Structure, Agency and Commerce in the Ancient Near East

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STRUCTURE, AGENCY AND COMMERCE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

BY

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We see therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development of a series of revolutions in the mode of production and of exchange. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848.
The magic of property turns sand to gold. Arthur Young, 1787.
How odd it is that anyone should not see that all observation must be for or against some view if it is to be of any service. Charles Darwin, 1861.

Abstract: The nature of the economy in the Bronze Age of the Near East has been long debated. Various models are reviewed, as is the role of merchants, the structure and extent of ‘international trade’, and the nature of the market-economy. The diversity of co-occurring structures are seen as characteristic of the ancient economy.

Keywords: reciprocity, redistribution, market economy, models, merchants, interaction spheres

Today’s economic analysis differs from that of the classical or “structuralist” view, as espoused by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus and Karl Marx. The classical approach highlights the activities of collective actors, organized groups or classes, i.e. landlords, peasants, aristocrats, merchants, etc. In the 20th century John Maynard Keynes adopted this approach in directing his anger against high-saving rentiers and speculators believed to be responsible for slowing economic growth. In such an approach relationships among collective actors influence and determine technical and social progress. Markets are deemed to be the factor that determines the level of effective demand while the economy’s position depends on the interaction of supply and demand systems. In such a system supply may, or may not, create its own demand. Demand normally creates supply. Thus, while entrepreneurship, individual agency, is essential to the existence of a market economy entrepreneurial success depends upon the state for its supportive or restrictive role (Taylor 2007).

To what extent did entrepreneurship and a market economy exist within the ancient Near East? For decades archaeologists and Assyriologists were influenced by the writings of Karl Polanyi (1957). He held that social relations determine the exchange of goods either within a context of reciprocity: the exchange of goods within symmetrically
arranged groups or, redistribution: the exchange of goods organized by a powerful center. These interactions are not structured along rational actions but by social interactions. Such a view is directly opposed to neo-classical economic theory that recognizes exchange only in the presence of price-making markets. The debate between the contrasting modes of exchange that characterized the ancient Near East has endured for decades. The great classicist Sir Moses Finley in his highly influential Ancient Economy (1973: 28) came firmly down on the side of Polanyi:

The Near Eastern economies were dominated by large palace or temple complexes, who owned the greater part of the arable [land], virtually monopolized anything that can be called “industrial production” as well as foreign trade (which includes inter-city trade, not merely trade with foreign parts), and organized the economic, military, political and religious life of the society through a single complicated, bureaucratic, record-keeping operation for which the word “rationing”, taken very broadly, is as good a one-word description as I can think of.”

More recent research has brought about a shift in perspective. There is an identifiable terminology that documents the physical presence of markets (Röllig 1976) and, more importantly, one cannot ignore the empirical data that record the existence of market mechanisms that recognize the concepts of profit and loss, investment, price fluctuations, and situations of scarcity (Gledhill & Larsen 1982; Larsen 1976; Veenhof 1972; van de Mieroop 1999: 92-135; Özgüç 2003). The relative importance of a market economy and redistribution remains an enduring problem. Polanyi’s lasting contribution lies in identifying alternative means of exchange that most assuredly did exist in the ancient Near East: reciprocity and redistribution.

Third millennium institutions, principally temples and palaces, supported scores of families through a system of rations, redistributing wool, barley, oil, textiles, bread and beer. Adult men and women, children, babies, the elderly, and the handicapped were allocated specific rations according to age, gender, occupation, and physical condition. In the second millennium the ration system was replaced by a wage structure but the central support of the majority of population by the central institutions remained the same (van de Mieroop 1999: 118). In reviewing the three modes of exchange: reciprocity, redistribution, and the market van de Mieroop reaches the following conclusion: “Again, I think that we cannot determine the relative value of these three modes of exchange at any time within Mesopotamian history, nor can we say that any one of them was absent at a particular moment in time”.

Liverani (2001) in an extremely insightful study has posited an evolutionary distinction between reciprocity and redistribution. He sees redistribution as a pattern more “archaic” and linked to the origin of the state and the emergence of an administrative centrality. Thus, redistribution underscored a “centrist ideology”. That which lay beyond the central control of redistribution was a world of “chaos” for “the centrality of some states left little room for a multicentered ‘symmetrical’ understanding of political relationships.” (Liverani 2001: 6).
An important distinction between reciprocity and redistribution is made by John Baines and Norman Yoffee (2000: 16). They distinguish between “autonomous elites” (as defined by Schmuel Eisenstadt (1986) whose existence, recruitment and legitimacy do not depend on kinship or political affiliation, but on individual and intellectual abilities) and “inner elites”. Inner elites according to Baines and Yoffee:

“consist of a very small percentage of people [in the earliest civilizations], certainly less than 1%, and constitutes both the cultural and the administrative and executive core of a society…. The inner elite is the group that carries and transmits the central meaning of a civilization….The conclusion seems inescapable that the principal focus of high culture was the very elites themselves, at whose behest it was created and for whom it was sustained, and the great gods. The inner elites made themselves the focus and the repository of civilizational meanings in such a way that the rest of society was excluded from the development and maintenance of those meanings.”

“Autonomous elites” emerge in the later axial age civilizations of Han China, ancient Greece, Israel, Brahman India (see Eisenstadt 1986). Combining the views of Baines, Yoffee and Liverani we have the ancient Near East of the third millennium dominated by an economy characterized by redistribution and controlled by the central authority of “inner elites”. We shall return to this perspective below.

In recent years there has been a spate of publications pertaining to trade and exchange in the Bronze Age of the Near East. Much of this concern has been inspired by southern Mesopotamian expansion into the distant regions of Anatolia and Iran. This phenomenon, referred to as the ‘Uruk Expansion’, refers to the movement of peoples, on a relatively large scale, into the lands of “the other”, ca. 3500 B.C. The chronology of the expansion, its duration, and above all its cause(s) are the subject of numerous books and articles. Guillermo Algaze (2005) favors colonialist, even, imperial expansion in search of resources and control of trade, while Gil Stein (1999) favors exchange within the context of what he calls “distance parity trade”, meaning that the centralized control of trade falls off at a rate proportionate to the distance from southern Mesopotamia. Both ‘models’ could comfortably coexist. It is not my intent to engage in the debate over the cause(s) of the Uruk Expansion. An excellent review of the substantive issues is available in Rothman (2001).

The Uruk Expansion raises a broader issue. What was the nature of trade and exchange that united broad areas throughout the third millennium? There is a considerable literature discussing the archaeological and textual evidence that united Mesopotamia in trade with the regions of the Persian Gulf [which the Mesopotamian texts refer to as Dilmun] (Ratnagar (2004), Potts (1990), with Oman [which the texts refer to as Magan], Crawford (1998); Potts (2000) (Costa & Tosi 1989); Stöllner, Slotta and Vatandoust (2004, Kaniuth 2007), the Indus Civilization [which the texts refer to as Meluhha] (Ratnagar (2004), Possehl (2002) and with the Bactrian-Margiana Archaeological Complex (hereafter BMAC) of Central Asia (Hiebert (1994), Sarianidi (2002), Moorey (1994). The archaeology and textual evidence relating the Iranian Plateau
to the above regions is discussed by Kohl (1978), Steinkeller (1983), Potts (1999), and Lamberg-Karlovsky (1996).

The interaction that characterized the Bronze Age and brought distant places into contact has been referred to as a “World System”. This ‘model’ takes its lead from Wallerstein’s (1974) study of the emergence of capitalism between 1450-1550. Within archaeology the adoption of ‘World Systems Theory’ (WST) has had a near industrial output (Wallerstein 1974; Kardulias 1999). WST insists upon three assumptions, none of which are applicable to the Bronze Age of the Near East: 1. The core dominates the periphery, be it by organizational superiority, military means, or ideological agency, 2. The core exploits the periphery by asymmetric trade; the extraction of valuable resources from the periphery by exporting cheap goods from the core, and, 3. the politics of the periphery are structured by the cores organization of trade and exchange. This essentialist view, inspired by Marx, is demonstrably wrong when applied to the ancient Near East and perhaps to all pre-industrial societies. As Sahlins (1994: 412-13) has observed, in denying agency to the periphery “world systems theory becomes the superstructural expression of the very imperialism it despises”. Philip Kohl (an early advocate of the Marxist perspective advocating #1 above, see 1978, but recently more nuanced 2008) believed that the core (Mesopotamia) dominated the periphery (the Iranian Plateau) and introduced WST to the archaeological community (1979). More recently he has stepped back from grand theory and suggested that interaction was due to “shared social fields”. Evolutionary convergence in prehistory brought people into contact within “shared social fields” of interaction. The concept of shared social fields is derived from Alexander Lesser (1961: 99) who wrote:

“The concept of social field has a fundamental implication: social relations within the field are patterned, not unstructured, adventitious, or incidental….the field concept rather than the concept of society as an isolate or closed system reflects socio-historical processes more accurately – that human contact and patterned interpersonal relations are not restricted to social interaction within a single localized social aggregate, but are a universal constant of social life”.

Who was it that shared in these social fields? What class of individual or category of institution was involved in these “shared social fields”? Were they really “shared”? Within the Bronze Age was it true that human contact, interpersonal relations and interaction was a universal constant of social life? Whether addressing colonialism, imperialism, or “shared social fields” within the ancient Near East authors have been long on allegations and short on demonstration. Within these “shared social fields”, “world systems”, “peer polity interactions” and “central places”, just who was the agent involved, or directing, the interaction and why? Certain it is that within the ancient Near East one cannot argue “that human contact and patterned interpersonal relation(s) are not restricted to social interaction within a single localized social aggregate, but are a universal constant of social life”. Within the ancient Near East interaction within “social fields” were far from “shared” particularly in the interaction that tied Mesopotamia to its distant periphery. The ideology of “shared social fields” involves the politics of public intent and naively ignores the complexity and tension that so frequently characterize the confrontations between private and public interests. We shall briefly examines the texts
and the archaeological record to see what light they throw on the nature of the interaction that brought Mesopotamia, the Iranian Plateau, Anatolia, the Persian Gulf, the Indus Valley and Central Asia into occasional, rather then sustained interaction.

We first ask the question did wealth increase? Was there a gradual accumulation of wealth throughout the Bronze Age of the Near East? Recently, Gregory Clark addressed this question in his *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* with regard to the period 1200-2000. In England, from 1200 to 1850, there was no measurable economic growth until the Industrial Revolution that promoted a rapid accumulation of wealth. Economic stagnation comes about as a “Malthusian trap” as described by T.R. Malthus (1798) and refined by David Ricardo (1821). These classic works posit that at any given moment there is a well defined level of subsistence that allows for the average family to reproduce itself. If there is a good harvest or a reduction in the supply of labor then mortality may decrease and fertility may increase. The resultant pressure of a larger population on a fixed supply of land will force labor and subsistence (wages) to fall. This is known as the law of diminishing returns: more and more workers on the same area of land results in each additional worker producing less than his predecessor as he has a smaller share of land to cultivate. Thus, in pre-industrial society the material standard of living is determined only by the level of subsistence, which, in turn, is dependent upon the relationship of population to cultivated land. Incremental technological progress, such as irrigation, fallowing, fertilizers, bronze tools, et. al. do not substantially improve living standards but do allow for more people to be supported on the same land. The Malthus-Ricardo trap may account for what appears to be the long term absence of living standards to rise in Mesopotamia. The unprecedented leap forward in the creation of wealth, after a millennia of economic stagnation, began in England after 1780. A series of technological innovations and economic adaptations transformed the textile industry, transportation, and mining, with perhaps the most transforming invention the steam engine. The shift from men and animals as sources of energy to coal and steam allowed for the production of iron and steel which, in turn permitted for the production of machinery and the laying of railroads.

Why all of this happened may explain, in part, why it did not happen before the 18th-19th century. Following the Industrial Revolution economists speak only of economic growth while prior to it medieval historians puzzle over its absence (Cipolla 1991; 1993; Bairoch 1988; 1993). The Industrial Revolution was a Big Bang, the likes of which had never occurred in human history. What brought about this Big Bang?

The conventional wisdom, best expressed by Douglas North (2005), signals out a set of legal, economic and social institutions that are conducive to economic growth. Their co-occurrence allowed for the relatively rapid advance of the Industrial Revolution, compared to the relative scale of long-term economic stagnancy. The most important are the rule of law securing the right to property, social mobility, and open markets. These, in turn, allow for a security of saving, investment and entrepreneurial behavior. The above conditions allowed for incentives that permitted individuals to devote themselves to economic activities resulting in profit instead of gain through warfare and prayer. To the above Clark (2007) emphasizes the centrality of institutions that serve to create and maintain incentives that favor innovation, enterprise and trade. Clark emphasizes the fact
that economic growth results in no small part from institutional changes that move away from centralized control to an open-market economy.

In returning to the ancient Near East we may well ask what institutions and incentives existed in allowing for innovation and economic growth. Was there what Kohl (2008) has identified as a “shared social field” that united distant communities into a “world system”, a “shared social field” of cultural contact, understanding, and exchange within the third millennium of the Near East? A “shared social field” implies that all participants in the social field “shared” equal access. Within “world systems”, consisting as they do, of ‘cores’ and ‘peripheries’ relations are deemed to be asymmetrical (Wallerstein 1974), i.e. the core dominating and exploiting the periphery (for a Mesopotamian example of the fourth millennium city-states see Algaze 2005). Is the “shared social field” and the “world system” of the ancient Near East a soothing parable of multiculturalism, an early palimpsest of globalization that led to increasing wealth?

There have been numerous studies pertaining to Mesopotamia’s commercial relations with the Indus Valley (Ratnagar 2004; Chakrabarti 1990; Possehl 2002, the Persian Gulf (Potts 1990; Cleuziou & Tosi 2007), the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia (T. Potts 1994; Amiet 1986; Curtis 1993), to name but a few. None of these studies address the specificity of agency. Who is doing the trading? Who is in control of the trade? Are they private entrepreneurs? Associated with private corporations or institutions? Representing a ‘state’ owned enterprise? Or representative of all of the above? We shall try to address these questions.

Throughout the 1920s Anton Deimel, on the basis of a third millennium archive recovered from the temple of Bau at Girsu (Lagash), deduced a series of conclusions regarding the structure of the economy of the Mesopotamian city-state. Anna Schneider (1979) adopted his conclusions and presented a view of Sumerian society in which the temple functioned as the sole organizing institution for the production, consumption and redistribution of both goods and labor. This view continues to have an abiding influence upon both the Assyriologist and the public imagination. In such a view the merchant can hardly help being an agent of the state (temple-palace). Within a decade of Schneider’s publication Thorkild Jacobsen, I. M. Diakonoff and I. J. Gelb independently criticized this perspective (for a full documentation of the debate see Powell 1977 and references therein).

In 2001 Mario Liverani published an important and incisive work: International Relations in the Ancient Near East, 16000-1100 B.C. In that study he discussed what he referred to as a “regional system” that brought Egypt, Hatti, Assyria, Babylonia, Elam, and the Mitanni into “international relations” both political (marriage alliances, diplomatic treaties) and economic (trade and exchange). The geographical expanse of these relations encompassed the region from Egypt to Iran (see Potts (in press) for the identification of the kingdom of Shimashki as the BMAC) and the Persian Gulf. Liverani concludes that two forms of exchange characterized the “international relations” that brought these distinct polities into contact: reciprocity and redistribution. Reciprocity involves the movement of goods between symmetrical groups while redistribution involves the movement of goods toward a center and out again. Liverani (2001: 8) views redistribution as more “archaic”, linked with the origin of the state, and involved with “centricity”. Thus,
“The redistributive pattern underscores both disparity of rank between the central agency and peripheral partners and the imbalance between centripetal and centrifugal contributions. So the ‘real’ situation can range from unidirectional contributions (forced by physical or ideological constraints, and with purely ideological returns), to a centralized arrangement of reciprocal (balanced or unbalanced) relations…. reciprocal relations is the point of view of the central partner…any ‘peripheral’ partner could similarly build a centralized network of his own….ideology plays a central role” while reciprocity is more ‘evolved’ and, the reciprocity pattern also brings about an equivalence in exchanged goods, and this does not exist ‘in reality’ either.

The two different partners have different hierarchies of values, so that the evaluation by the one is never coincident with that of the other. The reciprocity pattern …. adopt the convention of at least pretending to consider each other as equals and of regarding their exchanged goods as equivalent….the pattern shifts from a description of real exchanges to an ideology of the actors involved in them. Under the ideology of reciprocity, quite unequal relations – extending to the extreme case of ‘colonial exploitation’ – can be seen to exist.” And, finally:

“…it should be clear that the two patterns – reciprocity and redistribution are not descriptive models but interpretations of a unique reality. In other words, the adoption…of one pattern or another is the result of an ideological decision, a selecting of only some elements as meaningful and a discarding of others as irrelevant or inconvenient…. So the very same episode can be framed into both patterns at the same time”.

Thus, both reciprocity and redistribution involve a “centrist” ideology in which both partners consider themselves as fictive equals. That which exists beyond this centrist ideology is the world of chaos. Within the context of redistribution the Mesopotamian texts celebrate imports and almost totally ignore exports. The propaganda of imports is characteristic of redistributive economies. The influx of goods is the tangible expression of power. The central authority obtains the goods, accumulation is the name of the game, consumption, or use, of the goods rarely mentioned. What is said of the Egyptian pharaoh may stand for all kings, “He is a King who takes, but from whom no one takes” (Allam 1973: 99).

The presence of redistributive patterns of exchange go back to the earliest written sources (Renger 1995) and to the origins of the Mesopotamian city-states ca. 3500 B.C. and “is strictly linked with the origin of the state organization as an expanded household, or ‘great house(hold)’ if we want to keep the ancient terminology’ (Liverani 2001: 6). That kingship within the ancient Near East was structured along the lines of an extended household (in Sumerian called the é-gal=great house) consisting of kin, retainers, and slaves is without debate (Postgate 1992: 88-109; Schloen 2001). In the middle of the third millennium, commensurate with the beginnings of interaction that laced Mesopotamia to the Indus Valley, the Gulf, the Iranian Plateau and Central Asia, the Mesopotamian social
landscape was characterized by stratified households of clans and lineages ruled by absolutist kings. Johannes Renger (1995) succinctly states: “The records, both written and archaeological, indicate that large institutional households decisively determined the social and economic reality in southern Mesopotamia, i.e. Babylonia, at least since the latter part of the fourth and the beginning of the third millennium.” These households constituted ‘the center of the productive economic activities we now handle through the market” (Lekachman 1959: 3). David Schloen (2001) has convincingly argued that the Mesopotamian household exhibits many aspects of Weberian patrimonial rule in which the state is an extension of the royal household. Modern examples abound: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, perhaps even in unexpected places, where dynasty becomes as important as democracy, India. USA? In the patrimonial estate there is little functional division between private and official spheres. Official offices originate in the ruler’s household. Power, in sum, remained the personal property of the ruler. Michael Mann (1986) has offered a reformulation of Weber’s notion of the patrimonial state - one that Montesquieu first coined as representative of “oriental despotism” (the first of many ism’s). Mann (1986: i,1) sees a dialectical relationship between the state and civil society in which a “range of infrastructural techniques are pioneered by despotic states, then appropriated by civil societies (or vice versa); then further opportunities for centralized coordination present themselves, and the process begins anew’. His view that society is less a system or a structure than a series of “multiple overlapping and intersecting sociopolitical networks of power” accords more with the modern world than the absolutist power of Medieval or, for that matter, Bronze Age kings. In approaching the:

1. For the features of the patrimonial state see Weber: 1978: i,1006-10 manner of agency, that is addressing the question of who as individual, and what as institution, was responsible for long distance exchange in Mesopotamia we take the position that power is always negotiated and as Mann (1986: i, 172-3) argues, “it is the dialectic between the centralizing and decentralizing that provides a considerable part of social development’. One further point can be made that has diminished a concern for individual agency. The designation of the ancient city as a “consumer city” (Weber 1978) is closely associated with the notion that commerce played a minor role in its economy. Weber constructed the ancient city as a parasite extracting taxes and rent from the hinterland and never returning comparable value in goods and services. In this view trade is relegated to insignificance playing little, if any, role as impetus to increasing production. Such a view still has resonance among those that distinguish an ancient from a modern economy (Finley 1973; Scheidel & von Reden 2002).

Trade and exchange are stimulated by: 1) a need for resources or, 2) a desire for profit. Mesopotamian texts clearly hint at the presence of the two forms of trade. On the one hand the state administered trade and rigidly controlled the merchants activity. The state would provide the merchant with goods to be traded for specific commodities in distant communities. Upon the completion of the trading mission the administration would enter the value of goods sent and those obtained in order to maintain a balanced account. If entering and exiting values could not be reconciled, i.e. if there was a deficit, it would be subtracted from the next account. The system allowed for considerable elasticity. The administration would lack precise knowledge as to the rates of conversion used for specific goods in distant lands. There was room for merchant ‘profit’ even in administered trade. The state, on the other hand, was minimally concerned with profit. Its
interests lay almost exclusively in assuring a guarantee that its procurements were met. The state gave fixed values to good. Prices were conceptualized as innate and immutable. Only goods subject to a seasonality of demand, i.e. cereals and animals, were prices subject to seasonal fluctuations. The behavior of the merchant, unattached to the central administration, was completely different. Once he departed with a consignment of goods, i.e. textiles, his sole concern was to maximize profit. Administered trade, controlled by the state, and private entrepreneurial ventures easily coexisted in the complexity of Mesopotamia’s commercial complexity.

Discussions such as “world systems”, “interaction spheres”, “peer polity interaction”, and “shared social fields” avoid identifying agency, that is the role of individuals and institutions involved in trade and exchange. In-so-far as such discussions unfold they are the domain of Assyriologists involved with the textual record (Leemans 1960; Veenhof 1972; Larsen 1987; Renger 1984; 2000; Hudson and Levine 1996). Debates tend to revolve around the question: “Was the merchant an independent entrepreneur? An agent of the temple or palace? Or a combination of the above? Deciding between the above is often difficult. The majority of the Mesopotamian (and Egyptian) texts are recovered from institutional contexts (temples and palaces) that suggest control over all aspects of foreign trade. In spite of this, however, we argue that there is sufficient evidence to document individual agency within commerce, even within the context of private enterprise.

We must distinguish differing roles of trade and exchange in different social contexts as well as in different periods of time. The models, advocated within the archaeological community, tend to discuss 3rd millennium interaction as a functionalist or structuralist singularity. Thus, the model advanced, i.e. “World Systems” unites a near continental horizon of trade and exchange; a commercial enterprise that brought Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Iranian Plateau, the Indus Valley, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia into spheres of commercial exchange. This grand edifice is constructed solely on the distribution of material remains without consideration of social institutions or individuals. In a word there is no agency to commerce only a distribution of goods. The distribution of artifacts stand as proxies for cultural interaction. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz ‘thin description’ is offered as explanation.

There is an abundance of evidence for trade in the second half of the third millennium. The evidence from the archives, recovered from temples and palaces, indicate that foreign trade was largely a monopoly of these “Great Institutions” (Oppenheim 1957). The situation is, however, more complex. Within the Late Bronze Age, (ca. 1200 B.C., see below) numerous centers of complexity had the capacity to engage in writing. The lingua franca that united their correspondence was Akkadian. Throughout the third millennium, however, there was but one place that was literate, Mesopotamia. Only texts and archaeology serve as witness to the nature of the trade and exchange that united distant regions. (For the triumph of writing in political and international relations in Mesopotamia see Glassner 2003).

Of course trade and exchange can already be documented in the Neolithic, ca. 6500 B.C., when Anatolian obsidian, not the only resource to be traded, is found from the Levant to Iran (Renfrew 1977). Within Mesopotamia during the Uruk period, ca. 3900-3100 B.C., numerous resources came from distant regions to supply the increasing number of city-states. These raw resources included copper, gold, silver, alabaster, and lapis lazuli to
name but a few. Despite Wallerstein’s (1974) dismissal of such commodities as mere “preciosities” we recognize their critical role in economic growth (J. Schneider 1977). These materials possess what Arjun Appadurai (1986) has called “prime value”. The manufacture of high status items involves the creation of added value, the qualities and worth added to materials by labor. Raw materials moved toward urban centers where added value was created and where centers of manufacture formed an increasing number of urban networks (as elegantly detailed by Jacobs 1970).

There are echoes in texts written in the late third millennium that may relate to the trade of the late fourth and early third millennium. These texts may represent the collective memory of an earlier trade and exchange. Enmerkar, the ruler of the city-state of Uruk, tells how he negotiated with the ruler of a distant land, referred to as Aratta and located beyond seven mountain ranges and across several rivers, to secure lapis lazuli, carnelian, and other stones from the mountains to embellish his temple of Innana. Messengers go back and forth and following protracted negotiations and threats a consignment of precious goods is exchanged for a donkey caravan of grain. Sadly, we have but one side of the story as the lands of Aratta were illiterate (for Aratta see Potts 2006) and Zaccagnini (1993) for Enmerkar's role in long distance exchange. Early third millennium texts are rarely concerned with foreign trade but they do make mention of the ordinary merchant, the gaes’r, and the foreign trader, the garas’. The ubiquitous merchant of the second millennium, the tamkârum, who operated in both local and long distant trade as both a private entrepreneur or as representative of temple or palace, is not mentioned in third millennium texts. It may be conjectured that the absence of the tamkârum in the third millennium represents an absence, or minimal presence, of private merchants. In early Mesopotamian literary texts the redistributive pattern describes the movement of goods from the distant world to the central capital. Two well-known examples from the literary canon will suffice.

In the ‘Curse of Akkad’ the prosperity of the city of Naram-Sin depends upon contributions made from the four quarters of the world: Meluhha in the east, Amurru in the west, Subartu in the north, and Sumer in the south. All bring their products to fill the granaries and storehouses of the ‘central place’, Akkad (Cooper 1983: 3). In describing the construction of the Ningirsu temple, Gudea describes the transport of timber and stone from various mountains beyond Mesopotamia. The ideological framework and the tributary mode of Mesopotamia’s attaining goods is succinctly described by Liverani (2001: 143):

The whole world contributes to the construction of the temple at its centre, and once built, the temple will perfectly express the universal control of its god (and its city-ruler) over all lands. The cosmic landscape is patterned accordingly, at the centre of a cultivated and inhabited plain, a city lies where a temple is built, all around the plain, the mountains are rich in raw materials, and from mountain to plain the rivers provide the necessary channels for transporting them. The heroic enterprise of the city-ruler consists in opening the roads to the mountains, gathering the raw materials, and bringing them to the centre. In this ‘mental map’ the world is shaped as a funnel in order to ensure the centralization of resources. Exchanges between different points within the periphery itself are physically impossible
and ideologically irrelevant, and a flow of material goods ‘against the current’, from the centre to the periphery would be contrary to the funnel-like shape.

The transport of goods from the periphery is an index of power. Imports are celebrated, exports rarely considered. Ideology constructs the ‘mental map’ of the distant periphery. Its primary function is the extraction of goods. One virtually never reads of the nature of the ‘other’; their religious beliefs, central institutions, political or social organization. The periphery exists within their ‘mental map’ only as a region from which to obtain resources. The material world is a manifestation of these “mental maps”. Of the countless references, throughout the third millennium, of the distant places of Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha we read not a single word of the people or of the nature of their society, only of the resources obtained from them. The ideal of accumulation is the hallmark of the texts. The concentration of surplus is a state monopoly while consumption (so central to modern markets), as well as exports, are never idealized. Self-sufficiency and accumulation are set in different social contexts but neither depend upon, or acknowledge, a relationship of interdependence - a dependency upon the ‘other’. The Mesopotamian ‘mental map’ which set in opposition a center and a periphery had hierarchical value. Far from “shared social fields” they were oppositional, superior and inferior. The difference was even noted in vocabulary; the Sumerian inner country was kalam and the surrounding mountains/lands kur.kur. Recently, Steinkeller (2007: 231) has written that “the word kur meant “foreign”, also “strange, alien and hence “hostile” and maintained the same meaning whether written in Sumerian or Akkadian. The Mesopotamian perspective maintained a ‘centrist’ position in which there was a clear-cut opposition between inner and outer lands; the former friendly, the later hostile. The texts maintain an astonishing indifference to the environmental, ecological and social worlds of foreign lands. Foreign lands attain significance only in so far as they can fulfill the needs of the central country. These needs were fulfilled by the extraction of tribute, reciprocal gift exchange, and, as discussed below entrepreneurial trade and exchange. Mesopotamian texts record the types of materials obtained and at times the quantity received. Rarely are exports mentioned and even more rarely what was done with the imports, i.e. lapis to adorn a temple (Pinnock 2006). The archaeological record attests to specific materials coming from given destinations: copper from Oman, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, carnelian from the Indus, carved stone bowls from southeastern Iran, while the islands of the Gulf, referred to in the texts as the land of Dilmun, acted as ports of trade gathering materials derived by maritime trade from distant regions and trading them to Mesopotamia. These regions were frequently referred to in the Mesopotamian texts. Their role in trade is well documented in both the textual and archaeological record. Thus, the Indus=Meluhha (Ratnagar 2004; Possehl 2002); Oman=Magan (Cleuziou and Tosi 2007; Potts 2000); Bahrain=Dilmun (Crawford 1998; Potts 1990); southeastern Iran=Marhasi (Steinkeller 1982; 2006), and more controversially the Oxus Civilization (BMAC) of Central Asia=Shimashki(?) (Potts, forthcoming).

That tribute, gift exchange, and marriage alliances tied Mesopotamia to the distant periphery is long known and much commented upon (Renger 1984). Akkadian conquests extended from the “upper sea”, Syria and Anatolia, to the Iranian Plateau, and the “lower sea”, (Dilmun [Bahrain] and Magan [Oman], see below). In recent decades archaeologists
have uncovered industrial activities, far from Mesopotamia, involved in the extraction of raw resources that were shipped to Mesopotamia. From Oman (ancient Magan) came copper, from Afghanistan lapis lazuli, from Marhasi (southeastern Iran) carved soft stone vessels, and from Meluhha (the Indus Valley) came carnelian. To judge from these, and other examples, long-distance trade involved raw materials rather than finished products. In turn, the luxury goods manufactured in Mesopotamia from the imported raw resources were rarely exported to the distant periphery. In discussing the trade and exchange that brought Mesopotamia into contact with distant lands it is misleading to ignore the different roles of trade in different social contexts. To map the provenience of resources in foreign lands and document their presence in Mesopotamia indicates the presence of interaction but offers no understanding of the structure and/or nature of the trade relations underlying the interaction. There is no agency to the inferred interaction. Furthermore, to suggest that interaction tied distant lands into patterns of interaction representing “shared social fields” is inherently misleading. The social fields within each region of interaction were far from “shared”. The items traded can be broadly identified as essentials, staples, and luxuries. Trade in each of these items have different correlates in society. Trade in luxuries (a significant percentage of Mesopotamia’s long-distance trade - as evidenced by their archaeological recovery) involved a very small part of the population, while the staples trade, i.e. imported copper or exported textiles, was largely a monopoly of state and did not involve a significant population, while essentials such as the production of salt, the acquisition of mortars and grinders, stone tools, shoes, rope, etc. are all but invisible in the texts. There is a presumption that materials extracted from the immediate environment, i.e. reeds, clay, certain stones, would favor a home-based craft production while imported status goods, i.e. gold, silver, lapis, copper and semi-precious stones, would be obtained, and their production initiated, largely by state institutions (Postgate 1992: 229).

The second half of the third millennium offers an excellent compliment of textual and archaeological evidence for long-distance trade that tied Mesopotamia to foreign lands (Liverni 1993). The Akkadian Dynasty (2334-2193 BC) procured rare foreign goods by military conquest, by political alliance, and by diplomatic negotiation. Ships from the distant lands of Dilmun (Bahrain), Magan (Oman), and Meluhha (the Indus Valley) are said to have already moored in Akkad’s harbor during the time of Sargon (2334-2279 BC), founder of the Akkadian Dynasty. While Sargon boasted of his “international trade” his son Manishtusu bragged of his victory over 32 Magan “fortresses”, probably oases towns well known to archaeologists working in Oman, i.e. Bat, Bisya, Hili (Cleuziou & Tosi 2007). Manishtushu’s son Naram-Sin had to reconquer Magan, defeat its leader Mannium, and took as booty a compliment of stone vessels that were recovered in the excavations of Ur and Nippur. We note that, today as in the past, items of high value [Magan: honey, perfumes, spices, frankincense?] packed in expensive containers, i.e. decorated stone vessels, are the key to successful gift exchange. Naram-Sin’s daughter, Tarsam-Agade, sealed a diplomatic marriage with the Syrian city-state of Urkesh. Similarly, the last ruler of the Akkadian dynasty Sharkalisharri (2217-2193 BC) wed a princess from the kingdom of Marhasi, a kingdom that overran Elam. Such marriages suggest that the Akkadian state did not exist in a political vacuum but was surrounded by other states with which it went to war, had alliances, extensive commercial relations, and negotiated with on a level of equality (for
the texts dealing with the traditions of the kings of Akkad see Glassner 1993). The texts offer explicit commentaries on the transaction of materials and amounts exchanged, res gestae, as well as chronicles of shifting alliances and relations, in media res. Interpreting the texts, however, is never an easy or straightforward matter. The relationship, indeed the very existence of the extent of private entrepreneurial vs. institutional state control, of both trade and production, remains a much debated and shifting target, varying through time and space (van Driel 2000). The vast majority of Mesopotamian texts offer a history from above, a documentation of state, while archaeology, with its excavation of the ‘oikos’, the individual household, provides a view from below. The texts and archaeology would seem to offer a synthesis of an urban-rural continuum. Initially labor was controlled by urban institutions, one could accumulate wealth but laborers, craftsmen, farmers, merchants, bureaucrats, and long-distance trade, were all controlled and attached to state institutions (Renger 2000). In time, by the early second millennium, individuals were able to demand exemptions from labor, taxes, and obtain land. The city extracted agricultural surplus from the villages. Villagers lived at a subsistence level, were characterized by a domestic mode of production in which their labor was free. Such a view is in accord with the reconstructions of Diakonoff (1974), Liverani (2006), Postgate (1992).

Benjamin Foster (1977; Liverani 1993) documents the existence of an extensive private entrepreneurial trade within the Akkadian period. Such trade in the hands of merchants was entirely local and dealt with animals: cows, pigs, donkeys, asses, sheep and goat; commodities: flour and oil while silver and grain (served as a medium of exchange), wood, slaves (with Mesopotamian patronyms [rarely foreigners]), garments and textiles. The professional business agent, called dam-gār, acquired commodities and sought profits from his trade with either state or private client. Texts dealing with internal trade and exchange can be found in every Mesopotamian city-state. What is striking, however, is what is rarely found in Akkadian texts. Surprisingly absent are the very products one would expect to see if trading agents were to acquire goods not available in Mesopotamia. There are no accounts of merchants bringing in bulk acquisition of copper, silver, lapis, or other precious or semi-precious goods. Internal records of transactions of these commodities do exist, sometimes in large quantity, but of their arrival through trade with foreign lands there is silence. Foster (1977: 37) concludes:

“There is in short no evidence in the available records that the Sargonic dam-gār played any significant role in the acquisition of products foreign to Mesopotamia, or was anyone other than a businessman who sought profits for clients, including the state in Mesopotamian markets with mostly Mesopotamian goods”.

We note, however, that the term nam-garāsh-ag meaning ‘to exercise the profession of traveling merchant’ (Kramer 1977: 61) appears once, and only once, in the extant literary texts, in the epic poem already referred to, namely, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta. Similarly, in a Sumerian hymn to Enlil, chief god of the pantheon, there is reference to “merchant of the wide earth” (Falkenstein & von Soden 1953: 76). The presence of such terms in these texts offer suggestive evidence that merchants did travel to foreign lands to obtain goods. That the foreigner was largely responsible for trucking goods to Mesopotamia was an early observation of W.F. Leemans (1960; 1977).
Mesopotamians prayed to foreign gods to bring timber, gold and lapis to Nippur. The texts indicate that foreign messengers and traders arrived in southern Mesopotamia from Ebla, Mari, Dilmun, Magan, Meluhha (even a village of resident Meluhhans living within Mesopotamia, Parpola & Brunswig 1977), Susa, Ansan, Simashki, and Byblos. Leemans (1977: 7) summarizes:

With regard to Sumer and Babylonia it can be stated that there is no evidence that they themselves were typical trading countries, nor in general, as already said, that the Sumerians presented themselves as long-distance traders of great importance. From the Sumerian sources it can be rather concluded that foreign traders came to South Mesopotamia.

On these matters there are many nuanced and important differences of opinion. Thus van de Mieroop (1999) and Steinkeller (1987) independently suggested that craftsmen, and other economic activities, in the Ur III period were not as centralized as other scholars believe. Van de Mieroop (1999: 92) concludes that “The common worker in the state sector of the Ur III period, was only part-time employed by the state, worked with other family members, and spent a substantial amount of time engaged in a world inaccessible to us”. In discussing the relations that brought Ebla, Mari and Ur into contact during the Ur III period Pinnock (2006: 95) reminds us that the relations between Syria and Mesopotamia were “more multifaceted and complex, based more on ideological and political elaboration than on single mechanisms of trade, exchange, and imitation”. She finds that the nature of the trade that did exist in the Ur III period was characterized by the “peer exchange of luxury pieces”, i.e. furniture, precious wood, musical instruments, while “predominant were exchanges apparently on a base of reciprocity, of cattle for food, gifts or cult” (as also argued by Owen 1990: 116-21). Finally, contact between the three cities, at least between the administrative elite, it seems is “that the prevailing mechanism was that of peer-polity interaction on a large scale, and of a reciprocal acknowledgment of roles”. The administrative archives speak of gift exchanges, the sharing of royal ideologies, and their attentive role in maintaining and adorning the temple. There is hardly a word of the production for local consumption, of the trade and exchanges that clearly must have taken place between village and villager. Van de Mieroop (1999) is assuredly right that ‘the common worker’ is “inaccessible to us”. That inaccessibility hides and distorts a world of private agency, enterprise, initiative, and productivity!

Eanasir, one of the great merchants from the city of Ur was involved in the shipment of substantial quantities of copper from Dilmun to Mesopotamia. Eanasir lived in a residential area of Ur during the reign of Rim-Sin (1820-1763B.C.). His residence and archive was located on what the excavator, Sir Leonard Woolley, dubbed 7 Paternoster Lane (Woolley 1931; 1954). Eanasir’s involvement with the copper trade was on a most impressive scale. We read in the texts that Eanasir’s share of copper in a single shipment of 18 1/2 metric tons was 5 3/4 tons - all destined for Mesopotamia (Leemans 1960: 38-39; for metallurgy in the Persian Gulf see Weeks 2004). The remainder of the copper belonged to other merchants and their partners. Although copper was the primary concern of those referred to as the ‘alik tilmun’, the guild of traders involved in the Dilmun –
Mesopotamian trade, other merchandise included pearls, silver, gold, lapis lazuli, coral, ivory, carnelian and other semi-precious stones. It was largely a trade in luxuries commanded by the elite for the adornment of their temples and palaces. Eanasir’s commercial operations were both public and private in the sense that his merchant activities in Dilmun represented king and state in acquiring copper on their behalf while simultaneously attending to his own, and his partners, private enterprise. Eanasir and his partners (i.e. Nanni, Shumi-Abum) would invest distinctive amounts of silver and according to the amount invested in the trading mission they would reap a comparable percentage of the profit. On the one hand, his merchant activities in Dilmun served the interests of king and state, and on the other hand, he attended to his own (and his partners) private entrepreneurial acquisition of copper to be sold in Mesopotamia (Leemans 1960: 18-5). Then, as now, there was confusion, and pretense, that public office and private interests were separate concerns.

Goods obtained from Dilmun were obtained from elsewhere for there is neither copper, gold, silver nor lapis lazuli on Bahrain, or in the nearby northeastern regions of the Arabian Peninsula. Dilmun acted as a transshipment center, a port of trade, for goods obtained elsewhere (i.e. copper from Magan[Oman] and carnelian from Meluhha [the Indus Civilization]) that were, in turn, shipped to Mesopotamia (for an excellent review of this trade see Ratnagar 2004). What did Mesopotamia offer in return for the goods from distant places? The texts tell us that the principal Mesopotamian exports were garments, textiles, perfumes, oils, and grain. Two examples suffice:

Lu-Endilla, a merchant from Ur during the reign of Ibbi-Sin (2028-2004 B.C.), received the following goods from the temple of Nannar (the principle temple of Ur): 60 talents of wool, 70 garments, 180 skins (leather), 6 kur of sesame oil for “merchandise for buying coppe and ivory from Magan”. While this text (Leemans 1960) clearly indicates that the temple institution was directing the trade the following expresses a private undertaking: “Lu-Meshlamtae and Nigsisanabsa have borrowed from Ur-Ninmar 2 minas of silver, 5 kur of sesame oil and 30 garments as capital for a partnership for a expedition to Dilmun to buy copper there.” (Bibby 1969: 191). Waetzoldt (1972) documented both the extensive shipments of wool to the Gulf and the scale of the textile industry in Mesopotamia. A single archive deals with merchants procurement of four tons of wool shipped to Dilmun while texts from Ur attest to 9,000 slaves employed in its textile industry. A single text attests to the processing of 6400 tons of wool (within an unknown period of time) during the reign of Ibbi-Sin (Jacobsen 1953: 174-78). We note that there is a shift in the administration of long distance trade, or so the limited number of texts seem to indicate, between the reigns of Ibbi-Sin and Rim-Sin. Lu-Enlilla appears to act solely on behalf of the temple, there being no evidence for his involvement in private entrepreneurial activities. At a later period Eanasir is both an agent of the palace as well as engaged with others in private enterprise. Such evidence is suggestive, as noted long ago by Leo Oppenheim (1954; 1957) of a shift from temple to palace and an emergence of private entrepreneurial activity.

The Ur III period is one of astonishing textual documentation. Some 40, 000 texts are published with tens of thousands awaiting publication. The texts can document the receipt of one sheep or calculate the harvest of 38 million liters of cereal. The written record is, like that of the Akkadian Dynasty, extremely biased. It is produced exclusively by the state and casts light only on its activities. Were there individual agents that were
involved in long distance trade? The texts seem to indicate that during the Akkadian Dynasty and the following Ur III period the state maintained a near monopoly on foreign trade.

The founder of the Ur III state, Ur-nammu (2112-2095 BC), arranged for the marriage of his son and successor Shulgi to a princess from the city-state of Mari in northern Syria. Shulgi, in turn, is known to have married at least nine women, each of whom represented a political alliance both within the Mesopotamian world and with distant lands, i.e. a princess from Marhasi. The texts detailing his alliance with Marhasi is particularly illuminating. It details the extent of gifts exchanged in cementing the alliance (Steinkeller 1982). Three of the five kings of Ur (five generations of rulers from the same family) sent their daughters to marry Iranian princes. One can assume that such alliances also involved gifts within a reciprocal exchange of goods and resources. The Ur III state extended its control over Elamite Susa and imposed a military regime over the region. In the provinces this regime was headed by a governors (ensi) and military generals (shagina) responsible for extracting tribute (referred to as the bala tax). The goods obtained were calculated in exact numbers whether animals, i.e. cattle, sheep, goats, or other goods and/or resources, i.e. copper taken from the periphery. Political alliances and military conquest formed twin approaches to the construction of an Ur III empire. State control left little room for private enterprise, which, if extant, would have been tightly controlled by the state. It is, however, difficult to imagine that individual state agents and messengers (as Eanasir) did not contract their own business on the side. The multiplicity of regional systems and the permeability of state control to become diffuse, would act as counter measures to the states desire for centrality. That merchants, messengers, and ambassadors carried seals that referred to them as “servant of the king” serves a state ideology but does not eliminate the fact that individual merchants could involve themselves in private enterprise. Nevertheless, Neumann (1979) is not alone (see Lambert 1981) in arguing that the Ur III merchants were entirely in the employ of the state. The existence for private entrepreneurial merchants, however, is deduced from the presence of capital loans for interest. A.L. Oppenheim (1964: 88) remarked that Mesopotamia is exceptional in its acceptance of the economic principle of sponsoring state and private loans at set interest. The existence of such loans is sufficient for Powell (1977: 29) to conclude not only that there were private merchants (availing themselves of state loans in order to conduct their trade) but that “These pieces of evidence bear witness to a type of economic structure that corresponds more closely to a model of market economy than to a model which posits some kind of central redistributive agency such as the temple or state”. Within the Ur III state, the most absolutist of third millennium states, the relationship between merchant and state is a mix of largely state employed merchant, a private merchant’s dependence on the state, and textually invisible private merchants.

At Umma the most common commodities that state merchants received from the administration were grain, wool, silver, dates, fish, leather/hides and vegetables. The goods received by the state merchant were given a total value in silver. In exchange for these goods the merchant then supplied the state with: silver/gold, lard/sausages, copper/tin, bitumen/gypsum, resin/timber, spices (i.e. coriander). The silver value of the materials received was then compared to the value of the materials supplied. If the silver values were equal the transaction was closed as a balanced account. If, however, the value of materials received was greater than the value supplied the account remained
unbalanced and the merchant was indebted to the state. Alternatively, if the supplied materials had a greater value then the received materials the merchant could keep the difference as ‘profit’. It is the later instance that accounts for the established ‘wealth’ of the merchant. The texts pertaining to the activities of the state merchants at Umma, numbering over 75, and the nature of their private vs, public activities is presently being studied by Xiaoli Ouyang, a doctoral candidate at Harvard University (2008).

Within the Ur III period cattle drives brought large herds from the Iranian Plateau to a place near Nippur called Puzurish-Dagan. From there the meat was distributed to the temples (for further redistribution) as well as to the court and military. The eastern periphery, Susa and the Zagros highlands, was exploited for its animal stock. Two hundred sheep could arrive at Puzurish-Dagan in a single day. These animals fuelled a woolen industry which the Lagash texts inform us employed 6000 female workers in a single ‘factory’. Textiles were a major export, together with sesame oil, to Magan and Meluhha (Potts 1993). Royal inscriptions mention a variety of places and people on the Iranian plateau that were raided for booty as well as for captives – often, and importantly, referring to the capture and transport of foreign craftsmen for shipment to the Ur III heartland. With the passing of time the imperial dominance of the periphery failed. Eastern states, such as Shimashki, which Potts (forthcoming) identifies with the Oxus Civilization (BMAC) of Central Asia, were implacable enemies of the Ur III state. Around 2000BC an Elamite and Shimashkian alliance brought an end to the Ur III kingdom. The last of the Ur III kings, Ibibi-Sin, was chained and dragged to Elam. From 2000 to ca.1700BC an Elamite revival, inspired and directed by Puzurinshushinak’s Mesopotamian conquests, dominated the Iranian plateau and played a controlling role in the politics of Mesopotamia (Potts 1999: 122-27). Treaties negotiated after the Ur III wars with Mesopotamia involved gift-exchange and trade that channeled lapis lazuli, copper, carved steatite vessels, horses, tin, and craftsmen from one ruler to another. It is perhaps no accident that at this time (ca. 2000BC) materials of the BMAC (Shimashki?) are to be found on numerous sites of the Iranian plateau, the Gulf, and the Indus Valley (Amiet 1986; T. Potts 1994). As David Anthony (2007: 417) notes the arrival of the horse and the increased use of tin, all resources coming from the Central Asian north, began to appear - coincident with the spread of the BMAC on the Iranian plateau. The impact of the horse and tin, both derived from the north, on the economy (and warfare?) of the greater Near East cannot be over estimated. Zimri-Lin (1776-1761 B.C.), king of the powerful city-state of Mari, in the eighth year of his reign distributed 905lbs(!) of tin to his allies. Texts indicate that the dissemination of the horse took the form of gift exchange (Moran 1992) while tin from the north, Uzbekistan (Stöllner et. al. 2004, for a review of these sources see Anthony 2007) and from the east, Afghanistan (Cleuziou & Berthoud 1982; Piggott 1999) was, in part, more of a private venture in the hands of the Old Assyrian merchants (see below).

In the Persian Gulf the Ur III period continued to sustain extensive contact with Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha. To Dilmun alone eight different countries transported their goods: Meluhha, Marhashi, Tukrish, Magan, the Sealand, Zalamgar, Elam, and Sumer. Archives indicate that state merchants took wool, sesame oil and textiles, a major Babylonian industry, to Dilmun and Magan and exchanged them principally for copper. The Dilmun trade in copper was astonishingly large and complex. Dilmun (the islands of Bahrain, Failaka, and the northeastern coast of Saudi Arabia) does not have copper. It
obtained its copper from elsewhere, likely Magan, and trans-shipped it to Mesopotamia. A single text indicates that a shipment from Dilmun to Mesopotamia could involve 18 tons, 10-18,000 ingots (Cleuziou & Tosi 2007: 196). The centrality of the Iranian Plateau in the literature of the third millennium offers a minimalist perspective. The texts are all about trade in luxuries involving the elite and controlled largely by state institutions. Trade in staples or necessities, privileging the masses, is conspicuously absent. Roger Moorey (1993: 43) captures the essence of this relationship:

“the role of this flow of luxuries in sustaining Sumer’s great organizations of state and their hierarchies is everywhere apparent. It is far less clear how it affected the local highland communities engaged in the extraction, processing and distribution of minerals, since little is known of their subsistence technologies, their social structures, and the extent to which their economies were geared to a production for export.”

Joan Oates (1993) presents a similar view for northern Mesopotamia: elites both controlled and served their own interests in the procurement of status goods. With regard to supply and demand mechanisms, the dumping of cheap surplus goods in return for luxury items, the cost of goods relative to transport costs, the supply of labor relative to the costs of goods, and other capitalist or Marxist modes of analysis are, given the evidence a hand, elusive and misleading goals. Christopher Edens (1992: 94), after examining Mesopotamia’s trade relations, succinctly states: ‘to analyze precapitalist complex societies, and the place of long-distance trade in those societies, as economic configurations is to misplace basic social forces in these societies.” Peasants, for instance, are all but invisible in the Mesopotamia texts - excepting those that I.J. Gelb refers to as ‘semi-free’, dependent laborers employed by the Mesopotamian city-state and ‘paid’ by food-rationS. Edens may be correct in observing that trade in precapitalist societies cannot be compared to modern society yet the precapitalist concern for luxury goods obtained in long distance trade has a resonance in David Snail’s (2008: 161) recent observation that, “It is often pointed out, with reason, that the modern economy is oriented around the delivery of status goods”. Perhaps precapitalist and capitalist societies share the value that status goods represent wealth that, in turn, signifies power.

The ambiguity in the polarizing perspective that juxtaposes an institutional state control over the economy vs. private enterprise has been a consistent, if misguided theme, within the study of the ancient Near East. That gift exchange, reciprocity, redistribution, and a limited private enterprise all coexisted throughout the third millennium is abundantly evident from the above discussion. Which was dominant, and which contributed the greater proportion to the economy varies in time, space, and by the culture(s) involved. Shifting power relationships and alliances, internal and external conflicts, warfare, climatic ameliorations, were but some of the factors that shifted the always precarious balance of trade between geographic and institutional settings. That a market economy thrived fostering private entrepreneurs, acting as venture capitalists, dedicated to the acquisition of profit, can be amply demonstrated in the first centuries of the second millennium. Before turning to the well documented Old Assyrian market economy it is worth contemplating the nature of a market economies origin. Theories of market development can be reduced to two schools: those that explain its development
from the ‘bottom up’ or from the “top down” (Smith 1976; Berry 1967). The first view emphasizes the role of exchange among rural farmers and the human propensity, so highly regarded by Adam Smith, to truck, barter, and exchange goods. Other factors nourishing this perspective are 1) the development of surplus producing technologies, i.e. irrigation 2) ecological diversity and the differential distribution of resources, and 3) increasing population pressures. Each of the above ‘explanation(s)’ supports the notion that markets will emerge locally, without an impetus from an external stimulus.

On the other hand the “top down” school argues that markets are not likely to develop locally. External, foreign influences, such as long distance trade, the essential procurement of urban food supplies, exotic elite goods, are viewed as essential for the development of market transactions (Vance 1970; Meillassoux 1971). Whichever thesis one favors the emergence, if an evolutionary emergence is even required, a market economy, in its various forms, from market fairs to global corporations, represents a considerable diversity of cultural complexity. It can be argued that a market system favors a governing elite for it is they that structure the rules of the market economy, i.e. taxes and the interest rates on loans. The urban elite can either stimulate higher or lower levels of production by managing the rate of interest on borrowed seed-corn allowing the farmer to produce more. In this regard the state may employ a number of strategies to foster the market economy. It may promote a free peasantry removed from the serfdom of a patrimonial domain, it may establish, as in medieval Europe, fairs under religious or royal authority, it may promote a unified currency, with standard weights and measures under its authority, and finally, it may establish a tax linked to an exchange economy.

The importance of instituting a tax is well captured by Gabriel Ardant (1975: 196):

…. seeing that taxation requires a certain economic structure, developed economic exchange, active commerce, and the division of labor, it behooves the state and is in fact vital to its existence as a state, to bring its powers to bear upon that structure [the market economy] and to shape it into a structure better able to support taxation.

Such a view suggests that market economies and the origin of state complexity are co-evolutionary phenomenon. One may well imagine that the political process in early states set independent patrimonial estates in conflict with the centralizing tendency of the state. The ruler(s) of state, on the one hand, wish to centralize control at the regional scale while, on the other hand, the strategies at the local level employ efforts to minimize the importance of the expansionist state. In this regard a key strategy of the state is to support institutions that erode autonomy at the local level, i.e. bureaucracies, armies, and, significantly, a market economy. A market economy extends beyond the sphere of the local community, erodes local authority, and in reaching out to a regional scale allows the producers to direct their surpluses beyond the local community. In breaking down local authority the regional scale market system is compatible with state goals: centralization and taxation. The importance of a market economy to the formation of states and empires is the focus of S.N. Eisenstadt’s magisterial study Political Systems of Empires (1969). On the one hand, self-interest motivates the individual in a decentralized market economy while, on the other hand, the state benefits from a centralized distribution of the wealth created. In 1776 the moral philosopher Adam
Smith, referred to by many as the first economist, captured the essence of the interaction of the private and public in perhaps the most famous metaphor in western economic thought:

Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous Employment for whatever capital he can command…. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. He intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (Smith [originally 1776] 1979: 423; for more on the ‘invisible hand’ see Emma Rothschild 2001).

In a more recent vein Jerry Muller (2008: 24) has linked the rise of ethnonationalism with the rise of both the state and the market economy:

By creating a new and direct relationship between individuals and the government, the rise of the modern state weakened individuals’ traditional bonds to intermediate social units, such as the family, the clan, the guild, and the church. And by spurring social and geographic mobility and a self-help mentality, the rise of market-based economies did the same.

In recent decades ‘models’ have been advanced to comprehend ‘the big picture’ of the ancient Near East. These models include world systems theory, trade diasporas incorporating colonialist, even imperialists agendas, distance-parity models, or, as already discussed, the strangely post-modern notion recently put forth that “shared social fields” in the ancient Near East suggest an “evolutionary convergence in prehistory and contemporary practice” (Kohl 2008). These models often combine, or stand apart, from overt interpretations favoring Marxist, statist, even capitalist modes of production believed to characterize the social order. It is commonly stated that we write about the past in order to comment, criticize, or enlighten the present. We burden the past with our present concerns, view the past as we wish the present, or idealize the past to instruct the present. In all instances the past does indeed exist but within a post-modern perspective as an agenda of the present. Can we remove the agenda and allow an understanding of the past on its own terms? Or does that become an undesirable historical particularism? Adopting any of the above ‘models’, or allowing for agenda driven interpretations, clearly distorts the past and subordinates it to our modern concerns. Today our understanding of the complexity of the third and second millennium cannot be subsumed by any single model. The commercial relations of the ancient Near East can no longer be understood by mastering an understanding of a part of the greater whole, i.e. Mesopotamia. The dominance of southern Mesopotamia [and Egypt] is countered by its increasing relationship, at times even dependence or subordination, to an outer world. The archaeological conquest of a vast cultural mosaic is an achievement of the 20th century. Southern Mesopotamia today is but one polity that interacted, at different times and in different ways (conquest, alliance, trade, etc), with northern Mesopotamia, Egypt,
the distinctive kingdoms of Elam inhabiting the Iranian Plateau, the cultures of the Arabian Peninsula (Dilmun, Magan), the Indus Valley (Meluhha), Anatolia, the Levant, Central Asia and the Caucasus. If one contemplates the origin of the horse and tin this already continental world expands onto the Eurasian steppes (see Anthony 2008). Interaction between these distinctive polities was often direct and, at times, indirect. No single model captures its complexity, no single interpretation forms its reality. The concept of “interaction sphere”, the quest for an understanding of what brought different polities into contact is, unlike the above ‘models’, without economic, political, or ideological baggage. The concept of “interaction spheres” was introduced by Joe Caldwell (1964; Lamberg-Karlovsky in print)) and posited a correlation between interaction and innovation: “When different cultural traditions are brought together there becomes available to each a new supply of diverse forms upon which new arrangements of forms- innovations and inventions- can be built.”

The presence of redistributive systems, under the control of institutions, and marketless trading, within a context of barter, reciprocity and gifts, as emphasized by Polanyi (1957), were but part of the economy of the ancient Near East. That it was not its entirety is hinted at by the private merchants that pld the Dilmun trade and given concrete evidence in the Old Assyrian trading colonies in Anatolia (Veenhof 1972).

The presence of independent agents, groups of agents, price fixing, institutionalized markets, prices dependent upon supply and demand, interest rates on loans, and risking both labor and profit within a market economy are all attested in the 20,000 texts recovered from the site of Kultepe in Anatolia (see Özgüç 2003). The texts were kept in the houses of Mesopotamian merchants from the city of Assur who established a colony at the edge of the Anatolian town of Kultepe. Texts attest to the presence of venture capitalists in an economic system of private venture-taking. The presence of a capitalist market economy at Kultepe does not eliminate the continuing presence of state institutions administering trade. Far from it. It is precisely our contention that a mosaic of economic structures co-existed rather than promoting a single mode of production! Texts that advise the merchants to “Sell at any price” (Veenhof 1972: 88) highlight the liquidity of the market and the risks involved. Careful calculation of margins of profit take into consideration customs expenses and costs of transport. The texts detail a ‘capitalist’ concern for the procurement of silver and gold in Anatolia in exchange for textiles and metal, principally tin, obtained from the city of Assur in northern Mesopotamia. Assur, in turn, obtained tin from further south, attesting to a more distant transport trade from the source(s) of tin. The differential value of tin as priced at Kultepe vs. Assur permitted the merchant his margin of profit. In Assur the merchant could obtain 15 shekels of tin for one shekel of silver while at Kultepe the rate was 7 to 1. Individual merchants, or a merchant corporation (a group of individuals pooling their capital) could either rent or purchase donkeys and wagons to transport bulk commodities. The maximum load of a four wheeled wagon could carry as much as 1350kg. Such wagon loads contained tin (up to 60kg in a single shipment), textiles, raw wool, leather, gold, lapis lazuli, pearls, ivory, firewood, straw, olives, wine, grapes, onions, furniture, and other commodities (Gökçek 2007; Derksen 2000). Texts archive the activities of individual merchants, families of merchants stationed at Kultepe and Assur, as well as merchant corporations handling ‘investments’ of private individuals in search of profits (not unlike Eanasir in the earlier Dilmun trade). The texts record the existence of
smuggling past customs, the costs of food en route, the amount of interest paid on loans, the liabilities within partnerships, the legal adjudication in disputes, and responses to market fluctuations, i.e. in the price of tin which could vary as much as 20% over short periods (Larsen 1976). Although the archives from Kultepe clearly attest to capitalist markets (ca. 1900 B.C.) strong indications exist for its earlier existence, i.e. the Dilmun trade of the alik Tilmun. Texts detailing trade between Eshnunna to Larsa and Susa to Sippar indicate that the market economy was already present in the late third millennium. Long ago Lambert (1953) remarked upon extensive raw materials from the Gulf being passed from town to town in a series of bilateral exchanges that connected the city-states from southern Mesopotamia to the distant north. Such “relay” trade in the hands of a succession of merchant middlemen connected consumers with suppliers.

The archive at Kultepe is restricted to three generations within the period of a century (1910-1830 B.C). The quantity of materials traded is most impressive! In a sampling of 189 translated texts (of 20,000 recovered to date) we read of 90 donkey loads representing 11 tons of tin shipped into Anatolia and the receipt of 14,500 rectangular bolts of textiles. One of the many merchants residing at Kultepe was a man named Innaja (Michel 1991). When his Father Elali died Innaja went to Kultepe while his older brother took charge of the business in their home office at Assur. Innaja’s sons were also involved in the business and were located in different Anatolian towns coordinating the family business in those communities. Innaja also worked closely with his wife, Târâm-Kubi, who remained behind in Assur gathering goods that she forwarded to Kultepe. Intermarriage within trading families was not uncommon as evidenced by Innaja’s wife being the sister of another prominent trader, Imdî-Illum (for his archive see Larsen 1982). Veenhof (1977) estimates that 2000 inhabitants, of a total of 15,000, from Assur were engaged in the Anatolian trade - of which one-third traveled to Anatolia. At Assur, as at Kultepe, the king and the palace are barely mentioned. Traders ran their businesses with little interference from the state, save for the essential collection of taxes, the imposition of restrictions on the nature of the goods traded, and the adjudication of disputes. It is of interest to note that the material remains excavated in the houses of the merchants at Kultepe replicate the indigenous culture. The only items attesting to the foreign origin of the merchants are the written texts, cylinder seals, and their impressions. Thus, if merchants “go native” in a foreign land there is virtually no way for the archaeologist to detect their presence in the absence of their instruments of commerce; texts and seals. One can imagine that this was not an infrequent occurrence in the Mesopotamian periphery.

Within the third millennium of Mesopotamia it is exceedingly difficult to offer an essentialist perspective on the nature of their economy. Gift-giving, reciprocity and redistribution (governed by what Oppenheim (1977) called the ‘Great Organizations”: temple and palace), tribute, and a market economy, fuelled by private entrepreneurial behavior, all co-existed. To attempt to find a dominant mode, as none existed, is to express an agenda. Calling upon an outmoded Marxist mantra of characterizing a continental economy by a singular ‘mode of production’, whether kinship, tribute or capitalism (Wolf 1982), simplifies and distorts the complexity and multidimensional nature of an economy. By the middle of the third millennium the extensive interaction that brought so may different cultures within the Near East into contact would have ameliorated the dominance of any single institutional form. An appreciation of a
constructionist view, one that recognizes that trade and markets bring different cultures into contact that in turn transform old social meanings and create new ones. Trade and market practices are inherently social practices that require degrees of acculturation and assimilation and demand an understanding of distinctive cultures as partners in trade. Trade and markets requires a mutual understanding of ‘value’ both within the context of social behavior as well as within the commodity. The import and export of commodities brings about a materialization of identity wherein certain materials are identified with specific regions, cultures, and ethnicities. Thus, carnelian would be identified with the distant Indus, copper with Dilmun and Magan, carved chlorite bowls with southeastern Iran (Marhashi), horses with the Elamites, and curiously, a type of onion, much demanded in Mesopotamia, with Magan. In this manner trade and interaction brings about not only awareness but individual identity through production (Smith 2007).

The use of distinctive seals from Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, symbolically communicate which commodities came from which of the above regions. Years ago it was observed that:

A related matter of shared ideology and meaning can be derived from seals. The use of very distinctive, highly individualized styles and shapes of seals of the Indus (square), the Persian Gulf (round), Mesopotamia (cylindrical and Turkmenistan-Seistan (compartmented) in the middle of the third millennium is... far from accidental. The seals in all of the above areas are believed to have served a similar function [sealing merchandise for transport, confirming ownership, and for security]. The seals allowed one to identify the mother country of the merchant [and the merchandise]….The seals, in short, provided an overt symbol of ethnic identity as well as a practical tool for trade regulation (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1975: 362-63)

Thus, the shape of the seal offers what David Wengrow (2007) has recently referred to as “commodity branding”. Goods coming from different regions would be ‘branded’ by their distinctive seals. Branding identifies within a bazaar economy the region from which the commodities were coming. Specific goods within the third millennium market place were heterogenous, unbranded as to specific provenance, of dubious quality, and involved procedures of weighing and measuring that were subject to manipulation. Within such a context personal trust and loyalty are paramount concerns of the merchant in expanding their trade relations. One may well assume that trading networks involved kinship networks assuring levels of trust.

In the later Bronze Age (1500-1200 B.C.) royal relations brought Egypt, Babylonia, Elam, Assyria, the Hittites, and the Mittani into a contact referred to as the “Brotherhood of Nations”. Great kings established with their counterpart a fictive relationship by addressing each other as ‘Brother’ (Moran 1992; Cohen & Westbrook 2000; Bryce 2003). This “Great Powers” club was an exclusive one, one in which members recognized each other as an exclusive participant within a family metaphor that excluded “the other”. The “basic principle” characterizing ‘the Brotherhood” is enunciated by Cohen and Westbrook (2000: 20): “the exchange makes pervasive even obsessive reference to the basic principle of reciprocity”. Reciprocity is the principle ingredient within the substantive exchange of messages, messengers, and gifts. Levi-
Strauss’s (1969) trio of items of exchange—messages, gifts and women, are well represented in the communications that united this “Brotherhood”. Diplomatic alliances, threats of war, requests for brides, and above all requests for gifts with countering arguments as to the sufficiency of the gift abounded! Whether the gifts were, or were not, adequate expressions of reciprocity was a constant issue. Laws of hospitality in distant lands protected ambassadors, merchants and professional couriers in carrying out their engagement in political alliances, trade, and gift exchange. An appreciation of the importance of the ceremonial, almost ritual, aspect of gift exchange is fundamental.

The great kings of the Brotherhood never traveled to distant lands. In fact, Burna-Buriash the Babylonian king had little idea of geographical distances. He thought the Egyptian pharaoh was a neighbor and had to have his messenger confirm that Egypt was indeed a distant country, namely, a 2-3 month donkey caravan distant. The Amarna Letters, an Egyptian archive documenting the correspondence of the “Brotherhood”, is full of contentiousness between the “Brothers” (Moran 1992). Much of the contentiousness dealt with the comparative value of the gifts exchanged and by efforts to establish a superior role in negotiating for more or better quality goods. There were rules to the game: specific gifts cannot be asked for, gifts are to be given in a dispassionate manner, gifts must be accepted and appreciated, and gifts deemed of equal value MUST be reciprocated. Finally, membership in the club was an effective way of formalizing a civilized centrality, the “Brotherhood”, from a barbarian periphery, non-members. Were it not for this archive the very existence of the “Brotherhood” and its formal manner of negotiating war, peace, trade, marriages, border disputes, and above all gift exchange would be all but unknown.

The glue that held this “Brotherhood” together was a trade in commodities masquerading as gifts. These, in turn, allowed for further exchanges: commercial, dynastic and cultural. Great Kings depended on each other for the supply of key items: gold, silver, horses, chariots, iron and wives. Importantly, they also depended upon the exchange of craftsmen, physicians, and augurs. These personnel were exchanged as gifts and viewed as prestige goods (Zacagnini 1983: 250). That artisans were mobile is already attested on the famous wall-painting at Beni-Hasan in Egypt, ca, 2000 B.C. The scene depicts a traveling smith with his equipment on the back of a pack donkey (Moorey 2001). Gifts as Marcel Mauss (1967: 1) wrote in his classic study “are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous….are in fact obligatory and interested”. Gifts are given in the expectation of reciprocation and economic self-interest. As Mauss (1967: 3) demonstrated, systems of total prestation in which literally all items are subjects of gift exchange are characteristic of archaic cultures. Within a context of quid pro quo gift exchange underscores the centrality of exchange and as Liverani notes is “the only possible starting point for the functioning of an international community”. Within the Amarna letters we read (see Moran 1992, EA refers to the number of the translated letter):

Whatever you desire in my land, write to me and they will bring it to you;
and whatever I desire in your land, I will write to you and they will send
to me. (EA 19)
Between kings there is brotherhood, friendship, peace and good terms if there is plenty of (precious) stones, plenty of silver, plenty of gold. (EA 11)

Since my fathers and your fathers established good relations between them, they sent each other fine gifts and they never refused each other any request for fine things. Now my brother sent me as a gift (only) two minas of gold. If gold is abundant send me as much as your father, if it is scarce send me a half of what your father (used to send). (EA 9)

In Egypt gold is more abundant than dust, and your brother loves you very much. What kind of man is he, who loves but does not send anything but this stuff? (EA 20)

As I am told in my brother’s country there is everything and my brother is in need of nothing so also in my country there is everything and I too am in need of nothing. But it is a good thing received from olden times, from the previous kings, to send gifts to each other. Let the habit remain established between us! (EA 7)

Liverani (2001: 153) summarizes:

The idea of accumulation is mainly attested at the official level, that of generosity at the level of personal conduct. This means that the state (the royal palace, the temple) is in charge of accumulation, and its prosperity and effectiveness depend on its capacity to store wealth for the future. The individual members of the community, however, must be generous and show no interest in acquisition. The overall model is that of a continuous and balanced circulation at the bottom of the socio-political pyramid with accumulation taking place at the top. The concentration of surplus is a state monopoly; the single cells of the community have to keep a reciprocal balance through exchange of goods and mutual aid.

The model of “shared social fields” suggests an expansive egalitarianism. In reality the world of the ancient Near East was far from a “shared social field”. It was a restricted and restrictive world, offering a cultural mosaic of appreciation for regional variation, diversity, and hierarchical difference. The only “shared social field” that existed at a distance, i.e. long distance trade, was restricted to the realm of the elites for “This is a society where most of the people never went beyond the next village, and were hardly aware of the distance separating them from the royal palace and the state border (Liverani 2001: 19). Prolonged interaction among the elites offered status, wealth, an idealized symmetry, and an increasing number of centralities (cores).

Within the Brotherhood the consumption of gifts is all but ignored. What happens to them is never discussed. Consumption is ignored, the goal is accumulation. The
concern is to obtain goods but the rule is to give them. Bargaining exists in the guise of generosity. Commercial relations are wedded to political relations and ambitions. Imports are celebrated while exports are all but ignored. Self sufficiency is praised while interdependence is the reality. Within the context of the “Brotherhood” Zaccagnini (1990) reminds us that no single state possessed a monopoly of either military power or the luxury goods that constituted the basis of international trade. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, the field of power is the relations of force between individuals who hold sufficient authority to put them in a position to influence communal decisions. No Great King could impose his will or bring meaningful pressure upon another. For a finely tuned appreciation of both textual and archaeological knowledge of the complexities inherent in the gift exchanges and international relations of the Late Bronze Age world there is no better guide than Liverani (2001).

An understanding of the complexities of the ancient economy of the Near East necessitates an imagination that allows for the co-existence of various economic actors and structures whose relative importance varies both within and over time. Mesopotamia was neither dominated by capitalist style activity, as argued by Silver (1985), by Polanyi’s (1957) reciprocity and redistribution, or by Wolf’s (1982) varied modes of production. Such crystallization of singular types recalls the arguments of the Bücher-Meyer controversy which over a century ago juxtaposed “modern” vs. “primitive” economic structures (see Finley 1979 for a review of this controversy). Our own contemporary aversion to state control of an economy, our belief that free enterprise is a panacea for all social ills, or a contrasting view of communal ownership in a society of shared social fields, are but a few ideological impulses with which we burden the past. Goal motivated behavior is a decisive factor in social transformation, whether the motivation be for power as ultimately practiced by the state, or for profit, as sought by the entrepreneur. Trade highlights interaction both within a community and at a distance. Interaction, in turn, highlights the importance of agency that precipitates individual action. Interaction, whether it be between states or individuals simply cannot be treated as mere structural phenomenon confirming a universal or essentialist model. Interaction is a continuing process at times co-operative, often violent, almost always unpredictable, subject to forces resulting too frequently in unforeseen consequences. There are indeed “shared social fields” that Kohl (2008) believes represent a convergence of prehistory and contemporary practice, but not in the sense of his meaning. Today the state, priests, and merchants, as in the third millennium, continue to envelope us in their macabre dance in which profit and value serve as motive, even as adaptive, force. The convergence of prehistory and contemporary practice, with regard to profit and value, present us with a stark contrast between the past and the present world. Profit and value, as countless other attributes, are perceived and acted upon by individual agents in a completely different manner, dependent upon the distinctive cultural context. As the first philosopher of the dialectic, Heraclitus of Ephesus (540-475 B.C.), observed “Everything is and is not”.

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