EARLY MESOPOTAMIA
Society and economy at the dawn of history

J.N. POSTGATE
While its true singularity may lie deeper in the complexity of social organization, the two most striking characteristics of early Mesopotamia are its literacy and its urbanization. Just as we need to appreciate the nature of the written record to use its messages, we must be aware that all our documentary and archaeological evidence derives from the city, and so be conscious of the inherent biases which result from this. Perhaps we would in any case have chosen to approach Mesopotamian civilization through its cities, since it is there that everything most special to it is concentrated, but in fact we have no choice. Although we have some insights into the rural scene, this is only by courtesy of documents which were themselves generated within the city. It is only those aspects of the countryside with which the city-dweller was involved that the texts will illumine, and at present the only archaeological evidence is the distribution of settlements. Fortunately there was a very close relationship between the early cities and their hinterland, so that the texts are more informative than we might expect. The links fall into legal relationships, the contractual bonds between landlord and tenant, palace and dependant, recruiting officer and recruit, and the political movements exposed by state correspondence from Mari and elsewhere, from which great shafts of light have transformed our picture of the nomads in the ancient Near East.

Defining a city

Usually the first question asked about an ancient city is how big it was. A simple answer to this is to quote the size of the ancient mounds, and, although this simplicity conceals a host of technical and procedural problems, at one level it has a certain validity. Archaeological surveys can distinguish a hierarchy of settlement size even before the Uruk period, and Adams' work in particular shows that during the fourth millennium a separate class of larger settlement – or 'city' – can be differentiated from the smaller sites or 'villages' (Figure 4:1). It must be stressed that the transition from one settlement class to another may be drawn at different points on the absolute scale in different periods, since the classification depends not on absolute size, but on the relative position within a hierarchy. If our classes have any significance, they will correspond to the function of the settlement within that hierarchy. We have already seen how the ceremonial role of the city as the home of the central shrine of a district follows from the literary compositions of Early Dynastic times, and this gives us a solid criterion on which to isolate a class of major settlement, recognized as such by the people of the time (chapter 2). We can also assume
with confidence that most of these also functioned as economic and political centres, and that their functional differences from other settlements should be detectable in the archaeological record.

The outward form

The range of city size is well illustrated in the Early Dynastic period by the cases of Uruk and Abu Salabikh (Figures 4:2a and 4:2b). At the beginning of the Epic of Gilgamesh we are exhorted to admire the size of his city Uruk, in particular the wall he built round it (Text 4:1), and indeed at Uruk the city wall dates to the ED period and is 9 km in length.

Text 4:1 Epic of Gilgamesh: the listener invited to admire the city of Uruk
See if its wall is not (as straight) as the (architect’s) string,
Inspect its ... wall, the likes of which no-one can equal;
Touch the threshold-stone - it dates from ancient times.
Approach the Eanna Temple, the dwelling of Ištar,
such as no later king or man will ever equal.
Go up on the wall and walk around,
Examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly.
Is not its masonry of baked brick,
did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans?
One square mile city, one square mile palm groves, one square mile brick-pits, (and) the ... of the Ištar Temple:
3 square miles and the ... of Uruk it encloses.

(From Tablets I and XI: cf. Dalley 1989, 50, 120)
enclosing 400 ha, by any standards a city; at Abu Salabikh the Main Mound is encircled by a wall only 1.3 km long, and the area within it is scarcely more than 10 hectares, no more than a village in many societies. These are the extremes, but there are good reasons to consider them both cities. One such reason is the wall itself. If the city’s religious identity is expressed in the temple, its fortification walls represent its political identity (see Figure 13:2 below). Even at small sites these walls may be several metres thick, and the effort of their construction is sufficient sign of their collective importance (see Text 4:2).

Text 4:2 Samsu-iluna boasts of rebuilding the wall of Kish
At that time Samsu-iluna the strong, with the force of his troops built the city of Kish, dug its moat, surrounded it with a marsh, established its foundations like a mountain with large amounts of earth, had its bricks moulded and made its wall. Within a single year he raised its head above the previous level.

(After Sollberger and Kupper 1971, 225)
Walled settlements are not, of course, a novelty of the urban age, but the walls of our cities are both practical and symbolic. Rulers celebrate their construction of a new wall, and when a city is taken in war it is standard policy to ‘demolish’ its fortifications (Text 4:3). In practice, a city wall will tend to be too small or too big. Several of the Early

Text 4:3 Inscription of Rimuš
Rimuš, King of Kish, defeated Ur and Umma in a battle and killed 8040 men. He took 5460 prisoners and captured Kaku, the King of Ur. He also captured Kikuid, the ensi of Lagaš, and conquered their cities and destroyed their ramparts.

(After Sollberger and Kupper 1971, 102)

Dynastic cities found themselves confined on the ancient mounds by the limitations of the city wall, within which the occupation levels had risen well above the surrounding countryside. At Ur, for instance, it is clear that the ancient, Early Dynastic, walls were seriously constraining inhabitants in the Old Babylonian period. Two obvious solutions can be adopted: to sacrifice security and build suburbs outside the walls, and/or to abandon the old wall line and enclose a much larger space: at Old Babylonian Sippur we have a city wall, reconstructed by Samsu-iluna, but the texts refer regularly to at least one suburb named Sippur-Annamum after an Amorite tribe and no doubt originating in encampments outside the walls.⁹⁹ There is no archaeological or textual evidence to suggest it was ever walled in. The city plan of Ešnunna shows the second option: a densely built tell in the north-west corner represents the original Early Dynastic city, and in places the line of the old wall can be guessed, enclosing it; but during the late third and early second millennium the city burst its bounds, and was swallowed up in a new enclosure of post-Ur III date of several times the area (Figure 4:3).

While some of this expansion may reflect a growth in the resident population, other factors must be involved. Major changes visible to archaeologists almost always derived from deliberate public acts, out of phase with purely demographic trends controlling the expansion or contraction of population and settlement. One obvious reason is political: new rulers from outside, without their own residences at the city, can hardly have constructed huge new administrative buildings within the tight-packed old city, and, indeed, the large structures at the centre of the redrawn enclosure at Ešnunna are the governors’ or kings’ palaces. Further, in a capital city, accommodation for the officials and visitors from other centres will have been needed, and the increase in economic activity will inevitably draw in commercial interests. The recently identified city of Maškan-šapir was probably expanded greatly to fulfil its role as a government centre for the north of the kingdom of Larsa.⁹⁰ The extreme case of this, the construction of an entire new capital, familiar in later contexts from Khorsabad through Chang-an and Samarra to Islamabad, is rare at our time and the only instance is perhaps the city of Akkad, which has yet to be discovered.

Within the gates
We can hardly hope to recreate the true nature of city life in early Mesopotamia, although literary texts convey a sense of the busy hum of men (Text 4:4). One necessary step is to
Curse on Akkad: the city in its hey-day
So that the warehouses would be provisioned,
That dwellings would be founded in that city,
That its people would eat splendid food,
That its people would drink splendid beverages,
That those bathed (for holidays) would rejoice in the courtyards,
That the people would throng the places of celebration,
That acquaintances would dine together,
That foreigners would cruise about like unusual birds in the sky,
That (even) Marhaši would be re-entered on the (tribute) rolls,
That monkeys, mighty elephants, water buffalo, exotic animals,
Would jostle each other in the public squares ... 
Holy Inanna did not sleep.
(Cooper 1983a, 50–1)

establish the degree of variability within the walls, and to determine the use of space within each house. Both texts and archaeology can contribute, and neither will be adequate in isolation. For obvious reasons, complete cities, unlike palaces and temples, have not been excavated. At present we can only pick and choose our examples from different times and places. There are no general rules: while the central shrine remained at the heart of the city, the growth and decline of each city depended on its particular economic and political roles. All one can say with safety is that it is a great mistake to conceive of the average Mesopotamian city as an unbroken expanse of homogeneous housing neatly filling the space within the city walls and clustered round a central temple or palace. At Uruk the redrawing of the line of the city wall may well have taken place a thousand years before the expansion of Ešnunna, and it seems that the residential quarters never filled the huge space enclosed (perhaps reflected in its sobriquet of ‘Uruk the sheep-fold’). Moreover, the later Epic of Gilgamesh – poetry though it is – tells us that the wall enclosed date plantations and perhaps brick-pits as well as the houses and shrines (Text 4:1).

Nothing illustrates better our ignorance about the structure of an early Mesopotamian city than the question of craft quarters. The assumption that members of the same craft may have shared the same part of a city is not supported by any hard evidence. It is a natural assumption, however, based on the two premisses that craft skills would have been passed down from father to son, and that families tended to stay close. To some degree it is perhaps supported by the evidence from Old Babylonian Ur, where merchants seem to have occupied the south-east part of the city, while some members of the temple personnel lived close to one another just south of the main temple, and from contemporary Nippur, where the huge libraries of Sumerian literary texts excavated by the nineteenth-century American expedition came from a scribal quarter of the city. Perhaps it is not surprising that other craft quarters have not been recognized, since trade, religion and schools would naturally attract the greatest concentration of tablets and incidence of literacy. In default of written sources, archaeological evidence may come to our aid here: huge expanses of the site at Warka are covered in vitrified clinker, presumably from pottery production;
and the surface remains also show there were areas specializing in the working of semi-precious stones and shells. Even in a small town like Abu Salabikh, surface distribution of clinker, confirmed by excavation, shows that there was a concentration of pottery production at the north end of the settlement, within the city wall. Their scale alone does not necessarily allow us to deduce that these concentrations represent craft activity dependent on the major institutions, such as the temple or palace, since it would be quite in accord with more recent cities for members of one craft to be clustered together even in the private sector.

Equally as uncertain as craft quarters is the problem of where commerce was transacted in the ancient Mesopotamian city. Modern Near Eastern towns have extensive suqs, comprising narrow covered lanes lined each side by small single-room shops or by larger establishments with doorways leading through to a central courtyard. As in medieval Europe, both craftsmen and merchants tend to keep together according to their wares and products. Economic historians have been arguing for years, since the writings of Polanyi in the 1950s, as to whether or not there were ‘markets’ in ancient Near Eastern cities, and we do not at present have unequivocal evidence to answer this: we have no archaeological example of a market-place (this would be difficult to identify, in any case), but it would be perfectly possible to have a market without the kind of forum that western perceptions tend to expect. Words do exist in both Akkadian and Sumerian which seem to refer to relatively open spaces, such as rebitum ‘a square’ in Akkadian, equated with the Sumerian sīla dagala, literally ‘wide street’. However, there is nothing in the texts to suggest that these spaces were used for commerce, or that they housed the assembly, which may rather have met in the courtyard of the city’s main temple. More evidence exists for the city ‘gate’ as a public space, presumably an open area just within the wall. Shops may have existed, e.g. in Old Babylonian Sippar, but we find no mention of commercial areas like ‘the street of the cloth-merchants’, for instance, and the very existence of retail trade of this kind remains controversial. We do know, of course, of the ‘quay’ (kārum). This began no doubt simply as the place where goods were unloaded at the city harbour, but by Old Babylonian times had become the society of merchants in a city, who formed a guild. It is likely enough that, if they had an office or base (e.g. the bit kārim), it would have been close to a harbour, but neither the texts nor the archaeology show that this formed part of a commercial quarter (see chapter 11).

The population

The size of a city’s population is arguably a more significant statistic than the area it occupies. Statements in the texts do not help us here, either because they are so vague that we cannot tell to what they are really referring, or because they relate only to one sector of society, such as a military force or temple personnel, from which we have no way of extrapolating to a whole city. Although we may reasonably hope that further detailed investigation of the Ur III archives will in due course provide clues, our best approach at present seems to be from the archaeological evidence. Not that this is simple either. Even if we know a city’s spatial extent, it will tell us the size of its population only if we have
an idea of the density and homogeneity of occupation. As we have just seen, these are largely unknowns, and quite likely to vary widely from city to city.

In the absence of any other criterion, the problem has been approached by Adams and others by adopting a figure of between 100 and 400 persons per hectare, derived principally from statistics for more recent Near Eastern towns.\textsuperscript{96} Quite possibly our cities do mostly fall within this range, but the procedure is unsatisfactory on two counts — in its method, since the use of later statistics begins from an assumption we should be setting out to prove, and in its results, since the range is wider than is useful. The only other approach has to be from the other end of the archaeological spectrum, observing the size and internal organization of individual buildings and their density in different areas of the site. This immediately confronts us with a lot of tough old archaeological chestnuts to crack. Did the houses have one or two storeys? How can we decide whether rooms were used for living, storage, reception and ceremony, cooking and food preparation, industrial activities? What was the residential pattern of contemporary society? Some of these questions have at least a partial answer in the documentary sources (see chapter 5), although we have hardly begun to exploit them to this end, but others must remain within the archaeologists’ domain. A start has been made on some of them in the Early Dynastic at Abu Salabikh, where we are accumulating evidence for the density and variability of occupation, the size of houses and of their component rooms and courtyards, and, through quantitative micro-archaeological observation, for the activities in each space, both inside and outside the houses.\textsuperscript{97} If, for the sake of argument, we estimate 5 souls per house and 40 houses per hectare, since the city wall enclosed about 10 ha, the old city would have had a population of 2000; with 10 persons per house this would rise to 4000. Another approach would be to allow a figure of 20 sq. m roofed space per person (taken from world-wide ethnographic observations),\textsuperscript{98} but this cannot be applied uniformly since larger houses may be expected to have devoted more space to storage. Furthermore, it would not do to forget that there was another part of the city of almost equal size outside the walls to the south. Nevertheless, with due regard paid to sample size and location, the block by block approach to reconstructing the city and its population does seem to offer the best hope of answering the questions of population size and density.

City institutions

I: Assembly

For a city to function as an entity, it required some central direction which could be independent of the source of political power. At Suruppak in the Early Dynastic period we hear of plough animals belonging to ‘the city’, and public administration seems to have been distributed among buildings in different parts of the city, suggesting that the more powerful families may have assumed a role in local government.\textsuperscript{99} One of the most influential contributions to Mesopotamian history was made by Thorkild Jacobsen in two articles dealing with ‘primitive democracy’.\textsuperscript{100} Pulling threads together from disparate sources, he put together a case for the importance of democratic institutions in the Early
Dynastic period, which retains its conviction today. The city assembly (ḥukkin/pubrum) was the forum for popular debate and decision: Jacobsen shows that in the myths of later times the gods are portrayed in their Assembly as reaching political and military decisions by consensus. The model for these has to go back to the early years when the city was itself the state, and the short Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh and Akka portrays decisions at Early Dynastic Uruk being made in the light of the (sometimes conflicting) advice of both the elders and the young men of the city. This dual system survived at least into Old Babylonian times, when we read of ‘the city and the elders’, though only as a law-court (see chapter 15), since the seat of power has moved elsewhere, to the palace. It is virtually only at Assur that we still see the Assembly, or rather the elders acting on its behalf, take an active role in the political as opposed to the legal affairs of the city.¹⁰¹

Even in judicial affairs we know very little about the Assembly: we are never told where it met, perhaps in the courtyard of the main temple. The members were no doubt the citizens, the ‘sons’ of the city, but nothing has come down to us as to how one qualified and whether ‘dual citizenship’ was possible. In the light of the Uruk cycle epics, and by analogy with similar institutions, it may be that there was an ‘upper house’ or ‘executive council’ of city elders, and the proceedings in the Assembly were controlled by one or more designated officials.¹⁰² These may well have been responsible for the non-judicial administration of the municipality also, but we hear virtually nothing about them, and there is little doubt that the duties of the Assembly were largely devoted to the local councils just to be described, and its powers long since usurped by the ruler, whether local or from outside.

2: The ward

Quite how different parts of a city were differentiated is one of the outstanding problems, solutions to which are unlikely to surface in the textual sources. Help could well come from archaeological work, but little has yet been done. We may expect the city layout itself to reveal spatial divisions or differentiation within the city, which would correspond to residential groupings or various activities or lifestyles. The degree to which these residential or occupational differences, with at least theoretically recoverable archaeological correlates, will have coincided with agnatic, or at least kin-based, groupings within the population, hardly detectable archaeologically, must vary in time and place. In Old Babylonian times cities were divided administratively into separate ‘wards’ or ‘neighbourhoods’, represented by the heads of household (‘elders’) and a mayor (rabīšum), perhaps consciously modelled on the administration of villages.¹⁰³ The word for these wards in Akkadian is bābtum, closely related to the word for a gate (bābum) and it is natural to assume that the divisions were at least originally related to the different city gates. A fascinating document from Ešnunna lists Amorites ‘living in the city’ according to their wards (Text 4:5). The wards are named after the first man listed in each group. There are seven, nine and ten men listed in the three wards, which could reflect the number of Amorite families. This gives a minimum of say thirty to forty people in a ward, but,
Text 4:5  From an administrative list found at Ešnunna
1 – son of Milki-la-El
1 – Ugazum
1 – Šalanum
1 – Mut-kabid
1 – son of Iblinum
1 – son of Palusum
1 – son of Ilan[um]
1 – brother of Zamal[ra]num
1 – Ud[a]ma, his brother(?)
1 – son of El... ]
[Total] 10 – city-ward (bābtum) of Milki-la-El.
Total 26 Amorites, ‘nobles’ (ellītum).

[After listing three reserves (dah-hu) the text concludes:]
(Grand) total: 29 Amorites residing in the city. Control of Lušilim. [Date]

(After Gelb 1968, 40-1)

given the purely Amorite nature of the names, we cannot rule out the existence of numbers of non- or pre-Amorite families within the same residential grouping. 104

There must always have been a tension between the institutions of municipal government on the one hand, and kin-based divisions in society on the other. On the whole, we would expect an archaeologically detectable – hence topographical – division to coincide most closely with the administrative wards, in view of their presumed spatial integrity. At the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, when cities were perhaps re-establishing themselves after a period of abandonment, there is evidence that settlements were composed of large open enclosures surrounded by massive mud-brick walls and separated by narrow lanes, which no doubt corresponded to social, probably kin-based, groupings (see Figure 5:4, p. 92). In the course of time it is likely that pressure on space wore down the physical barriers, and urban intercourse the social barriers, but the outlines of both probably remained drawn in much the same place. Nevertheless we are not yet in a position to draw together the archaeological and the textual evidence. The bābtum as an ‘urban village’ does not seem likely to have begun life merely as the residence of a single extended family; both the social group and the actual enclosures would need to be bigger. This is illustrated by a recent study of two excavated housing areas at Nippur which might be considered as ‘neighbourhoods’, but seem much too small to constitute a ward or bābtum since otherwise the Old Babylonian city would have comprised hundreds of bābtum. 105

Agnatic groupings
Was there then a social grouping larger than the family? In the case of recently settled nomadic populations, this will obviously have been the tribe, in whatever form it took before settlement, but there is also evidence, in the form of scattered references, to clans or tribes within the long-established urban communities of the third millennium. When
Gudca inaugurated the E-nin Turbo temple at Girsu, he called up labour from three groups called im-ru-a, each of which was represented by a symbolic standard (šu-nir), and named after a major deity: Ningirsu ‘the king smiting the foreign land’, Nanše, ‘the pure bow of the ship’, and Inanna ‘the rosette’. While literary texts sometimes refer to clans, and their expansion, they are very rarely mentioned in administrative documents.106 Once a clan holding of land is referred to in a legal text from the Ur III period;107 and in an Early Dynastic text from Šuruppak a laconic note records 539 boys from 7 clans (im-ru), showing that they must have been composed of several families each.108 The question is whether the greater occurrence of clan affiliation in the earlier period is the result of a real change, or simply that the documentation is increasingly refined to specifically legal points, shedding the non-legal (though perhaps still socially relevant) aspects of the situation.

The countryside

Every city had its hinterland, which looked to it as a political centre and with which, as we shall see in chapters 8 and 9, it maintained an intimate symbiosis. It was responsible for the administration of the countryside as much as of the city. The Pre-Sargonic Girsu archives are largely concerned with rural matters, and we have already noted that the city of Šuruppak in the Early Dynastic period administered its own plough teams. Adams has shown how at this time the cities tended to concentrate the population at the expense of the scatter of small settlements present in earlier times. Nevertheless, at different periods villages were founded and flourished, and in the Old Babylonian period especially we can see that although politically dependent on the local city – whether it was sovereign or reduced to a provincial capital – each village undertook the administration of its own territory. Villages were called ārum just as larger towns, and in fact we hear more of the smaller rural settlements acting as an official body than we do of the cities. In the Code of Hammurapi (CH §23) it is stipulated that the ārum should take responsibility for crimes committed within its territory, and the village’s role in local government appears clearly in Old Babylonian correspondence (see Text 4:6; chapter 15). It was the elders and the

Text 4:6 From an Old Babylonian letter
The village (ārum) has given me 10 iku [= 3.6 ha] of land, the holding of a soldier who campaigned with me and whose hearth is extinguished [i.e. who has no heir].
(See Bayliss 1973, 120)

mayor (rabišum) who represented the village, probably setting the pattern which was adopted in the city wards. Apart from administering the law, the principal matters for communal decision will have been the organization of water rights, fallow and other agricultural affairs within the village boundaries.109

The desert and the nomad

On the fringes and in the interstices of settlement are the nomads, who maintained a much less stable and less easy relationship with the settled population. There were surely
mountain tribes with a transhumant lifestyle like recent Kurdish groups, but they would not have been forced into interaction with the settled plains by the climatic imperatives which bring the bedu north seeking grazing in the summer, and their intrusions on the Mesopotamian scene, such as the Gutian incursion, tend to have only a transient effect. By contrast, the lifestyle of the desert nomads meant that they were ever present, and there is no doubt that their tents were perceived as a menace by the city dwellers (Text 4:7).

Text 4:7 Descriptions of the Amorite

(a) A tent dweller ... wind and rain, ..., who digs up truffles from the hills, but does not know how to kneel; who eats raw meat; who has no house during the days of his life, and is not buried on the day of his death.

(Myth of the wedding of Amurru: after Buccellati 1966, 92)

(b) Since that time the Amorites, a ravaging people, with the instincts of a beast, ... the sheepfolds like wolves; a people which does not know grain ...

(Inscription of Šu-Sin: after Civil 1967a, 31)

Although recent studies have emphasized that they were economically dependent on the sedentary sector, engaging in 'enclosed nomadism', they could not be controlled like other members of the state, since they were not tied to a time or a place. First and foremost they were shepherds. This meant that they ranged far in search of grazing, and in times of friendly relations the villagers and townsfolk might employ the nomad to tend their sheep, or agree to let him graze their young fields in exchange for some benefit. The Amorites were also breeders of donkeys (Text 4:8), which were used by farmers and soldiers as draught animals, and were no doubt sold to merchants for their caravans. They could also engage in trade in their own right, and at times the routes between Mesopotamia and the west, especially that taking off from the Mari region to reach Syria via the oasis of Tadmor (classical Palmyra), were in the hands of the desert tribes. Their role here was no doubt largely to provide the animals and local expertise to enable the journey to take place: but the recent example of the Slubba, a non-bedu tribe, renowned hunters living rather like tinkers, with metal-working and other less material skills such as star-gazing and primitive medicine, shows that other subsistence strategies were possible.

Text 4:8 Animals received by the Ur III administration

6 male donkeys
1 female donkey
booty of the land of Amurru
from Lu-Nanna, under Etum the courier.
1 goat – Hunhalbida
2 grain-fed female goats – Šilluš-Dagan, contribution.
Naša took delivery.
[Date:] 20/3/Šulgi 48.

(Lieberman 1968–9, 53)
Text 4:9 Prayer accompanying a funerary offering to Ammi-ṣaduqa’s ancestors and predecessors


(After Finkelstein 1966b, 96–7)

However much the details have been modified in recent years, it remains the case that the desert population seems to renew itself from time to time with fresh, but always Semitic, tribal stock: the Arabs were preceded by the Aramaeans (emerging around 1400 BC), and they by the Amorites (first recorded giving trouble in the later third millennium). Lacking a permanent territorial base, such groups are always identified by their tribes, and tribal affiliation is central to the social context of the nomad, who lays great weight on his patrilineal descent. The ancestral tradition may not be as accurate as we might expect, both ancient texts and modern parallels indicate, but it is an important social and political perception, reflected in semi-legendary lists of ancestors and the use of Amorite names by Hammurapi’s dynasty to its very end (Text 4:9).116 The nomenclature of nomadic groups is always confusing and shifting. In the early second millennium the Amorites were sometimes divided into ‘Sons of the North’, who included the important Hanaeans, and ‘Sons of the South’, but they were more alike than different (Text 4:10).117 The affinities

Text 4:10 From a letter to Zimri-Lim

If indeed they come to the banks of the Euphrates, is it not like beads on a necklace, distinguished because one is white and one black? Thus they say: This village is Bin-Šimal (‘Sons of the Left = North’), this village is Bin-Yamina (‘Sons of the Right = South’) — is it not like the flood-waters of a river in which the upper confronts the lower?

(Durand 1991)

between the different groups which usurped political power from the borders of Palestine right through Syria to Babylon undoubtedly affected the interaction between different parts of the Near East in much the same way as under the newly formed Aramaean states in the first, or perhaps at the time of the Kish, Mari and Ebla axis of the mid-third millennium. Yahdun-Lim’s account of his march to the Mediterranean reveals the nature of Amorite power in those days, each ‘king’ being associated with both a city, such as Tutul, and a ‘land’ (mātum) which bears a tribal name like Ammanum and evidently refers to his less sedentary Amorite subjects (Text 4:11). Similarly, in a famous letter, Zimri-Lim is described as ruling both the sedentary Akkadian population of Mari and the Hanaeans of his own Amorite origins (Text 4:12).
Text 4:11 From inscribed bricks of Yahdun-Lim in the Šamaš Temple at Mari
In that same year, La’um king of (the city of) Samanum and the land of Ubrabu, Bahlu-
kullim king of (the city of) Tuttul and the land of Amnanum, and Ayalum king of (the city of)
Abattum and of the land of Rabbum – these kings became hostile to him (Yahdun-
Lim) and the troops of Sumu-Epuh of the land of Yamhad came to their aid, and these
forces of tur-mi-im gathered together against him in (the city of) Samanum. By force of
arms he bound these three kings of tur-mi-im, and killed their troops and the troops of
their allies, accomplished their defeat and made a pile of their corpses. He destroyed their
ramparts and turned (the cities) into ruin mounds.
(Dossin 1955, col. iii.3-27; cf. Malamat 1989, 42)

Text 4:12 From a letter to Zimri-Lim from his Governor at Terqa
Let my lord give dignity to his kingship. If you are King of the Hanaeans, and secondly
you are King of the Akkadian(s), then my lord should not ride on horses. My lord should
ride on a carriage and mules, and so give his kingship dignity.
(Kupper 1954, No. 76, 19-25)

The political upheavals which brought the Amorites on to the scene at the end of the
third millennium probably occasioned a widespread abandonment of rural settlements,
comparable to that associated with the arrival of the Aramaeans a thousand years later.
Yet in time each of the nomadic groups is either absorbed into other populations or
becomes sedentary itself. Thus in Mesopotamia the Amorites are integrated so completely
into society that no trace of them survives the fall of the 1st Dynasty of Babylon. It was
traditional to see this process as a succession of waves, with tribes moving from a state
of complete nomadic barbarism to settled life. However, this is certainly an over-simplifi-
cation, and various intermediate stages may be surmised from ethnographic parallels and
observed in the cuneiform sources. Even a largely mobile group could have its sedentary
sector. It cannot be accidental that both Amorites and Aramaeans are recorded as having
a base at the Jebel Bishri, between the Euphrates and the major oasis of Tadmor (Palmyra):
in the later second millennium there were villages here, and an Amorite connection with
the mountain is found back into the third millennium.118

Nearer to urban civilization, along the Euphrates and Habur rivers, a process of gradual
assimilation to sedentary society is revealed by Mari letters: part of the tribe, part perhaps
even of a single village, may fix its winter residence and cultivate fields round a settlement,
while another part continues to take the flocks further north in the summer in search of
grazing (Text 4:10).119 As with such regimes in other places and times, the annual migration
may follow recognized routes to recognized encampments (navûm), where the grazing
rights were defined in relation to other nomads and the settled population. Nevertheless,
the demarcation will not have been as precise as that of sedentary farmers, and there must
have been plentiful occasion for dispute. In times of stability some of the desert nomads
even turn up in the employment of the urban sector, usually either in undemanding roles
such as door-keepers, or in service as mercenaries. The Ur III texts show that some
Amorites were integrated into sedentary life, especially in the south at Lagaš and Umma, while those mentioned in Isin and the Nippur region further north and west are engaged in miscellaneous casual jobs. Late in the Old Babylonian period we find encampments of Kassites, both on the Euphrates towards Mari and receiving beer rations from the urban administration in Sippar, very likely acting for the time being as mercenaries for the state (see chapter 13). It has always proved politic for a state to secure the continued attachment of its fighting men by finding plots of land for them, and no doubt this was another frequent route towards settled life.

Further reading

Little of a general nature has been written about urban and rural life: two Old Babylonian cities have been studied from different viewpoints by Harris 1975 (Sippar) and Stone 1987 (Nippur), and a study of Ur in the Old Babylonian period is expected from M. van de Mieroop. For the phenomenon of urbanization, with specific reference to settlement distribution and size, Adams 1981 is basic. On nomadic lifestyles in Mesopotamia two basic works are Kupper 1957 (in French) and Buccellati 1966. The doctoral dissertation of Luke 1965 is also important. For an anthropological approach see Kamp and Yoffee 1980 and, world-wide, Khazanov 1984.