

Silver as a Financial Tool in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia

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“All history is contemporary history,” the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce famously proclaimed and indeed a volume on the political economy of monetary innovations has greater poignancy in a Europe whose latest monetary experiment, the euro, is on the verge of collapse, with various heads of state offering contradictory solutions to the problem. We have a natural curiosity about roots, beginnings, and my chapter will address the earliest recorded interactions between states and financial tools. Historians cannot go farther back in time to study these issues. No cultures before the two I will discuss had states, political economies, or writing, the latter crucially for us the only means through which we can study the use of financial tools in any detail. This does not mean that there were no socio-political structures or economic activities earlier on or for that matter in cultures without writing in existence alongside those I will discuss, but the relationship between the two is impossible for us to study as historians. My chapter deals with the two earliest complex societies in world history, which both formed states and developed writing systems through indigenous processes: ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. These two cultures show a great number of similarities and parallelisms—to such an extent that they are often considered together in historical analyses—but also differences and I will explore their divergent attitudes towards silver as a financial tool. Before I do, let me introduce them somewhat further and point out some important parallelisms relevant to the topic of the political economy of monetary innovations.

Ancient Mesopotamia is a modern term used to indicate the cultures of the region of modern Iraq and its surroundings in a period from around 3200 to 300 BC, although these chronological boundaries are easy to contest with good reason. In essence the designation encompasses multiple cultures and political organizations that are documented to us through cuneiform writings on clay

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tablets primarily recording texts in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages. More specific terms like Babylonian and Assyrian are more accurate indications of the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia; but there is sufficient coherence among those that dealing with them as a group makes sense. Ancient Egypt may seem much easier to define but its apparent uniformity is deceptive as its long history saw more change than is often acknowledged. For simplicity's sake I will use the term here as it is commonly done to refer to the cultures and political organizations of the area along the Nile from Aswan to the Mediterranean Sea from around 3000 to 300 BC, again dates that can be easily challenged. In both regions the geographical boundaries are very flexible depending primarily on military activities, but that is not such a problem here, as I will focus on the heartlands. Chronologically I will concentrate on the third and second millennia BC, when mostly indigenous processes drove cultural developments and practices. Sometimes the term "Bronze Age economy" is used to refer to their economic activities.

Both Egypt and Mesopotamia developed states in the late fourth millennium, that is, complex socio-political organizations beyond the communal level. They also each independently created writing systems—hieroglyphic and cuneiform—as a consequence. The economic transactions became so complex that they needed some type of accounting to inform people not present at the time when goods were transferred or services rendered. While the record is very rich—in Mesopotamia more so than in Egypt until the late second millennium—it is very patchy in its coverage both in space and in time. We have access to sets of archives that document activity in a certain place at a certain moment in time. The number of records can be in the tens of thousands but they often derive from one or more specific places and from a circumscribed period—for example, from a handful of cities in 21st century Babylonia or from a single village in 14th–13th century Egypt. Still the wealth of data is unparalleled but for a few other periods in ancient world history.

Other parallelisms more specifically related to the political economy exist as well. Silver was a metal not native to either region. Mesopotamia had no local silver at all, while in Egypt some lead deposits had a high silver content that could be extracted; yet it seems that the metal was mostly imported (Stos-Gale 2001). Gold was much more readily available in Egypt, especially when the state controlled Nubia to the south with its extremely rich mines in the eastern desert. In some periods of ancient history Egypt was the foremost source of gold for the entire Near East. In both regions too, the political elites almost monopolized the use of precious metals, including silver, for what one can call non-productive purposes. Evidence for this has primarily survived in tombs; the mid-third millennium Royal Cemetery at Babylonian Ur and the late second millennium Valley of the Kings in Egyptian Thebes immediately come to mind, of course. King Tutankhamun's treasures continue to boggle the mind and we have to remember that he was a minor ruler buried in a tiny tomb. The elites did not only surround themselves with such wealth in death but also when alive, although most of the evidence for that has disappeared. But we know of gilded statues, jewelry, inlaid furniture, and so on. An illustrated record of the donations by king Thutmose III to the Karnak temple in Egypt suggest what massive amounts of precious objects were kept in such

treasuries (cf. Van De Mieroop 2007: 183). Thus although a lot of silver may have been present in these societies, much of it was stashed away and of no use as a financial tool.

Silver and other metals were available in wider circles, however, and in both cultures appeared as instruments to facilitate financial transactions. The use of silver in both societies has been studied quite extensively, but to my knowledge no one had ever compared the two. I will thus start out with a brief survey of the evidence, which differs substantially between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Egyptian sources are very few in number and hard to interpret. In the New Kingdom, the later half of the second millennium, the term “his silver” appeared to indicate the value of commodities. In the richly documented village of Deir el-Medinah everything could be evaluated in amounts of silver or copper/bronze using measures called *deben* (91 g) and *kite* (9.1 g). This was not because the metals were used as payment but to establish value in barter transactions (cf. Kemp 2006: 321). The community at Deir el-Medinah was closely knit and unusual because it resided outside the agricultural zone and was fully dependent on the palace for its food, fuel, water, and so on. The inhabitants received these to support their work in building the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Yet, this very state-dependent group of people was actively engaged in transactions with one another, unusually well-documented in writing. People acquired cereals, baskets, furniture, animals, tools, jewelry, and many other items from others and paid for these in a barter system with other goods (Janssen 1975). Values were calculated in metal, however. There existed thus a type of market at Deir el-Medinah, although not with professional merchants who acted as intermediaries. The evidence from Egypt for special places of exchange with people both acquiring and selling is paltry, but it does exist in a very different type of documentation: tomb paintings. Those depicted scenes of daily life to accompany the dead in the hereafter as guarantee for a comfortable survival there. Although we cannot read them literally as accurate reflections of what life was like in ancient Egypt—a common mistake—they are rooted in reality, only very idealized. One scene shows a harbor with ships under the command of Syrian men whose cargo is being unloaded (Kemp 2006: 325; Kenamun TT 162). On shore there are booths with traders—two men and one woman—negotiating with the Syrians. One trader holds a small scale: was it used to measure silver or for spices and the like? The mid-third millennium Old Kingdom tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep (Moussa and Altenmüller 1977: p. 10) contains a scene where men and women sell consumables (vegetables, fruit, fish, etc.), craft products (small metal objects, cloth), and personal services (barbering) although the means of payment is unclear. This shows that goods and services circulated above the pure subsistence level, most likely paid for through barter with the value of the exchanged goods measured in quantities of metal (Römer 1998).

People did collect metals too, however, although the evidence is confusing. At the ephemeral 14th century capital of Akhetaten (modern El Amarna) in a small space beside a public well in the North suburb archaeologists found a buried covered jar, which held a hoard of metal. It contained “twenty-three bars of gold and a

quantity of silver fragments and roughly made rings, as well as a silver figurine of a Hittite god. The gold bars had been made simply by pouring melted-down gold into grooves scooped by the finger in sand. The total weight of the gold was 3,375.36 grammes, equivalent in ancient terms to 37 *deben*. The total weight of the silver came to at least 1,085.85 grammes, or 12 *deben*” (Kemp 2006: 315 and figure on p. 316). The total was enough to acquire, for example, 10 to 12 head of cattle. No one really knows who buried this hoard and why. Forgotten hoards are one of the main causes for the survival of coins in later history and this jar could have contained someone’s accumulated wealth although Akhetaten was never under threat of an enemy invasion. A letter from Deir el Medinah tells a very strange tale regarding a hoard of copper tools and gold and silver (Wente 1990: 164 no. 196). The writer reports how he was told to look for pits in a pigsty and that he found a collection of copper tools as well as a jar “capped with gypsum and sealed with two seal impressions and inscribed [with a list of what was] in it: 10 *deben* of silver, 2 *mina* of gold,¹ 7 heart amulets, 7 chains(?) of gold, and 20 gold signet rings.” His friend wanted to divide the gold and silver up but the writer refused and dutifully reported the copper as pharaoh’s property to the overseer of the treasury. He does not report what happened to the precious metal, but he seems confident that he did the right thing. Not everyone was that honest. The most fascinating text record of the end of the New Kingdom reveals the robberies of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings, which could not be stopped partly due to corruption at the highest levels of Theban society. Groups of men broke into the tombs and went so far as to setting fire to mummies to collect the gold inside the wrappings. The precious metal recovered flooded the market and it is possible that the silver–copper ratio declined from 1:100 to 1:60 as a result. The papyri detail that the robbers were in touch with groups of merchants who lived on ships anchored in Thebes’ harbor and these seem to have acted as fences for the stolen goods (Römer 1992: 279–281).

Before summing up the Egyptian evidence I need to mention loans and credit, which will be central to the discussion of ancient Mesopotamia. The Egyptian sources on them are very scarce until the New Kingdom. Records from previous periods show that people sometimes helped out neighbors with grain or so as acts of solidarity in times of need. They usually contain promises of the recipients that they will return the goods. Some credit sales are also known through records of legal disputes about them. It is again only the Deir el-Medinah community that left us more evidence. People advanced goods to others to help them out in what has been called an open credit system based on reciprocity (Janssen 1994). These advances were expressed through statements that something was in the possession of someone else. We assume that there was the expectation of repayment at some point in the future never declared, and there is no indication of the existence of interest at all. Profit was thus not the reason for these transactions. Interest only appears in first millennium Egypt (see Bleiberg 2002 for a survey).

¹ The use of the Near Eastern *mina* here is unparalleled in Egyptian sources of the period (Hoch 1994: 127 no. 162) and fascinating in this context.

It is thus clear that silver and copper/bronze were used primarily as measures of value in ancient Egypt in the third and second millennia, and that they served this role without having to be present. How values were determined is another and highly controversial matter. The metals were also in circulation, however, rarely documented but sufficiently so that we must imagine that some people even of lower social ranks held amounts of them in addition to their assets in the form of consumables and other commodities. The palace and the temples, richly endowed by it, held most of the metals, however, and did not use them for financial purposes. When royal inscriptions list treasures captured or donated they account for items without expressing their value in gold, silver, or copper/bronze. Those metals appear with their weights recorded when they were part of the collections described as unworked materials.

The evidence from Mesopotamia, that is, both Babylonia and Assyria, is much richer than the Egyptian and much more nuanced (for detailed surveys of the evidence, see Milano and Parise 2003; for the political economy, Yoffee 1995). From the mid-third millennium on, value was expressed with amounts of silver and this remained the practice, with numerous attestations, until the year 1600 when the so-called Old Babylonian period ended. After a 200-year long interval without textual evidence, the later second millennium data show a gold standard instead of silver (Müller 1982)—a remarkable practice in a land fully dependent on distant Egypt for supplies of that metal. At the same time in gold-rich Egypt villagers at Deir el-Medinah measured value in silver. Although there were short and long term fluctuations in prices in Babylonia there are clear indications that there existed ideal equivalences between silver and other commodities, which seem to have been established when the metrological system was created, that is, at the time of script invention around 3200 BC. The first paragraph of the Laws of Eshnunna, written in Akkadian around 1770 BC, sums these up most directly:

1 *gur* of barley (can be purchased) for 1 shekel of silver. 3 *sila* of fine oil—for 1 shekel of silver. 12 *sila* of oil—for 1 shekel of silver. 15 *sila* of lard—for 1 shekel of silver. 40 *sila* of bitumen—for 1 shekel of silver. 1 *mina* of wool—for 1 shekel of silver. 2 *gur* of salt—for 1 shekel of silver. 1 *gur* of potash—for 1 shekel of silver. 3 *mina* of copper—for 1 shekel of silver. 2 *mina* of wrought copper—for 1 shekel of silver (after Roth 1997: 59).

It is obvious that the list takes 1 shekel of silver (8.333 g) as its basis and states the relative values of other commodities using basic units as well: 1 *gur* (300 l) barley, 1 *mina* (pound) wool or potash, 3 *sila* (liters) fine oil, 3 *mina* of copper, etc. The idea that 1 *gur* of barley was priced at 1 shekel silver survived throughout Babylonian history even when the volume of the *gur* measure changed. In the third and second millennia it contained 300 l, but in the first millennium only 180 l (Powell 1990). In the short term, the price of barley did not adhere to this ideal standard and, for example, it was cheaper right after the harvest than later in the year. Unfortunately, the data for the centuries when the Laws of Eshnunna were written are slim, but it seems that for at least a century barley prices were never as high as 1 shekel silver per *gur*, although later on this changed (Farber 1978). We have no evidence of price edicts of the type the Roman emperor Diocletian

proclaimed²; the Babylonian law codes were not royal decrees but idealized statements about what just circumstances would be, so there is no evidence of governmental price controls. It is likely that the equivalences stated were intuitively considered normal ones even if there were fluctuations due to various circumstances (time to harvest, poor weather, war, etc.).

Silver equivalences were used for many commodities. In the 21st century appeared a type of account we call Merchant's Balanced Accounts, which provide prices for foods (cereals, fish, fruit, cheese, honey), materials for craftwork (reed, timber, bitumen, alkali), metals (gold, copper), and livestock (sheep and goats). Finished products (leather bags, sandals) are rare in them (Snell 1982). Merchants provided the commodities, which were mostly locally available, to institutions with capital granted to them in the form of non-perishable items (wool, metals including silver) and exchangeable staples (cereals, fruits). That the same equivalents were used in other accounts is clear from records of the same era as well as later centuries, when there is documentation for the sales of land, wool, cattle, oil, barley, slaves, etc. (Farber 1978). Although prices were expressed in amounts of silver it is likely that many of the transactions were barter. The sales include credit sales of manufactured goods paid up front in arrangements that parallel another type of financial arrangement where silver was crucial: the loan.

The loan contract, a type of document that records a multitude of credit arrangements, is one of the most commonly written accounts preserved from ancient Mesopotamia with thousands of examples from almost the entire history of the culture. I surveyed the evidence in another publication (2002a), and it seems that four main purposes were served: (1) as in Egypt people helped out each other with advances of commodities and small loans without the expectation of a gain; (2) as in any agricultural economy producers sometimes needed help with payments before harvests or when harvests were poor; (3) loans were often granted to individuals with the aim of obtaining their labor or that of one of their dependents; and (4) entrepreneurs advanced capital to facilitate the circulation of goods regionally or to obtain imports from abroad. In all cases the amounts owed could be expressed in quantities of silver and of barley, in various combinations. Loans often stated, for example, that silver was advanced but that repayment was due in barley. Although silver often acted as a measure of value without being physically present, it is clear that the metal was in common circulation. In early second millennium Babylonia, for example, the palace as largest landowner wanted easily storable silver as payment of taxes and rents instead of produce and engaged entrepreneurs to act as middlemen in interactions with farmers, herders, etc. These collected the produce but paid the palace silver, and how they converted one into the other is not documented. Many private archives of the period contain records of this activity and the people involved clearly managed much of the circulation of goods at the time, which relied on credit in several ways. First the palace provided

² The so-called Edict of Belsazzar is a statement of rights to income (Van Driel 2002: 166–167).

credit to entrepreneurs allowing them to collect resources for payment in the future—and we know it could take several years for them to pay up—and second, the entrepreneurs often extended credit to the producers when they could not pay up on time. Interest became part of the system at the latest in the mid-third millennium and although actual rates varied there were ideal ones, documented in the law codes and elsewhere: 20 % for silver and 33.3 % for barley (Van De Mieroop 2005). The rationale for the silver rate was fully rooted in the metrological system and the relationship between basic units. One *mina* of silver contained 60 shekels and each month one smaller unit (shekel) had to be added to the larger one (*mina*), ending up with 12 shekels per *mina*, that is, 20 %. In the case of barley the rate derived from agricultural rental fees, which amounted to one-third of the yield. Why the difference in rates according to what was borrowed? Many scholars consider economic factors as the reason, pointing out that barley loans were usually taken out shortly before the harvest when prices were high and repaid at harvest time, when prices were low, while the value of silver did not fluctuate similarly. But the price differences for barley could be much larger than 13 % (Pomponio 2003: 89–91), and it seems that customary rules rather than economic factors set the rates. Although the calculations originated from an annual perspective, interest was charged in full irrespective of the length of the loan, and many of them were short-term. Thus actual rates tended to be high and it is no surprise then that debt was a recurrent problem in Babylonia, to such an extent that kings abolished consumptive loans at irregular intervals, at least until 1600, in an attempt to curb the power of the entrepreneurial class over the population (see, most recently, Charpin 2010, which contains the relevant bibliography).

The same entrepreneurs used credit to finance long-term enterprises, including foreign trade. The latter is best documented in a unique record found outside Mesopotamia proper in the ruins of a colony Assyrians established at Kanesh in central Turkey in the 20th–19th centuries (Veenhof 2010). Groups of investors put together caravans carrying woven textiles imported from Babylonia and tin acquired in the east (Iran and Afghanistan) to Kanesh, where they were exchanged for silver and gold to be shipped back to Assur. Assyrian representatives traded the textiles and tin for the precious metals in various substations in the region. The profits were substantial: tin cost at least double in Kanesh what it cost in Assur and textiles tripled their value. This trade was clearly one of the channels through which actual silver entered Mesopotamia and the Assyrians probably used some of it to pay for the Babylonian textiles thereby supplying the south with the metal so crucial in local exchange.

Textual evidence shows the use of silver in some other contexts as well. The law codes set out hiring fees for people, such as boatmen, builders, even physicians, and they also stipulate financial fines. Those written in the Sumerian language do so consistently for physical injuries, including manslaughter (Laws of Eshnunna ¶ 43–47; Roth 1997: 66). We always focus on the *lex talionis*—eye for eye—in discussing the Code of Hammurabi, but when someone injured another of a lower social rank the penalty was a fine in silver (e.g., Code of Hammurabi 196–198; Roth 1997: 121).

Although in many instances the silver reported in texts may just have been a measure of value for another commodity it is clear that the metal was extensively used in Mesopotamia. Texts and some archaeological remains show that it was often kept in the shape of rings or coils and from the mid-third millennium on there is evidence of small pieces snipped off for payment (Powell 1978), and some hoards of scrap metal have been excavated (Peyronel 2010). People did weigh out amounts of silver at times. Whether or not one should refer to silver and other commodities used to verify value (barley, copper, even gold) as money is a contested issue. Some scholars say of course (e.g., Powell 1996); others prefer to wait until coinage appeared on the scene in the later first millennium BC to use the term (e.g., Renger 1995). There is also much debate about the existence of markets in Mesopotamia, much of it dependent on how exactly one interprets the term (Zaccagnini 1987–1990). The evidence for the narrow meaning of special locations for trade transactions is slim, but even if there were no equivalents of the later Middle Eastern *suq* or Medieval European *halles*, strategically located areas at crossroads or city-gates naturally seem to have brought together buyers and sellers (Röllig 1976).

There are substantial differences thus in the use of silver as a financial tool in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. In both cultures the metal served as a measure of value, even if it was of foreign origin and rarely seen in many communities. Silver never had that function on its own: lower values were regularly expressed in amounts of copper/bronze and sometimes tin, and higher values in gold. In Mesopotamia amounts of barley were also frequent measures of value. It is notable that the purity of the silver was not indicated—that became only an issue in the later first millennium (Powell 1996). People seem to have taken that for granted, which suggests that the actual metal was not important, only the idea of it. It was only in the first millennium that objects of silver or other metals appeared in the Near Eastern area bearing marks of guarantee from a temple or a palace (Snell 1995). These seem to be forerunners to the coinage that originated in Lydia in the seventh century. The big difference between Mesopotamia and Egypt is that in the former culture the concept of exchange facilitated by silver as an actual commodity or as a measure was much more common from very early on in its history. Numerous transactions in local contexts or involving long-distance movements referred to silver, and there are many more indications that the actual metal was used. Assyrian traders carried it from Anatolia and Babylonian entrepreneurs paid it to institutions, and there must have been occasions when individuals paid it out in little scraps to pay for fines, salaries, and acquisitions. And finally, the most radical difference may be that in Mesopotamia the idea that amounts of silver could be made to grow by lending it out for a profit existed early on, while in Egypt this was a concept of the late period only. The inhabitants of Babylonia invented interest.

How do we interpret the differences? The answer depends to an enormous extent on our views regarding the overall structures of these ancient economies and whether or not we perceive private entrepreneurs and the market as having a decisive impact. All scholars agree that the public institutions of palaces and

temples played huge and determining roles in the economies of these regions and that they were major players in the distribution of resources in the form of rations and other commodities. They are also aware that on the level of communities exchange happened in ways that are not accounted for in the records and that were based on reciprocity. Everyone furthermore acknowledges that there were other types of transactions that involved exchanges where prices were important and variable, where people had some interest in making profits, and where features of a market economy are visible. It is clear that in every economy three modes of exchange—distribution, reciprocity, trade—played a role; the difficulty is to determine their relative importance. There are those who see the role of private entrepreneurs and the market as marginal and those who see them as the backbone of exchange—this is true for all fields of ancient history. The debate between so-called primitivists/substantivists and modernists/formalists, if one can even call it a debate, has become sterile, I believe, and will not be solved with additional data. The difference of opinion is often due to the nature of the documentation available for any particular era of history and the type of records the researcher focuses on (Van De Mieroop 2004). Those who see a predominant role of the public institutions in the Near Eastern economies will interpret financial tools as managed by the state; those who focus on entrepreneurs will see market forces at work. Clear evidence exists to substantiate both views (cf. Clancier et al. 2005). In either case, we need to explain the differences between ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, which on the surface look so alike.

Let us accept that the states played a very important role in the economy and in exchange.³ The political structures of Egypt and Babylonia-Assyria in the third and second millennia are usually described as very distinct. From its inception around 3000 BC Egypt was a territorial state encompassing a long stretch of land along the Nile River. The political unification of the region marked the start of Egyptian history and many of the projects we regard as high points of Egyptian achievement were possible only because of the access to labor and resources from the whole country: the Old Kingdom great pyramids, for example. The state collected from the entire territory, but also gave back to it. One of the last official records of the period I consider here was the great Papyrus Harris I from the reign of Ramesses IV (1153–1147), reaffirming donations his father, Ramesses III (r. 1184–1153) had made to temples. The royal benefactions were truly staggering. Ramesses III donated 2,954 km² of agricultural land, possibly fifteen percent of all that was available in the country. Moreover, he gave 107,615 male servants, which may have been three percent of the entire population. If women and children accompanied these men, they would have made up half a million people. More than eighty percent of the donations went to temples in Thebes, but others throughout the country were recipients as well (Grandet 1994). Egypt was not always unified: its history is punctuated with moments of fragmentation, the

³ A conference volume like Zaccagnini (2003) shows that the role varied in different periods of ancient history, but palace involvement was always present.

so-called Intermediate periods, but even then the ideology of the redistributive state continued. Local lords of the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2160–2055) boasted of their ability to keep their subjects alive while those in neighboring territories starved (Assmann 2002: 93–105). It is startling then that one community fully dependent on the state at the height of its centralized power provides the richest evidence of private commercial interactions, seemingly undertaken freely. The workmen of Deir el-Medinah in the 14th–13th centuries, while deriving their livelihood from building tombs for kings and queens, exchanged goods, paid each other for work done, all without visible official interference.

The political situation in Mesopotamia was different: the earliest states were city-states and although historians tend to stress moments of centralized power (the 24th–23rd, 21st, and 18th centuries) until the mid-second millennium this remained the essential political structure. It was only after 1450 that Babylonia and Assyria became territorial states. Within these city-states the institutions (palaces and temples) were principal economic players, and it was their use of private entrepreneurs that made available the silver these individuals used for other financial transactions, such as loans. At the time when state economic activity dominates the record—the so-called Ur III period in the 21st century from which close to one hundred thousand state generated texts are known—men identified as merchants and by all accounts independent operators worked with the state in the acquisition and distribution of commodities, both locally and long-distance. The Merchant's Balanced Accounts, mentioned before, show their involvement with local products—fruits, reed, etc.—and there is enough evidence to suggest that they managed part of the tax system (Garfinkle 2010). They also received state funds to acquire foreign goods. One record, for example, lists thirteen individual or groups of merchants from all over the Ur III state who received amounts of silver for the purpose of acquiring gold (Garfinkle 2008). Although it is not explicitly stated where they were to find it, this was most likely abroad. In subsequent centuries Babylonian institutions used entrepreneurs increasingly to manage their local affairs (Van De Mieroop 2013) and the Assyrian records from Kanesh show how merchants imported silver and gold into Mesopotamia with little state interference. The liquid assets, they used in this work, enabled them to issue loans, etc. Or it is perhaps better to say that states used capital in the form of silver and the rights to taxes and fees in the same way that they used their other resources, such as fields and herds. They assigned the care to entrepreneurs who mixed their own resources with the institutional ones and tried to be as successful as possible, while the institutions were guaranteed a set income.

We should not underestimate the redistributive powers of the states, however. The tens of thousands of Ur III tablets derive from institutional archives and document the movement of massive amounts of goods and services. Comparing Egypt and Mesopotamia one could perhaps conclude that because of its size the Egyptian state controlled economic life to such an extent that silver was not much needed outside its purview, although it tolerated low-level exchange. Babylonian and Assyrian city-states may have been less dominating because of their smaller sizes and they may have encouraged commercial enterprise by private individuals,

with whom they interacted financially including by giving them assets needed to do their work. To explain the difference we should look at the geo-political situation. Were non-governmental agents needed in Mesopotamia to make possible exchange between competing city-states that were regularly at war with one another? Although the ideal of autarky may have existed and all Babylonian regions more or less had similar resources, it is clear that some resources were more readily available in some parts while they were needed everywhere. Everyone ate barley but some city-states had agricultural zones that were much more productive than others. Did merchants facilitate inter-city exchange among competitors? The same merchants could also go to distant regions in order to obtain goods that were not essential for basic survival but coveted by the elites, such as hardwood, metals, semi-precious stones, etc. all lacking in Mesopotamia (Van De Mierop 2002b). Because of their greater resources the Egyptians did not need that much from abroad, although they also engaged in foreign trade from prehistory on and some expeditions were celebrated in the official record, such as Hatshepsut's to the distant land of Punt. But more crucially regional trade was not impeded by political boundaries and the state did not need to rely on independent agents to obtain nearby commodities. This may explain the distinction between the two cultures.

On the other hand, the tyranny of the documentation should not be ignored. Virtually no records of the Egyptian citizenry are preserved, beyond those from the inhabitants of Deir el-Medinah and very few other exceptions. Only some settlements that were located in the desert have survived; the vast majority of Egyptian villages were situated in the Nile's flood plain and have been submerged innumerable times. Not only are they deep below the modern surface, but whatever piece of writing they contained has vanished. Babylonians and Assyrians are much better known because their homes and the archives they held can be excavated. We should never forget that historians look at fragments from the distant past, like small points of light in a vast dark room. Perhaps the distinction between Egypt and Mesopotamia is more apparent than real.

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