

STRUCTURE OF EARLY MESOPOTAMIAN SOCIETY

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The aim of this long-range project is to investigate the structure of the Sumero-Akkadian society over a span of about one thousand years, from its historical beginnings around 3000 B.C. to the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

While they remain to be corroborated by a more exhaustive treatment of the sources, some general conclusions have been reached up to now: The most ancient Mesopotamian economy was essentially rural and was concentrated in large households (manors, estates) owned by the ruler, temples, and nobles. The economy was private and based on family ownership. The land was not owned exclusively by the state (king) or temples, as generally claimed by scholars who believe that the economy of ancient Mesopotamia was either etatistic or ecclesiastic. The king bought land like any private individual, while the temples owned land given to them by the king or the nobles. The large households were run with the help of "serfs," who received their subsistence in the form of rations of barley, oil, and clothing. Independent craftsmen and real wages were unknown. The institution of slavery was very limited. All this changed radically between the end of the Ur III period and Old Babylonian times. The growing urbanization of the country brought about a rise of industry and an increased number of artisans who were free to work for wages, and the redistribution of land as a result of Amorite invasions created a new class of small peasants who paid taxes and owed service to the state. While in the older periods major productive forces were controlled by the state, temples, and large landholders, by the Old Babylonian period the major production seems to have been achieved by small landholders and artisans.