority. The term « monumental » refers to the size of the construction, both in its overall design as in its structural details; thus it refers to constructions which are (1) planned on a large scale, whether they be individual buildings, enclosed open areas, city walls, canal networks, or the like, and (2) characterized by massive size in certain aspects of the execution, such as the width of the wall (the latter consideration is often a clue to the first one, especially in the case of poorly preserved remains). The sociological inference to be drawn from the fact of monumentality is that such constructions were *public* in nature. However one chooses to define such concept—whether for instance in terms of participation in the building activities, of access to the resulting structure, of ownership, or the like—the important distinction is that a public construction is not a larger private construction, but rather an entity which belongs to a socially different sphere than a private construction. The polarity public/private was never articulated in the social and political conceptualization of even the latest historical periods in Mesopotamia, so it is a fair assumption that it was not an operative concept in the earlier stages of urban development. It was however an operative reality, inasmuch as decisions were taken and actions implemented that presupposed a real distinction between the two spheres. A public initiative was one which involved the human group either as a whole or in large portions. In a political sense, which is what interests us here, public initiatives could be exploited by the leadership as a means to bolster its power base, in the following way. The carrying out of a public construction, such as a temple, involved identification of a rationale and/or stimulation of public awareness for such a rationale, planning for design and for availability of materials and manpower, coordination and organization of the operations, planning for long range maintenance and upkeep. These functions, and others, were provided by the leadership on behalf of the human group as a whole, and were in the nature of a public service. Since the group had no effective channels to act as its own agent in expressing the will for a public initiative and in implementing it, the actual carrying out of such a public initiative implied the recognition that the leadership had a real monopoly in the determination of public interests. Such a monopoly was obviously an enhancement of the political power base on which the king, as the main leader, built his position. It was then for the king to institutionalize the

difference between public and private, so that it would not be a temporary coincidence, but rather a permanent dichotomy to his advantage. The more public initiatives were taken and tangible signs left in the form of public constructions, the more rooted would the position of the king become as the embodiment of the public good for which he was working.

In addition to monumental architecture, a vehicle for public image building on the part of the king was the development of bureaucracy. It has already been argued above in this paper that bureaucracy arose from the need of articulating power through the newly emerging urban communities. What may be stressed here is that the offices which came thusly into existence were also by nature public offices, and their work, carried out in a hierarchical structure which led up ultimately to the king, was in fact public administration. The permanent character of the offices, as with monumental architecture, contributed to the institutionalization of the public sphere in a way far superior to what could be the case in a pre-urban society. A key element in this institutionalization was the introduction of writing and, through it, of archival procedures. It was noted earlier that writing was introduced as an essentially impersonal carrier of messages among members of the group; the impersonal character of the written text results from the fact that the message is fixed in a rigid and permanent formulation which can take the place of face-to-face contact. A counterpart of the reduced degree of personal participation proper to a written message is the much wider scope, in space and time, of people who can be reached by the message: to the extent that ease of communication is important for the exercise of power, writing emerges as an indispensable political tool—a consideration, incidentally, for which later Mesopotamian tradition shows very explicit awareness. Two aspects which interest us here are the development of administrative archives and the promulgation of law codes. Archives provide a vertical dimension through time to the administrative need for objectivation; and the collection of data in the archives contributes to the establishment of public records—public in the sense that they deal with the human group as a whole, though certainly not in the sense that they are open to everyone for inspection. Law codes are promulgation of royal judicial verdicts, abstracted from the specific situation of a given lawsuit and made general, through space and time, by the will of the king. Here too writing serves to isolate a human activity from the immediate context of a given situation (the king as judge of a specific case) and make it valid beyond face-to-face contact (the king as lawgiver for the country as a whole); in terms of our present argumentation, this means that the king makes public, i.e. applicable to the whole community, a decision which would normally be reached in a specific intrapersonal case. It is also interesting to note that Mesopotamian lawcodes are political texts

in that they underscore the jurisdictional scope of the king's activity, and assert his right to integrate different judicial traditions and apply them to to all regions under his control.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Modern institutional analysis of the late prehistoric and early historical periods in Mesopotamia has focused largely on the phenomenon of the city, dealing especially with problems of social organization and of economic structure. The notion of « urban revolution » has become well entrenched, especially since it includes as one of its features the introduction of writing, which in turn is traditionally considered as *the* distinctive feature of the transition from prehistory to history. The phenomenon « urban revolution » acquires in this light even greater importance, since it appears to encapsulate the series of events and institutional changes which together constitute the very beginning of history. Indeed, « revolution » is an apt term to define such a rapid and radical transformation of the human mode of existence. It is also true that the city is the hallmark of this revolution, since it provides all the pertinent evidence we have. On the other hand, the qualification « urban » added to « revolution » captures only a part of the phenomenon at stake. If attention is focused on the urban dimension of the process, the research tends to dwell on the topographical, architectural, social and economic analysis of a circumscribed settlement, and to neglect the political implications. Once we focus on the political aspect, it begins to appear that large human settlements are not only proof of incipient urbanism but also of a new political order—the bureaucratic state. This political dimension was certainly one of the factors which favored the growth and even the origin of the city, though the political dimension was in itself supra-urban in character. If the urban dimension seems to take precedence over the political one, it is perhaps due in part to the fact that in prehistoric periods the city is the only evidence available to show that a human group could grow beyond the limits of face-to-face association and retain its internal cohesion. Short of written texts, only the physical evidence of contiguity within the same settlement is available to document how far the boundary of the early state could extend. The city limits provide naturally a minimal boundary, since the state could expand beyond a given city to include not only the hinterland, but also other cities; even so, it is the city which provides the first meaningful clues we have for the existence of the bureaucratic state. Perhaps because of this close association of early state and city, and because of the documentary concreteness of the city as a topographical unit, considerations about the city

seem to have overshadowed those about the state. The importance of the political dimension, however, cannot be underestimated. On the one hand, the political will was most likely one of the factors responsible for the very origin of the urban phenomenon: the exploitation of the new structures, as soon as their potential came to be perceived, was a strong motive which led the emerging leadership to foster—in fact, to oversee—the growth of urban institutions. On the other hand, the formula of bureaucratic control, which served so well the purposes of the incipient city as to be considered a typically urban phenomenon, was not by itself urban in character: it was really an instrument of public administration which was geared from the beginning to serve the needs of the state, and a well ordered public administration remains a key for the understanding of later Mesopotamian political development, all the way down to expanded territorial states and to the empire.

Similarly, considerations about political development help to better understand the importance of the introduction of writing as a factor in historical periodization. Documentary specificity is the key innovation brought about by the use of written texts: in this respect the contribution of writing is rather to historiography than to history, and it can be said that the difference between history and prehistory is in the eyes of the beholder more than in the events and institutions observed. If however we look at writing in a socio-political perspective, then its intrinsic historical (as different from historiographic) value appears in bolder relief. As the characteristic tool for the inner workings of the newly emerging system of public administration, writing played a key role in the transformation of institutions. It was the key ingredient that made it possible for communication routines to become fixed, for information to be stored in an efficient cumulative pattern, for human relationships to be exerted over a span that was both wider in space and longer in time. Writing contributed, in other words, to the process whereby functions became objectified and acquired an autonomy of their own, over and beyond the personal qualities of the functionaries. As such, writing is the appropriate symbol not only (historiographically) of the major periodization marked by the beginning of history, but also (historically) of the internal transformation which saw the establishment of the bureaucratic state.

Once it is clear that the «urban revolution» is in fact part of a wider set of transformations than the establishment of the first cities, it does not really matter what expression is used to refer to the phenomenon. The term «urban revolution» may well be retained, as the one which not only is already currently in use but also refers to the most explicit segment of the documentation available. Generally speaking, terms and definitions are meaningful to the extent in which they fit within a given conceptual scheme, i.e. they should not only have an intrinsic substantive meaning, they should

also be complementary with the other terms and definitions with which they form a set. Now within the conceptual historiographic scheme of the period under consideration, the term « urban revolution » serves as an adequate definition: in a strict sense, it will be taken to refer to the introduction of the first cities, and in a wider sense, to the introduction of the bureaucratic state. Similarly, the terms « city » and « state » will have to be understood with reference to a given context, and not in any absolute sense. Synchronically, i.e., within the framework of the period when the urban revolution took place, city and state are meaningful concepts in relationship to other concepts such as village, province or tribe. Similarly, they are meaningful terms diachronically. With regard to short term change, they refer aptly to those innovative elements in settlement patterns and political structures which supersede the earlier prehistoric situation. With regard to long term change, city and state as we know them in the period when they first come into existence show some of the basic traits which remain characteristic of city and state throughout later history down to our own times. That other fundamental changes and innovations were further introduced in later periods goes without saying; that we may want to use different terms to refer to the different stages along this line of evolution, if the research focuses on long term change, is equally beyond question. It is the changing perspective which in every case will have to provide the proper justification for both conceptualization and terminology. By utilizing such varying angles of perspective, the field of ancient Near Eastern studies is slowly developing its own historiography worthy of the name: building on the ever indispensable philological and archaeological control of the sources, we are now beginning to apply true historical analysis to institutional processes, extending our historical consciousness to the farthest reaches of the documentary spectrum.

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CENTRO SCAVI DI TORINO  
PER IL MEDIO ORIENTE E L'ASIA

Estratto da

# MESOPOTAMIA

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*a cura dell'Istituto di Archeologia  
dell'Università di Torino*

LICOSA  
Libreria Commissionaria Sansoni  
Firenze

FOR THORKILD JACOBSEN  
ON HIS SEVENTY-SECOND BIRTHDAY

The work of Thorkild Jacobsen has come to serve as a paradigm for Assyriologists, linguists, archaeologists, social scientists, historians of religion. To those who know him personally, especially as a teacher, he is the paradigm of a true scholar, capable not only of pointing toward knowledge but also of communicating, as very few can, a whole set of scholarly attitudes and human values.

That is how we have seen him during his various visits to Los Angeles, especially in the Spring quarter of 1976, when the four of us had the wonderful opportunity to « sit at his feet » in the classroom, to talk at length about our common interests, and thus to refine our sensitivity for the methodological and substantive unity of our individual endeavours. Thorkild Jacobsen has been a unique inspiring force behind the formation of the Mesopotamian Area Program of which we are happy to publish here the first results. The common link is in the nature of the methodological interests, since we all share a concern for a conscious articulation of the presuppositions, strategies and goals of our research. We believe that such consciousness maximizes the substantive results of data analysis; also, that it more readily opens our line of inquiry to specialists outside our specialty. It is in this spirit that we wish to dedicate our articles to Thorkild Jacobsen, on the occasion of his seventy-second birthday, which we had the joy to celebrate together.

It is symbolic for us to be able to publish these articles in *Mesopotamia*, a forum which, by explicit editorial choice as well as by virtue of the interests of its Editor, is specifically dedicated to methodological issues in the field of the ancient Near East. The visit of Giorgio Gullini to Los Angeles, earlier in the same year, came to serve as another catalyst for the cohesion of our group. For this, as well as for hosting this brief collection of articles in his journal, we are most grateful.

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