

Structure of Early Mesopotamian Society

Having begun with a primarily linguistic interest in the earliest Akkadian sources, this study has expanded to cover the social and economic aspects based on Akkadian as well as Sumerian materials of the third millennium B.C. With the aid of grants from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Guggenheim Foundation and of the Colvin Research Fellowship, which he held in 1962/63, Professor Gelb has been investigating in particular the organization of the rural economy and matters of social stratification.

An unusual opportunity for collaborative research on this problem came in 1963 with the visit to Chicago of Professor I. M. Diakonoff, a noted specialist on early Mesopotamian economy. A member of the staff of the Institute of the Peoples of Asia in Leningrad, Professor Diakonoff worked closely with Professor Gelb for a period of several months in Chicago as Visiting Professor of Assyriology.

Professor Gelb is completing a major work, entitled "Land Tenure in Ancient Mesopotamia," in which he shows that, in contrast to opinions generally held in the field, the role of private economy was at least as important as that of the state and temple economies. At present, he is concentrating on the elucidation of the relative status of Mesopotamian society, especially that of the lowest classes. Professor Gelb has recognized three classes of ancient Mesopotamian society: the upper land-owning class; the lowest class of slaves who performed only household tasks; and the in-between class of "serfs," who represented the major labor force of ancient times.

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