

Class Conflict in Ancient Mesopotamia

Between Knowledge of History and Historicising Knowledge

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Abstract: In this article I provide a critique of historiography in Near Eastern archaeology and argue that forms of narrating the past are by necessity always political in nature. Current writing styles have a bias towards the upper classes of the past. I use this insight to elaborate on new ways of writing that shift the focus to different subjects of history. As a case study, I analyse discourses about evidence from fourth millennium Mesopotamia. Finally, I point out some alternative ways to approach historiography by asking new questions about old topics.

Keywords: class conflict, historiography, inequality, Mesopotamia, urbanisation

Perspectives on Writing History

V. Gordon Childe (1951: 33–39) conceptualised world history in what Stephen Jay Gould would have called ‘punctuated equilibria’ (Eldredge and Gould 1972) – that is, as a series of relatively stable stages and fast transitions. Childe identified three such transitions, which he called ‘revolutions’: a Neolithic, an urban and an industrial revolution. This notion of history has so deeply influenced the general understanding of the human past that it is difficult for authors of sweeping world histories, such as *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Diamond 1997) and *A People’s History of the World* (Harman 1999), to un-think those terms and the stages of world historical development that are associated with them.¹ Those archaeologists who have argued against Childe’s insights have for the most part maintained that such changes took place over too long a period of time to be called ‘revolutions’ (Trigger 1980).² Such quarrels, however, do not significantly diminish Childe’s insight into fundamental developments in global history.

Following Childe, archaeologists such as Robert McCormick Adams (1966) and Kent Flannery (1972, 1994) further elaborated on these ideas. In Near Eastern archaeology it was a group of scholars associated with the University of Michigan who particularly pursued empirical and conceptual research



into Childe's revolutions (e.g. Binford 1968; Hole et al. 1969). However, the transition that Childe had termed the 'urban revolution' was conceptualised as a process whose crucial characteristic is not the appearance of cities but rather the emergence of states (Wright 1977, 1978; Wright and Johnson 1975; cf. Bernbeck 2008a). In anthropological theories, the first emergence of cities is merely an epiphenomenon, arising from something more fundamental – namely, an increase in socio-political complexity, by which Wright and Johnson, as well as others, meant a growing political (often equated with 'vertical') and economic (mostly 'horizontal') differentiation of societies (e.g. Johnson 1973). Most scholars followed a social engineering model, including the 'principle of requisite variety' (Ashby 1958), which postulates that mounting differentiation in a horizontal systems dimension would automatically entail diversification in the vertical dimension, and the reverse.³ Some recent studies on the timescales of urbanisation argue for a self-amplification of diversity (e.g. Algaze 2001: 205–206), while others have returned to a focus on associations of inhabitants, ideological characteristics of ancient cities, factions vying for power and productive forces (e.g. Sherratt 1981; Smith 2003).

My own interest in the transition termed 'urban revolution' differs from these concerns. I argue that these important changes have been couched in a top-down narrative that silences some of its key aspects. Childe's history, the already-mentioned anthropological theories that reduce urbanisation to an expression of state emergence, and more recent academic discourse (e.g. Stone 2007) all share a distanced, structural approach to the urban revolution. The appearance of cities and increased productivity in the hinterland are analysed as geographical, large-scale political, demographic or cultural phenomena. Antagonisms and impediments to the process are treated mainly as factors that slow down a trajectory; rarely are they seen as worthy of investigation in and of themselves. But cannot the complexity of such a commingling of lifestyles be understood only when the multiple, incongruous forces involved have been taken into account?

When looking back at Childe's writing, we discover a tantalising one-sidedness in his thinking. He discusses the process of urbanisation mainly as a series of structural changes but never really investigates how people in the past experienced this transformation.⁴ His extremely valuable synthesis has a blind spot: people's involvement in and positioning towards the historical processes that they were going through. How could this happen to a Marxist historian? Did not Marx ([1847] 1983: 181) insist on the necessity to consider not just class 'in itself' but 'for itself', believing that historical change was likely to come about only when a group of people had become aware of their own exploited situation? Or does this principle not apply to pre-capitalist times?

One of Childe's main references to the interests of subaltern, working-class people can be found in *Man Makes Himself* (1941: 135):

The great public works then undertaken ... employed a host of workers. The latter's status is hard to define. How many laboured 'freely' in return for wages, or out of

sheer piety, or like conscripts in fulfilment of customary obligations to the community, or finally as slaves, the absolute chattels of an individual, a temple, or a state? All we know for the earliest times is that every labourer who continued to work must somehow be fed and supported by the surplus gathered by primary producers.

This paragraph reveals that Childe was aware of a lacuna in his historiography – the social and ideological positions of the subaltern. But instead of insisting on the need to pursue research into this issue, he contented himself with a fleeting acknowledgement of the problem, only to return immediately to the larger structures of surplus gathering and material support. Such a ‘solution’ to the diverse and likely oppositional views of those who were one of the driving forces of urbanisation – those who made history – risks shortening and simplifying the complexity of historical situations.

Historiography, Narrative Perspective, Past and Present Interests

Childe’s bird’s-eye view of history is not the disinterested, knowledgeable outsider’s reflection about the past that it pretends to be. The difference between ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ perspectives in general is mistaken, if etic is supposed to be an outsider’s viewpoint that is therefore more ‘objective’ than an emic one. The reason is that among the many potential insiders’ past perspectives, some are closer and others further away from the etic position in the present.⁵ When applied to history and archaeology, etic views are always relational. They can never refrain from linking up with some and taking distance from other past subject positions.

Childe’s view parallels that of many others who in their research and syntheses have reflected on large-scale processes in history. Most such histories, archaeological discourses included, are structured by a specific and firmly established relation of relations. At the basis are two relations: one between researcher and research subject, and the other between the narrator of a historical text and the narrated content. Researcher and narrator are not and cannot be identical (Bernbeck 2005). On a different plane, the connection between these two relations (researcher–research subject and narrator–narrated) is one of content to form – a connection that is constitutive for present historiography. Historiography imagines these relations in a very restrictive way:

- The past as different from the present, the ‘subject’ of our profession, turns into an object that needs to be mastered. Such mastery is achieved when the past is ‘understood’ or ‘explained’.
- Historians and archaeologists adopt a narrative form with a uniform standpoint. This single perspective, usually that of an omniscient narrator, has a deep influence on the content of our accounts of the past.

Both relations can be characterised as overpowering, unidirectional and non-dialectical. The combination of these two relations produces a historiography that is by necessity unrealistic. If we try to capture ‘fully’ what happened in a remote past by conceiving of the past as an entity that has coherence, we merge – willingly or not – our own perspective on ‘what happened in history’ with the interests of those past people who also had reason to strive for an overview of socio-political structures. In the case of ancient cities and states, these people were the bureaucrats and managers, the priests and early kings, rather than women, workers or the lower-class elderly (see Pollock 1992). Perhaps unintentionally, academic discourse develops into an abstract managerial view of the past whereby society is handled like a business with a balance sheet (Childe’s ‘surplus’), and the summary figures tell us how well such a totality is doing. Wright and Johnson’s (1975) insightful analysis of ‘decision makers’ and their space for actions takes a similar view.

The form of our accounts – textual narratives – hides to some extent this convergence of past interests and present perspectives. We talk about the past as if it could be captured and represented like the overall features of a large canvas, a world extraneous to our own. The structure of such narratives, with a single outsider viewpoint, imposes coherence on what is narrated. This link between form and coherence of content is responsible for an unrealistic rendering of past interests, which would have to be depicted from multiple angles at the same time, like a cubist painting. Alexander Kluge’s *Schlachtbeschreibung* (1978), a monumental attempt to render a fictional impression of the battle of Stalingrad, and Walter Kempowski’s *Das Echolot* (2005), a documentary on the end of the Second World War, are convincing attempts to integrate multiple perspectives – and they do not leave a shred of coherence to their theme of research. At the same time, though, their topics are turned into unmanageable and therefore unmastered narrations that give a much deeper sense of the complexity and contradictory character of historical reality than the more ‘successful’ coherent historical works that are edifying because they are abridged summaries.

The double relational arrangement of omniscient perspective and objectification/mastery is at the root of a further spin – the cross-cultural anthropological comparison. In-depth comparative studies such as Adams’s *The Evolution of Urban Society* (1966), Michael Mann’s *The Sources of Power* (1986) and Timothy Earle’s *How Chiefs Came to Power* (1997) build on the fixed configuration of the twin relations outlined above.

Towards an Aspectival Past

A historian’s or archaeologist’s search for past reality should include not only dry facts plus an account of structural, institutional changes, but also, as in Kluge’s and Kempowski’s works, considerations of people’s involvements in those changes. In recent developments in archaeology, those adopting agency theories have attempted to tackle this problem. However, we find two radically

different conceptualisations of agency: an ‘entrepreneurial’ one and, for lack of a better term, a ‘practicalist’ one. Flannery (1999) and others (e.g. Clark 2003: 47–48; Hayden and Adams 2004) turn agency largely into the potential for action by individuals among emerging elites, aggrandisers or entrepreneurs, and, more awkwardly, ‘agents’. In such scenarios, agents are mostly individuals whose motivation is derived from an assumption of instrumental rationality: their actions are supposed to optimise specific returns for themselves or their group. Because of this specific but reductionist set of assumptions, the agency of such individuals, and also of households and other institutions, lends itself to simulations in the form of agent-based modelling (ABM) (Bentley and Maschner 2008; Wilkinson et al. 2007; Wright 2000). This approach does not solve the above-mentioned historiographical problems, as the resulting history is a strict function of the mechanisms of acquiring and processing scientific knowledge. The underlying essence of ‘humanity’ of such approaches is the capacity for optimising means-ends relations. The past is turned into a ‘project of modernity’ in which over-idealised Cartesian subjects populate a virtual world that is supposed to reflect the past. The importance of such constructions is not so much their ability to enlighten us about the past but rather their tendency toward an ideological mechanism of dehistoricising our present instrumental rationality as a timeless and ubiquitous feature of ‘being human’. Twentieth-century history has revealed the dangers of such a worldview and its projections (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972).

A completely different, practice-based concept of agency is driven by the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984). In these concepts, agency is a potential for action by anyone, not just the powerful (Dobres and Robb 2000; Gardner 2004). In archaeological writings, individuals may become the focus of research (e.g. Gillespie 2001; Hodder 2000), but in most cases, it is a vague notion of small group agency that prevails. This kind of agency approach asks questions at the scale of daily life. Such thinking has to deal with the complex problem of motivations and their status in human practices. But this approach has its own drawbacks. Applications in archaeological contexts posit that daily life consisted of practices that barely ever reached the level of discursivity. A favoured way of explaining long-term change views small- and large-scale transformations as unintended consequences of embodied practices, rather than as actions taken in favour of – or opposition to – specific historical conditions (e.g. Joyce 2004; Pauketat 2000).

Thus, agency theories have advocated world histories that are either a product of competing avant-garde entities (as in ABM approaches) or the result of a Hegelian *Weltgeist* that reveals itself only after the fact to the insightful historian-archaeologist. These approaches have deep political and ethical repercussions. Complexity modelling as a way of investigating past worlds has few adherents in archaeology but many in the wider field of well-funded natural sciences, while the sociological, ‘practicalist’ approach tends to dominate present-day scholarly debates within archaeology. Both theories treat

past events and people in a non-dialectical fashion, ignoring the peril that the academic creation of alterities can work back in fatal ways on our own world.

In addition, both of these approaches, including Childe's, neglect the fundamentally antagonistic nature of history. Can we really assume that Neolithic revolutions or an urbanisation process went unchallenged? Is it not clear from the description of the emergent diversification of society and divisions of labour that those who had to lose in the process were not obliging blindly? Neither Childe (1941: 105–139) nor most later authors investigate these problems in great detail. Rather, narratives focus on 'specialisation' as a manifestation of 'horizontal differentiation' of a system, an index of social complexity. The assumed desirability of 'progress' is palpable in many older writings (e.g. Brumfiel and Earle 1987). Those who espouse applying a 'practicalist' approach to past actions excise reflexivity on the part of past peoples. This latter historiographic strategy reduces the conditions of possibility of interest-driven actions altogether (e.g. Stahl 2002). Should we not consider the repercussions of such narratives on our own present conditions?

With regard to the past, I contend that we should expect a reaction from those whose social and economic position deteriorated in a process of co-optation, even when such a change took hundreds of years. The assumption that people were unaware of the process – leading to a tendency towards explanations of change as 'unintended consequences' – is archaeo-myopic. Antagonisms, whether as staunch resistance, discourse (as 'hidden transcript'; Scott 1990) or both, were always part of history. I mention an example to which Childe himself referred: human mobility. Part of the romanticised past is the image of the eternal, unchanging village or city, a sedentaro-centrist image (Bernbeck 2008b) that divides the world sharply into the peasant and urban settled populations versus the mobile sector of nomads, traders and itinerant craftspeople. To a lesser or larger extent, human societies were always mobile, with complex forms of deliberate or enforced movements. The fundamental consequence of various forms of travel and mobility is located in the social and intellectual realm: people became cognisant of others' lifestyles and were able to compare them to their own (Clifford 1997). Life outside of cities and states was not unknown to urban dwellers. Whether through travelling craftsmen, herders, exogamous marriage rules or other means, mobility was a way to spread knowledge – verbally and/or materially – of other ways of life. This knowledge served as a backdrop to one's own conditions, as a tool for self-reflection by a group or individual. One indication of this is that all societies with writing have produced narratives of their Others. It is usually assumed that such alterities are routinely depicted in a demeaning fashion, as in the *Odyssey* or in tales such as *Gilgamesh and Humbaba*. It is likely, however, that this is more a characteristic of officially propagated stories. A good example of unofficial stories are the Pashtun tales collected by Aisha Ahmad (Ahmad and Boase 2003). Many of them provide a counter-image to the stark and real power differences between genders in Pashtun society. In most of those stories, courtly women

come across as smart and alert, whereas the majority of male power-holders and throne pretenders are almost foolish figures. These narratives synthesise the more ephemeral 'hidden transcripts'. Counter-worlds do not spring up from nowhere; they are based on real encounters with an Other, even when the specific stories, such as the legend of William Tell, have no historical kernel.

A silencing of the obstinate or actively resisting forces in history has often been noted, but is at best hinted at, in academic accounts of ancient south-western Asia. One of Childe's mistakes was his teleological view of history, which was based firmly on an attempt to trace back the processes that led from prehistoric villagers to the present in a fairly uniform development. Despite his Marxist stance, or maybe in part because of his closeness to Soviet Marxism, Childe (1951: 37–39) succumbed to a long-term history conceptualised as a unilinear, upwards trajectory. More benevolent interpretations suggest that his pacifist convictions led him to silence conflict – class conflict rather than warfare – as a motor of change (Renfrew 1994: 124–125). Anthropological theories do not fare better than Childe's histories, as they also disavow the multiplicity of voices of those in conflict with each other. Discourses about ancient Mesopotamia that speak of the 'prosperity' of its civilisation (e.g. Forest 2006: 15–17) are so deeply engrained in the academic discipline that their dissolution is almost impossible. They have turned into what Foucault (1972) terms a 'regime of truth'. And when someone resists scholarly orthodoxy, publication industries rectify the critique by suppressing it (e.g. Pollock 1999: xii).

Contrary to standard approaches, we might better follow Helmuth Plessner (1982: 90–93), who argues that coherence in historical representations is fundamentally mistaken as it neglects the internal dialectics and contradictory developments that are at the base of all human activities. Lion Feuchtwanger's (1963) metaphor of the past as a mountain chain best viewed when seen from afar is helpful here. He opines that a distant gaze is advantageous as it will reveal the overall features of a monumental landscape. An omniscient history à la Childe accords well with this opinion. The practicalist, agency-driven approaches, however, attempt to insert themselves into this allegorical past landscape in order to gain insight into detail. What they miss is that taking a few steps in such mountains can radically alter the understanding of one's position – and that there are countless potential positions.

The situation is even more complex. It might seem as if, in order to solve the historiographical problem, we simply have to question our knowledge from different points of view – for example, from that of a subaltern person, a priest or an accountant. However, just as in the present, not all perspectives in the past can be construed as equal. The power-holders' interest is that of conserving a system, of having at hand a considerable knowledge of ongoing processes which in many societies is acquired by way of a group (or class) of what Gramsci termed 'organic intellectuals' – people who help conceptualise worldviews that aim to depict the particular interests of the dominant group as the general interests of all groups. On the other hand, subaltern and often destitute groups

have a privileged insight into social conditions, as their interest in the maintenance of a status quo is minimal at best.⁶ History is most likely replete with situations wherein peasants, workers, women and other subjected sectors of a society tried to overturn ruling conditions (Scott 1976). Yet archaeologists have not bothered to investigate these closely, assuming that the sources would not allow us to do so. Historical narratives, Childe's included, reveal the ways in which we side with the interests of the powerful. Thus, Childe (1941: 134) writes: 'Finally, war helped in a great discovery – that men as well as animals can be domesticated. Instead of killing a defeated enemy, he might be enslaved.' How can such sentences form part of an emancipatory social history? This is possible only because the community of writers, book producers and readers live(d) in a discursive universe that finds no offence in taking the perspective of the slaveholder and potential killer, that is, the person for whom the availability of slaves is 'great'.⁷ Looking at our discipline, one might paraphrase Wilhelm Reich (1975): what has to be explained is not the fact that the academic who explores inequality despises it but why the majority of those who explore it do not despise it.⁸

A change from perspectival, single-standpoint narratives to the creation of aspectival accounts that juxtapose views of workers, servants or lower-class women in a village would result in completely different histories (Bernbeck 2005). Childe's world historical scheme and anthropological ideas about state emergence, aggrandisers and practice theory are, in the final instance, and to a greater or lesser extent, written from the perspective of the powerful: they are concerned with the survival of a large social whole, not with resistance to its creation (see Faulkner 2007). As historical subjects, 'urbanisation', 'state emergence' and 'tragedies of the commoners' (Pauketat 2000) are always utterly incomplete unless the views of social forces that tried to overcome such processes and their outcomes are included.⁹ Thus, the harmonious theories of city development can be said to be a romantic, archaeological beautification of a much harsher, antagonistic and discordant historical reality, one that in most cases remains to be discovered. Below, I discuss fourth millennium BCE Mesopotamia in an effort to show the potential for a different history. I argue that labels such as 'urbanisation', 'urban revolution' and 'state emergence' form the initial trap of historians and archaeologists because they set out a discursive field from which it is hard to escape.

Urbanisation and Alienation in Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is of relevance for any discussion of the first tendencies towards urbanisation. The growth of settlements and social differentiation dates to the late fifth to fourth millennia, called variously the Uruk or Late Chalcolithic period (Rothman 2001). The Mesopotamian case is crucial, because it has served as a model of urbanisation for many other regions in the world.

The Genesis of Cities and Settlement Structures

The Uruk period in southern Mesopotamia is characterised by a massive rural-urban migration that led to the growth of a few cities, the largest among them Uruk (Adams and Nissen 1972; Finkbeiner 1991). Traditionally, studies of settlement systems in the lower alluvium of the Euphrates and Tigris divide the area into a northern Nippur-Adab region and a southern region around the city of Uruk (see fig. 1). Beyond this presumed cultural-social double core of the Uruk tradition, remains of the same style of material culture have been found in lowland and highland Iran to the east and north-east, in the steppes of northern Mesopotamia and in south-eastern Turkey (Postgate 2002; Rothman 2001). The relations between the southern Mesopotamian populations in the alluvium and the outlier regions are not entirely clear, and interpretations range from models of world systems or colonisation (Algaze 1993) to trade networks (Stein 1999; Weiss and Young 1975) to refugee settlements (Johnson 1988–1989).

Uruk, by far the largest agglomeration, had an extensive temple platform and a complex of huge non-domestic buildings in the centre of the settlement (see fig. 2) (Englund 1998; Nissen 1988: 96–103). Their functions remain obscure as some had apparently been cleaned out before abandonment, and excavators did not document closely the findspots of objects. Materials for this public architecture were more durable than the usual mudbrick Riemchen walls. One of the tripartite ‘temples’ was built entirely out of limestone, which had to be transported from a nearby location (Boehmer 1984), described by Oates (1993: 408) as ‘only some 50 km to the southwest’. On the surface, that might appear to be an innocuous statement. But is it not likely that the word ‘only’ would disappear immediately if the experiences of the workers were taken into account? I will return to this issue below. Suffice it to say here that this limestone building was a unique occurrence in ancient southern Mesopotamia. Neighbouring structures had embellished facades of hard-fired clay cones with colouring on one end. Set into a bed of plaster, they protected the mudbrick core of the walls from wind and weather. These structures of unusual durability were at the same time of extraordinary splendour – locations of political power at the centre of a fast-growing city (Bernbeck 1996). The technique of using clay cones was emulated in smaller towns where they have been found on the surface of contemporary sites (Johnson 1980). Such monumentality always has both temporal and spatial dimensions, which are present in Uruk-period architecture as sheer size and new kinds of durable materials.

City plans from southern Mesopotamia are basically unknown. However, some northern Mesopotamian places such as Habuba Kabira not only had thoroughfares and *Mittelsaalhäuser* (tripartite houses with a central hall) with a relatively standardised plan (Strommenger 1980), but also a major public building (Tell Qannas) with typical temple plans (see fig. 3). Features normally associated with a religious building, such as an altar, sometimes are lacking (Finet 1977).

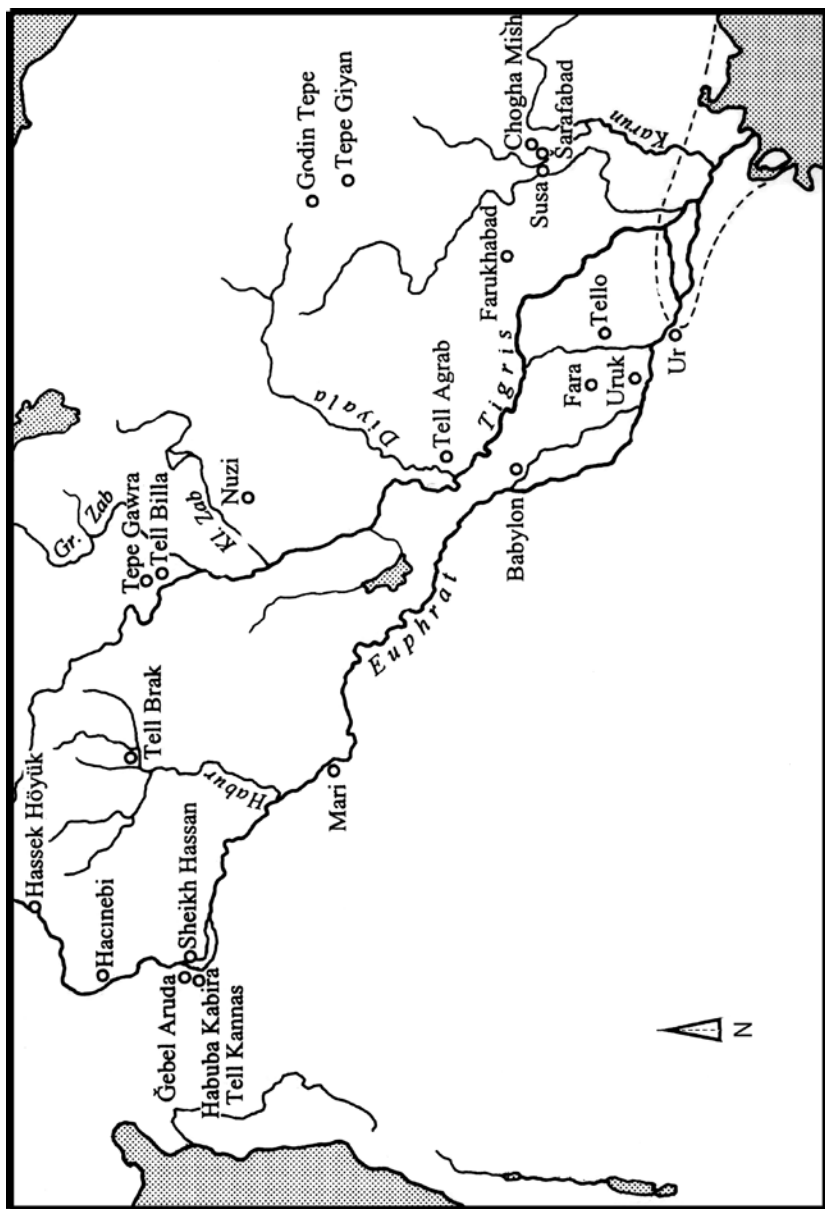


Figure 1: Map of Mesopotamia with sites mentioned in the text (after Boehmer 1999: XII).

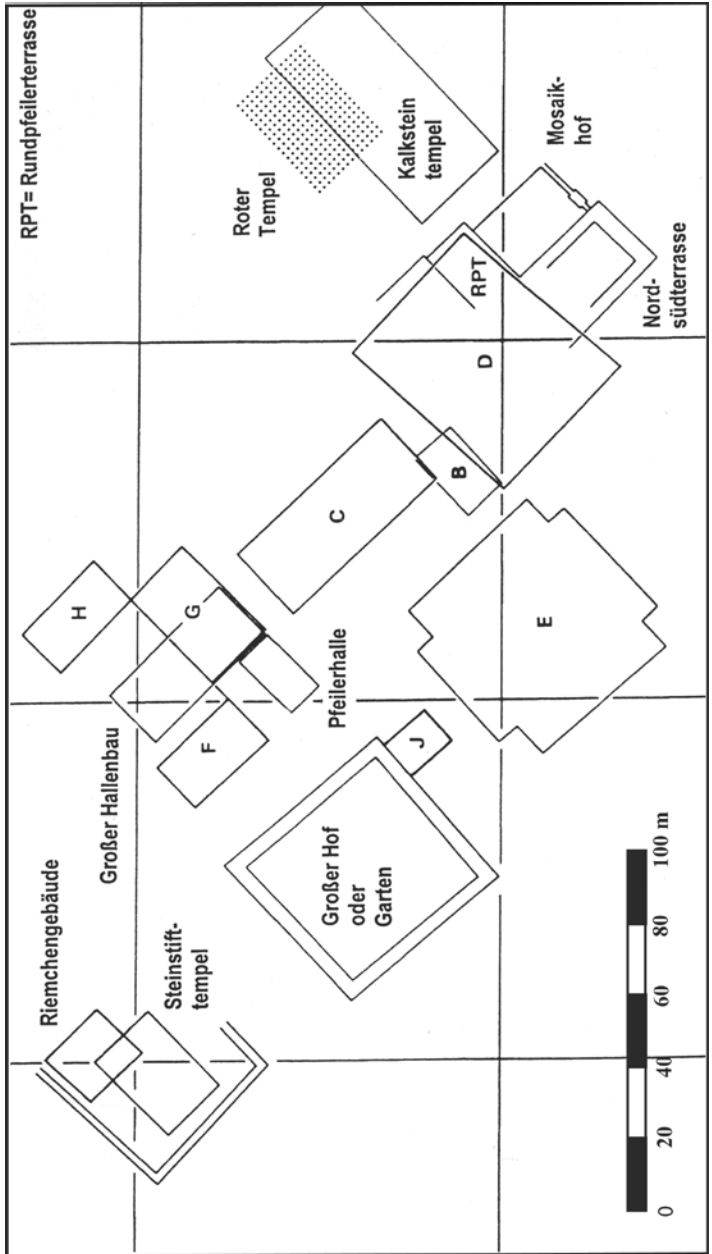


Figure 2: Public buildings in the E-Anna area (after Boehmer 1999; Abb. 1).

Who was living and working in villages, towns and cities? Despite plenty of field research, it is still difficult to give a precise answer. Pollock (2001) argues on empirical grounds that the Nippur-Adab region is not urbanised in the Uruk period since it is dotted with what she calls 'agricultural towns', settlements where activities are largely identical to those of smaller villages, and where vast public structures are so far not identifiable. If Pollock's thesis is correct, it would be important to know what the living structures in those towns looked like. Unfortunately, evidence for the region is nearly non-existent. Relying on evidence from peripheral cities such as Habuba Kabira in Syria runs the risk of falling prey to exceptional situations. Best known are the houses from Habuba Kabira, a town that lacks any history of slow growth and resembles Le Corbusier's Chandigarh, one of the richest cities in present-day India. According to Heinz (1997: 35–37), the Habuba Kabira houses can be grouped into five different classes; class II is the type that would indicate living structures of an elite (ibid.: 85–89). However, the less conspicuous structures in Heinz's typology are not that much smaller and are interspersed among the larger ones. In other words, the architectural documentation does not allow us to make any inferences about a split between socio-economic classes in terms of living conditions. It would seem unlikely, however, that the massive public structures of a city like Uruk were built by inhabitants of large *Mittelsaalhäuser* such as those found at Habuba Kabira.

Representations of Inequality

The time of urbanisation coincides with the first use of stone as a material for large-scale imagery, or what has been called monumental 'art' (Moortgat 1982). As in architecture, durability of matter and object size are deployed in novel ways. I suggest that a temporal surplus of the material world, when compared to earlier times, produces a stark reversal of the relation between people and their surroundings. Constant repair and recreation in pre-Uruk times were part of a universe in which people knew that their praxis largely created their own conditions.¹⁰ This was so even if that knowledge was embedded in ideologies that we might consider to be magical or religious.

In contrast, Uruk-period material culture produces a new paradoxical relation between people and objects: the material conditions into which people are thrown appear in part to be hyper-stable beyond the lives of any individual, or even several generations, and in part to be artificially shortened. Architecture and monumental art exhibit the desire to increase the temporal surplus of the material world. Disposal patterns of bevelled rim bowls, a crude pottery type discussed below, imply a strong counter-trend, a realm of society where throw-away practices reach almost postmodern dimensions. How could such sharply divergent tendencies co-occur? Traditionally, this question has been silenced, as art historians have focused on aesthetic desires and psychology for an explanation of the changes in artistic and representational

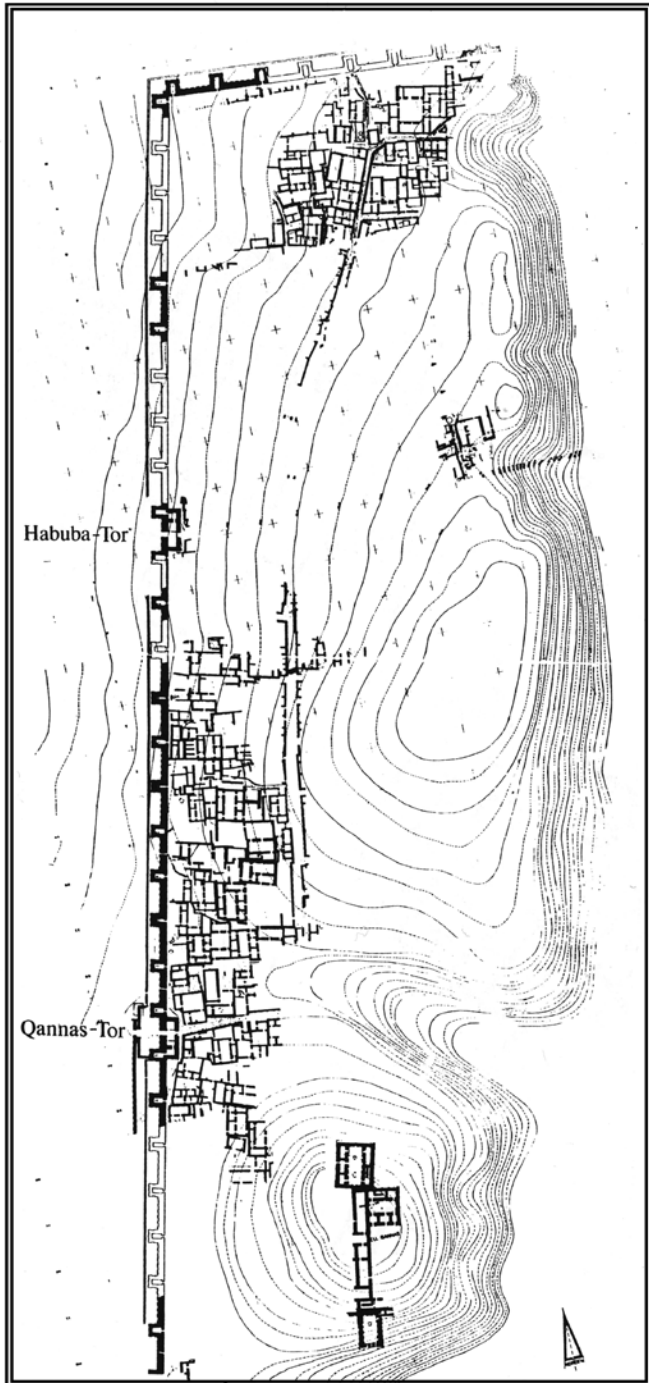


Figure 3: Habuba Kabira, city plan (after Heinz 1997: Tafel 6).

phenomena, while forgetting completely the accompanying crude items of daily life (Moortgat 1982; see also Ellis 1975). Those who were interested in the coarse bowls, on the other hand, had economic and political systems rather than users in mind (Nissen 1988; Wright et al. 1989).

Employing new materials requires the development of technical skills, tools and relations of production. In this time period, bow drills and microborers were likely used to a much greater extent than before. There is evidence for their use in the production of seals, and stone bowls were hollowed with larger borers (Boehmer 1999: 54–55; Eichmann 1987).¹¹ Not only were new skills and tools necessary, but also fresh paths to acquire the necessary raw materials. The social status of stone cutters is unknown to us, as is the organisation of their work. But one category of their products, the cylinder seals, clearly shows a split into two different groups. The ‘high quality’ seals have a large circumference and thus also a large surface for pictorial representation. They are worked with a number of different tools, from drills to engravers, and their subjects are mostly derived from the politico-religious realm. Another class of seals is smaller, made in a much more expedient way with bow drills or short, straight engraved cuts. The scenes that are depicted, if at all interpretable, often contain women as textile workers (see figs. 4 and 5).

The production of such a clearly structured representational set was probably due to a guided effort by an elite to construct a worldview that was both segregating and inclusive. Was this then the outcome of cunning schemes of rulers or priests? We cannot decide this with the evidence at hand. However, I argue that the ability to convince artisans to develop new technologies to produce images of the powerful and the subaltern in new but sharply divided media was not seen by all concerned in a positive light. A unified reaction by audiences would have been equally unlikely. Obstinacy and *Eigensinn* (stubbornness) of artisans in the Uruk period have not been research questions, mostly because archaeologists have not developed methods to ask such questions, but also because we have been fascinated by the sudden emergence of artefacts that the modern world views as aesthetically pleasing art (e.g. Moortgat 1982). If research questions are ideologically driven, potential research questions that are *not* asked tell us even more about our own ideological blinkers.

One of the major representational achievements of the Uruk period is the depiction of people in relation to each other (Bernbeck and Pollock 2002). In earlier periods, people are overwhelmingly shown individually on figurines or in relation to animals on stamp seals. One might counter that Garfinkel’s (2003: table 6.1) work lists 341 scenes with multiple persons, which he interprets as dances, from the period between the eighth and late fifth millennia in the Near East.¹² Garfinkel’s reading of nearly all pre-urban Near Eastern depictions that include several people as ‘dance’ may overemphasise this particular aspect of social life in two ways. First, considering the quantitatively enormous body of painted pottery and other media from which he draws his examples, the occurrence of dance depictions is extremely rare. Second, the rhythmic movement of



Figure 4: High-quality seals with ritual scenes (after Orthmann 1975: Abb. 126 a-b).



Figure 5: Small, low-quality seals with scenes of working women (after Orthmann 1975: Abb. 128 a-c).

bodies, underscored by music, is also often marshalled for collective heavy work, not just for dances (e.g. Richards 1993). But these objections do not detract from his main – and valid – point: pre-urban depictions almost never include unequal relations between people. The sudden change to an emphasis on the depiction of hierarchies must be seen as reflecting dramatic social change, even if the symbolic realm conceals rather than unveils real social relations.

The representation of unequal relations was likely a way to uphold a political hierarchy, a precondition of which is a specific framing that naturalises this kind of relations. The imagery on cylinder seals (e.g. Boehmer 1999), stelae (Orthmann 1975: Abb. 68) and the first statues often shows a figure rendered in a standardised fashion. He is easily recognisable as a ruler among his people because of his greater height, extravagant hairdo, long beard and skirt, and, in some cases, elaborate decoration. In contrast, most other men are depicted naked (Bernbeck and Pollock 2002; Lindemeyer and Martin 1993: Tafel 19–25), and women never appear on the same image as this ruling figure, with one exception (see below). The ideological implications are by far not fully understood (Pollock and Bernbeck 2000). Submission to this *Mann im Netzrock* (man in netskirt) is legitimised by imagery that shows him in association with the symbol of the goddess Inanna. The most striking such depiction is contained on the so-called Uruk Vase (see fig. 6), where superposed registers display, from the bottom up, water, plants, a row of rams, naked men carrying baskets, and finally, in the uppermost row, the ruler (reconstructible in the missing fragment of figure 7) and two attendants in a scene where they encounter a woman, most likely a priestess of Inanna or the goddess herself.

The stone vase defends and explains the principle of inequality in several ways. First, hierarchies can be found in nature (animals, plants, water); second, the ruler among humans is himself subservient to a supernatural power, Inanna; third, the vase provides a strong threat of exclusion by omitting half of humanity: women; fourth, the vase is a symbolic world with a ‘Droste effect’.¹³ In the upper register, two vases similar to the one that carries the representation are depicted behind the goddess/priestess (see fig. 7). This symbolic world is self-referential. It is a visual ‘strange loop’, the effect of which is that ‘despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out’ (Hofstadter 2007: 101–102). This new representational universe of submission and dominance is at the same time symbolically closed.

As mentioned, except for the goddess Inanna or her priestess, women are almost never shown together with men. Females are mostly depicted on small and coarsely made cylinder seals as groups of servile workers who pursue monotonously uniform activities, such as weaving and spinning (fig. 5). On some occasions, overseers can be identified (Pollock and Bernbeck 2000). Thus, the visual framing of submissive humans, achieved through an inclusion of the animal and plant world, is at the same time exclusive. The vase and other durable visualisations of a starkly hierarchical world do not simply represent the



Figure 6: Imagery on the 'Uruk Vase' (after Orthmann 1975: 69b).

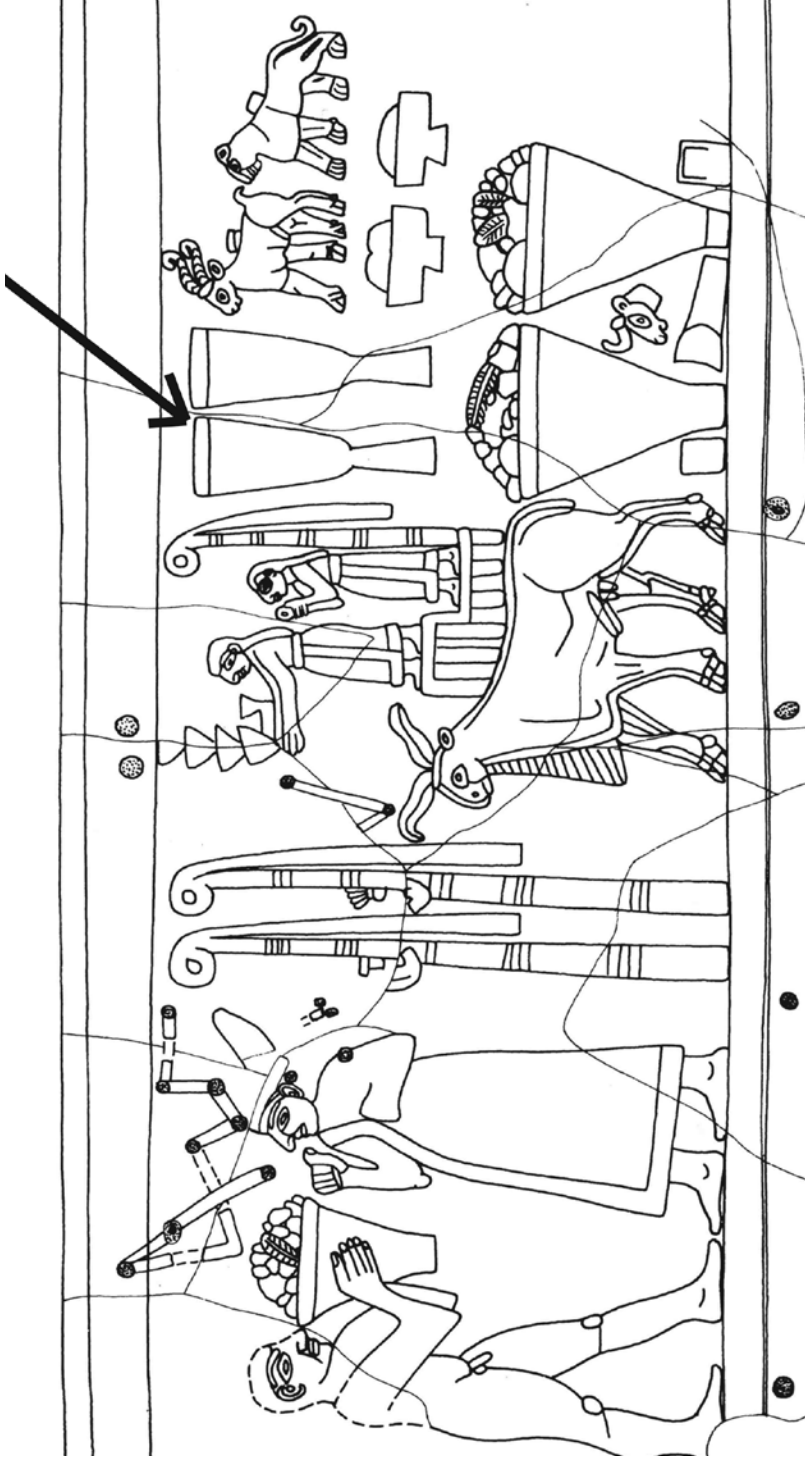


Figure 7: Upper register of the 'Uruk Vase' with 'Droste effect' (arrow) (after Lindemeyer and Martin 1993: Tafel 25).

world in which they were made. Through eliminatory and integrative moves, they create it, maintain and reinforce it, and advocate its inescapability.

It may therefore not be astonishing that such a representational universe incorporates the appearance of normative depictions of violence, including shacklings and killings. Traditionally, they have been interpreted as scenes of war, as the killing of external enemies. Called ‘scene of captives’ (*Gefangenenszene*) by Brandes (1979; see also Boehmer 1999), the exact content of the depictions is not entirely clear. However, the naming of a representation where naked men use sticks and similar objects to savagely beat up others who are bound together in a crouching position (Boehmer 1999: Tafel 12, 17, 20 bottom) is a way of framing that clearly has an effect on how a visual representation is interpreted. Thus, when Englund (1998: fig. 9) uses the caption ‘prisoners being tortured’, he makes us see a different image.¹⁴ Among the seal images from Uruk depicting prisoners are two in particular that were displayed often (see fig. 8) (Boehmer 1999: nos. 3 and 4).¹⁵ Both include a tall man with a spear overseeing the torture scene. Interestingly, archaeologists and art historians have spilled a lot of ink over the identity of this figure, most often concluding that he is the *Mann im Netzrock*, likely a ruler, who is referred to in later texts as EN. However, who are the tortured and the torturers? This is another unasked question, and its omission is revealing in view of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Western history (cf. Agamben 2005). In all such scenes from Uruk that are listed by Boehmer, torturers and victims are distinguished solely by their bodily comportment, not by hairdo or clothing. Judging by the photos and drawings, they are all naked. It is therefore not entirely clear that this is a scene of war, that is, an external conflict; rather, it may well depict the repressive forces of an emerging state against its own population. Indeed, the idea of a clear political and conceptual separation between external and interior populations in the Uruk period is another preconception that impinges on the interpretation of the imagery and the period as a whole.

The brutal scenes are clearly a crucial moment in a sequence of events; a clash of some sorts must have happened prior to this. What happened thereafter? Were the tortured people freed, imprisoned or killed? On a seal from Susa

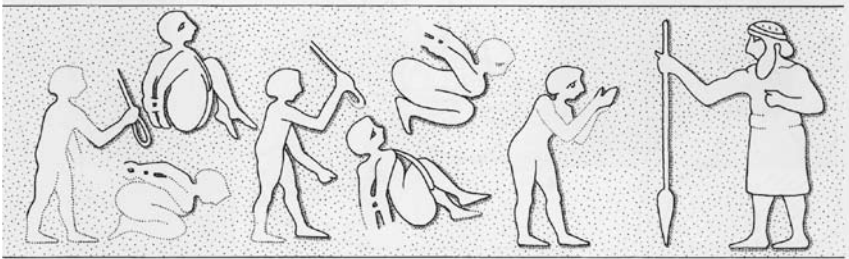


Figure 8: Depiction of violent conflict on a cylinder seal
(after Boehmer 1999: Tafel 17, no. 4 A-L).

(Boehmer 1999: Abb. 102b), a figure similar to the one overseeing torture in the Uruk seals is shooting with a bow at people who are already pierced with arrows in front of a structure that is most likely a temple. The ruler is probably a metonym for a larger fighting entity. But the space in which this fight against naked adversaries takes place is a city, making it more likely that this scene depicts an internal conflict rather than a war against outside enemies. As for the aftermath of torture, we may have to go back to Childe's comment on the 'great' discovery of slavery. In a discussion of archaic texts, Englund (1998: 176–179; 2007) notes the structural similarity between texts that deal with herds of animals and 'herds' of people. He interprets this as an indication of slavery. The phenomenon of 'herding' humans seems to have been fairly widespread. The depiction of animals at work in many seals from Susa of the time are ideologically related to this triple effect: domestic animals work, need protection and do not resist orders. Human subordinates fall into the same category. This theme is extremely important as the benevolent protection by a herder – a sort of pastoral governmentality *avant la lettre* – and the repressive function of commanding people in work groups appear at the same time.

While the first writing appears in Mesopotamia in the Late Uruk period, the scribes restricted themselves primarily to lists and accounting (Nissen et al. 1990). Even the deeds of rulers are not mentioned, and we have to wait until the mid-third millennium to find reliable accounts of historical persons and their names. However, a list of professions attests that activities were internally and hierarchically divided. In some places, a sign is used that in later centuries takes on the meaning of 'overseer' (Nissen 1974, 1988). From the pictorial and written evidence, we can safely conclude that Uruk society was class-based with sharp gender inequalities.

Lower-Class Lifeworlds

Texts hint at the existence of lower-class people in the Late Uruk period, but they do not tell us anything about the lives of these people. Available architecture and city plans are of no great help either. However, there is one widely acknowledged object that has the potential to reveal aspects of subaltern living and working conditions: the so-called bevelled rim bowl. These bowls have received a lot of attention because of their ubiquity, although, again, some important questions about them have rarely been raised. Bevelled rim bowls were made of very coarse clay. The bowls have impressions of fists on the inner base, a grainy exterior and a roughly smoothed interior and rim (see fig. 9). In contrast to other partly wheel-turned vessels of the time, these bowls were entirely hand-shaped. They were pressed into a mould in the ground, the edge being cut off obliquely, and the interior was coarsely smoothed before firing. Speed was likely a key aspect of the production process. The bowls have been found literally in tens of thousands at almost every site of the Uruk period. What is more astounding is that many of them were complete when found. They

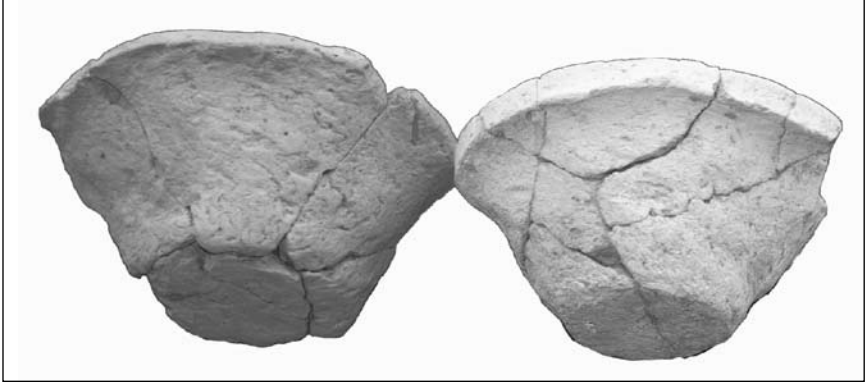


Figure 9: Bevelled rim bowls (photograph by the author).

are commonly interpreted as ration bowls (Nissen 1970), based on their sizes, which fit contemporary textual indications of personal daily food rations.¹⁶ At this early stage, archaic writing uses a sign (GAR) that closely resembles a bowl (Englund 1998: 180–181). The proposed function of these bowls as food ration containers, based on the sign GU₇, showing a head holding such a vessel to the lips (see fig. 10) (Nissen 1988: fig. 33), has opened the door to many ideas about the organisation of work and payment, political economy and distributional mechanisms. Bevelled rim bowl densities have been interpreted as indicators of the intensity of dependent work (and its payment). Wright et al. (1980, 1989; cf. Pollock 2008) have provided convincing arguments that the variable densities of these bowls in a deep pit at Sharafabad were due to seasonal and annual variations of productive activities. All of these interpretations have afforded many insights into the functioning of Uruk society in the fourth millennium.

Nevertheless, these explications are curiously lopsided. They rightly presuppose a ‘public sector economy’ in which a lower class of dependent workers were ‘paid’ – that is, fed – by their ‘employers’. Archaeologists have painstakingly investigated questions of management and bureaucracy, of payment and allocation of work (e.g. Johnson 1987). Wittingly or not, in asking these questions,

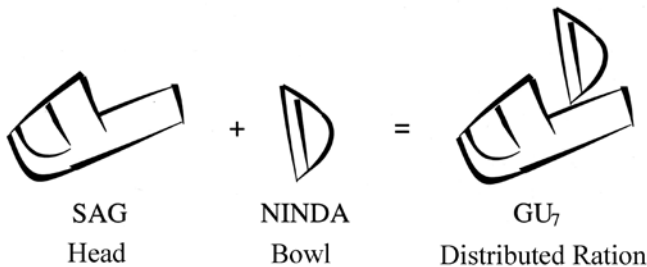


Figure 10: Sign GU₇, and tablet with that sign (after Nissen et al. 1990: fig. 6g).

researchers have consistently taken the standpoint of the powerful: they have adopted the perspective of those who distributed food rather than those who received and consumed it. For philologists, the nature of the written evidence can hardly avoid adoption of the stance of administrators and managers: Mesopotamian cuneiform writing was developed for exactly these tasks (Englund 1998; Nissen 1988). However, we as archaeologists do not need to reflect on who determined how to use scarce means in order to maximise specific ends. We have direct access to quotidian objects of work and reproduction. Nonetheless, the focus is on managerial decision taking rather than on investigating how the exploited might have reacted to such decisions. Zagarell's (1986) approach is one exception to this trend, but he focuses on time frames that mostly post-date the period I am concerned with. The views of the thousands, if not tens of thousands, of people who used those ugly bowls have been entirely silenced. This is a bizarre oversight in a history of research that goes back decades and that has been expressly concerned with 'common people'.

What can these bowls tell us about a working-class perspective in ancient Mesopotamia? What were the circumstances of life that forced people to eat from these coarse containers? Early texts will obviously not provide us with an answer. Even though they use a sign that depicts the bowls, these texts reflect the interests of the powerful: they are concerned with distribution, rationing and plans for future productivity. Nor will the pictorial representations help much, as the bowls in question, while symbolically prominent in archaic texts, are not often depicted in figural imagery – and if they are, then not in work contexts. Since few if any living quarters of the working class are known (but see Pollock et al. 1996), and workplaces hardly more so (e.g. Kohlmeyer 1997; Nissen 1988: 81–83, fig. 32), the only access to the perspective of the subaltern is from some primary contexts where bowls may have been set up for use and others where they were dumped. In the few instances where bevelled rim bowls were discovered in primary contexts, they were often found placed upside down and, as in Chogha Mish, in rows (Delougaz et al. 1996: plate 15, A–C).¹⁷ Texts indicate that distributions of rations occurred on a massive scale. We do not know for a fact what kind of food was distributed, as no residue analyses for such vessels are available. However, judging by the sign GU₇ (Nissen 1988: 84–85), easily interpretable as a head holding one of these bowls to the lips, it must have been something that could be drunk or a kind of porridge. Texts suggest that this might have been a barley product, most likely a sort of beer, which was not a thin liquid but rather a sticky, alcoholic pulp (Damerow 1996; Pollock 2003: 29–31). This beer-like ration was nutritious and also provided liquid, which was a necessity in the hot, dry climate.

Where did people consume these foodstuffs? In one case at least, the bowls were found under a house floor, most likely after being discarded by construction workers (Wright 1985). In other cases, gangs of workers may have been sent out to clean canals, an immensely important task that needed to be done at least once a year (Wilkinson 1990). Using the evidence of the bevelled rim bowls arranged in neat rows at Chogha Mish, we can imagine a scene in which

workers gather during a break from work to pick up centrally distributed food. In most situations, such a place would have been in the open fields or near canals, often away from towns.¹⁸ Apparently, the production of these bowls was so cheap that they were often thrown away in a whole, unbroken state (Pollock 1999: 94–95). The expediency of the production process suggests that these items were made at or near the place of their use. Transporting the bowls would have been more costly than shifting potters around with the work gangs who used them, thus also conveniently obliterating any temporal surplus of lower-class materiality. If we take the potter-bowl relationship as an indicator of general relations between worker and product, these finds indicate an early case of utter alienation in production. Ecologically, we have to imagine a countryside where fuel gathering in large quantities from locally available plants was still possible, a very different situation from today's southern Iraq. There is an interesting split between the majority of pottery shapes that were made with the help of the wheel, indicating specialised production (Potts 1997: 152–154), and the hasty and careless making of these bowls: it suggests that the people for whom the bowls were destined had to make them as well. These people were already at the point of materially producing the means of their own submission, which was, ironically, at the same time a means for their survival.

Between Misery and Revolt

By Uruk times, conditions of work had changed from household-based communities and respective forms of commensality to a system in which dependent workers were fed away from home in a public sphere. Daily food consumption was dislocated from kin-based contexts within households in the earlier Ubaid period to the public sphere in the Uruk period. This change had several fundamental social consequences:

- Traditional commensality was broken up; consuming food together in a work setting instead of a household led to the formation of a relationship of 'collegiality' and new collective subjects we might best call 'comrades'.
- Eating or drinking together is one of the most important loci for the constitution of social relations; communication in commensal contexts is mostly non-functional chatting. The new process, an emergent form of subjectivation, is likely to have contributed substantially to the erosion of older types of subjectivities, such as those based on kin relations, which were formed and reproduced in households.
- New subjectivities, shaped in specific commensal situations, allow us a glimpse into an area that is rarely explored by archaeologists: verbal communication. It is likely that with public commensality, new sociolects emerged, based on the task-oriented communication needs of work gangs rather than those of households. It is probable that words

and linguistic idiosyncrasies appeared that were specific to the working class. They are not preserved in writing because they were not of interest to the scribes, who belonged to the upper classes.

- According to texts, rations were paid on a monthly basis. However, the volume of the bevelled rim bowls rather suggests a daily payment (Pollock 2003). Either way, payment in kind must have allowed workers to form an abstract notion of labour: we know of different kinds of work that were paid in this way, from agriculture to weaving. Since all of the products were quantified by production within a time unit – the bowl sign GAR could be used to denote time units – the result of work was calculated by bureaucrats in abstract terms of ration equivalents. This concept of alienated labour cannot have remained hidden from workers, although we do not know how they perceived the relations between themselves, the object and time of work, and their ‘employers’.
- The fact that vast quantities of bevelled rim bowls were disposed of in a completely useable state suggests that the production scheme was wasteful. One explanation is that the overseers were concerned about cheating during the food distribution process. Thus, the comestibles must have been more costly than the bowls themselves, which were apparently of such low value that no particular effort was taken to collect them after use. What was more important was that no one should receive two rations. Therefore, the beer-like food was likely already filled into the counted bowls upon distribution; this explains why they were found in rows at Chogha Mish, ready to be filled.
- This means that individuals were eating collectively, but at the same time each person’s individuality was enhanced by receiving his or her own bowl. In addition, the amount of food distributed was severely limited. It can be surmised that this process of public and collective commensality at work, combined with an individualisation of consumption and scarcity of food, led to both protectiveness of one’s food (egoism) and external solidarity (in which everyone works and is paid equally). Fourth millennium worker subjectivities were inherently contradictory.
- The throw-away character of the bevelled rim bowls stands in stark contrast to the intended longevity of both buildings and monumental art. While we can only surmise the formers’ ideological potential, the imagery certainly was a powerful means that propagated the message of unequal social conditions as a natural state of society. Thus, if we assume that subjectivities are constituted in part through material culture, the temporal surplus of representational art helped stabilise submissiveness as a more and more doxic, unquestionable element of the Uruk lifeworld. In contrast, the almost daily practice of throwing away bevelled rim bowls might in part be explained as enforced if the makers were from the same overall group as the users – that is, workers. In this case, discarding these items would have obliterated the potential recognition that the workers produced their own means of living.

Class solidarity seems to have been more important than interpersonal jealousies over amounts of food. As already alluded to, the first depictions of violent conflict stem from this period. The image of a ruler and his followers beating and handcuffing others has been traditionally interpreted as 'war', in the sense of a conflict between two different political systems. However, outward similarities between the ruler's followers and the 'enemies' suggest instead a scene of internal insurrection, or the first depiction of violent class conflict. As noted at the beginning of this article, we need to pay more attention to the possibilities of revolt and resistance and to become more creative in finding means to detect such events.

The historical transformation of daily life from work plus the occasional beer party during the Terminal Ubaid period of the fifth millennium to the tiring daylong drudgery in public works projects took several hundred years. While no one, not even elites, foresaw all of these changes, radically new collective subjectivities were created. This process was not driven by any 'subject' – a point made by Childe rather implicitly but consistently in his major writings. Childe's identification of a major historical transition in the time of urbanisation remains valid and will drive further archaeological research. However, we need to open new perspectives into the investigation of this 'revolution', as such processes were multifaceted and contested (see also Adams 1992: 220–221). The most important of these perspectives is that of the people who suffered through the changes. Marxist historicist theories and today's dominant narratives of social evolution were and are too optimistic in their teleological idea that humanity had to go through certain stages in order to arrive at some ideal state, whether socialism or our own rather cynical 'freedom-plus-democracy' condition (Sloterdijk 1983). The suffering of these victims on this long and winding path through history has been all too quickly dismissed as a necessity – in today's awful terminology, the 'collateral damage' of history – in order to reach a final state of happiness. Our own histories help promote these 'necessary victim' ideologies of the political systems in which we live.

A first step to change this is the renunciation of framing terminologies such as 'urban revolution' and 'state emergence'. The process might better be termed 'the genealogy of enslavement and alienation', or 'the advent of public repression'. A fresh look at these processes from the perspective of the losers will lead to a more detailed and realistic account that includes the dialectics of historical change and the emergence of subaltern and oppressed collective subjectivities. The communist philosopher Louis Althusser argued that subjects are shaped by social conditions in the first place, and that changing conditions also change practices. I would add four words to Althusser's famous saying: 'History has no subject' – *but it creates subjectivities*. Near Eastern archaeology has not yet seriously attempted to discover them, and even less tried to investigate the process of their creation.

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Notes

1. Trigger (1998: 131) notes that Childe's stage model could not be openly adopted by academics in the anti-communist atmosphere of the McCarthy era. The main reason was Childe's use of the term 'revolution' for relatively fast transitions in world history.
2. Childe (1950: 3–4) commented on this choice of words, arguing that the results of his 'revolutions' were stunning demographic increases.
3. A notable exception to the deep influence of cybernetics and systems theory is the comparative approach of Adams (1955: 6–7; 1966). Although difference is as important to him as similarity, Adams insists on abstracting from cultural contexts in order to detect patterns.
4. Tringham (1996: 236) makes a related point, arguing that Childe was interested only in large-scale processes and therefore neglected real 'people'. As will become clear, I maintain that perspective, not scale, is the most relevant problem in Childe's histories.
5. The outsider perspective has been advocated on the grounds that, for those directly involved in historical processes, many structural aspects remain hidden. But actions in the past that made history were driven by people's insights. Thus, by silencing the motivations that led to changes or continuities, a 'structural history' becomes purely descriptive (see Bourdieu 1997: 9–92).
6. In our times, these groups are composed not of the Western working class but rather the disenfranchised in countries such as Somalia and the slum dwellers in mega-cities.
7. Remnants of this general mindset in archaeology can be found almost anywhere. For example, Algaze (2001: 206) writes: '[Trade] would have stimulated the acquisition and maintenance of the (dependent) workers that ... were needed to ensure the production of labor-intensive exports.' Past human lives are simply exchangeable commodities in this view. It is also interesting that the index of Smith's (2003) edited volume on cities includes 'worker availability' but not 'worker'. In a similar vein, Frangipane (2007: 154) writes of the 'emergence of the great "unequal" Uruk civilization'.
8. Reich (1975: 53) famously said that 'what has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals ... but why the majority of those who are hungry don't steal'. Arthur

Keene (1991: 390) had this to say on archaeological narratives: 'It might be worthwhile for archaeologists to think critically about how easily prehistoric subjects are allowed to slide into ranked or stratified social formations, adopting the "benefits" of domination with no muss, no fuss, and no struggle.'

9. A well-meaning colleague described my insistence on investigating resistance in the ancient Near East as 'ethnocentric'. He contended that Mesopotamians have had a collectivist habitus that did not allow anyone to resist submitting to the powerful and that reinforced the concept of a monarchy that cared for the masses. Such an argument, compatible with a 'pastoralist governmentality' à la Foucault, reveals its own roots in a historiographic ideology that prides itself on being enlightened but denies the smallest bit of enlightenment to past alterities.
10. I base this contention on an insight of Gramsci, who claimed that in class societies workers have a double consciousness. On the one hand, they fall prey to dominant ideologies, but on the other hand, they develop a 'philosophy', albeit an incoherent one, that is based on their own insight into how they deal with the real world. This kind of practical philosophy is certainly also open to people in non-class societies.
11. Eichmann (1987: 107–109) reports such borers from an ED I context. However, vessels from the Uruk period indicate their earlier use as well.
12. Garfinkel (2003: 82–83) rightly suggests that banqueting, as shown in scenes from the third and later millennia BCE, came to replace dancing as a collective and community-building practice.
13. The Droste effect, so-named because it refers to a brand of Dutch cocoa powder, refers to a recursive representation of an image within itself, on a reduced scale; the reduced scale may include further, consecutively smaller such images.
14. Boehmer's (1999: 20 scene of captives 24) in-depth descriptions use the terms *Peiniger* (tormentor) and *misshandeln* (ill-treatment), but, relying on Derrida's (1987) insightful discussion of the *parergon*, I suggest here that the caption is the more basic symbolic support for an image than a lengthy description.
15. The number of sealings of a particular seal indicates directly the frequency of use of a specific seal.
16. Alternative interpretations of the bowls' function abound, from salt containers to bread-making moulds, but these can be seen only as complementary rather than primary uses.
17. Frangipane (1996; 2001: 314–315) reports finds of a similar kind of mass-produced bowl from Arslantepe in northern Mesopotamia and claims the same function of ration distribution.
18. However, we know of such situations mainly from large excavated sites such as Susa or Chogha Mish, not from smaller worksites. An off-site survey in southern Mesopotamia would be needed to assess the possibility of such a scenario. However, thanks to modern-day imperialist politics, this is at present – and for the foreseeable future – impossible.

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