

STRUCTURE OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN SOCIETY

I. J. Gelb

The two-year project to study land tenure in third millennium Mesopotamia described in the previous two annual reports is nearing completion. A manuscript has been prepared dealing with fifty-five multiple land sale transactions, mostly on stone, dating from about 3100 B.C. to about 2250 B.C., and the socio-economic commentary to these texts will be completed this summer.

The records of multiple land sale transactions make it quite clear that large parcels of land were owned by private extended families or clans and that some of this land was being bought from the families by high officials or rich individuals. These records come from such diverse sites as Lagash, Umma, Adab, Nippur, Kish, Sippar, Eshnunna, and Assur and must reflect a widespread situation, not one which is restricted to a limited area of Mesopotamia.

An example of these transactions is given below. The format and phraseology of the transactions vary from location to location, but the example given here is fully illustrative of their nature. It comes from the Manishtushu Obelisk, a large stone monument which stands over four feet high and is covered with hundreds of lines of writing. The excerpt given here records the purchase of three adjacent parcels of land from three family groups in the town of Baz, in the province of Dur-Sin, by Manishtushu, son of Sargon of Akkad (2269-2255 B.C.). Words and phrases in the translation which are not self-explanatory are marked with an asterisk and explained in the brief commentary following the text.

Land Sale Transaction

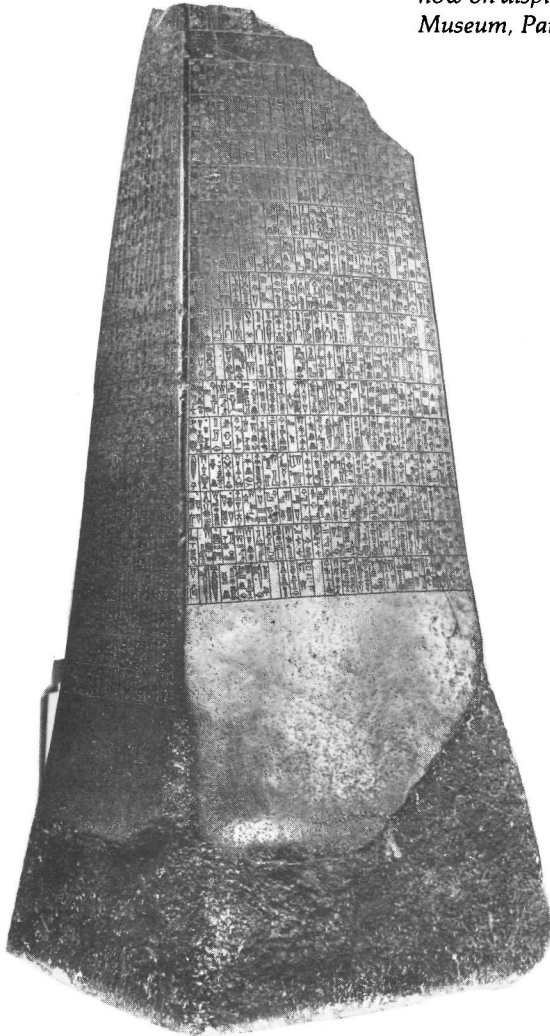
First field

439 iku (= 383 acres) of land, its price is 1463 $\frac{1}{3}$ gursaggal (= 351,120 quarts) of barley. Its silver is at the rate of 1 shekel (= 0.3 ounce) of silver for 1 gursaggal (= 240 quarts) of barley. The price of the field is 1463 $\frac{1}{3}$ shekels (= 27.5 pounds) of silver.

The additional payment* is 219 $\frac{1}{3}$ shekels (= 4.1 pounds) of silver.

4 PN's* (received) a total of 1 silver ornament weighing 15 shekels (= 4.5 ounces), 1 (first-class) garment, and 3 garments as the gift* for the field.

*The Manishtushu Obelisk,
now on display at the Louvre
Museum, Paris*



3 PN's (not receiving gifts).*

Total: 7 men, lords* of the field, receivers* of the silver.

Total: 10 men, brother-lords* of the field (not receiving silver or gifts).

Grand total: 17 men, descendants of (the clan of) Mezizi.

Second field

821 iku (= 716 acres) of land, its price is $2736\frac{2}{3}$ gursaggal (= 656,640 quarts) of barley. Its silver is at the rate of 1 shekel of silver for 1 gursaggal of barley. The price of the field is $2736\frac{2}{3}$ shekels (= 51.3 pounds) of silver.

The additional payment is $410\frac{1}{2}$ shekels (= 7.7 pounds) of silver.

4 PN's (received) a total of 1 silver ornament weighing 15 shekels (= 4.5 ounces), 1 (first-class) garment, and 3 garments as the gift for the field.

5 PN's (not receiving gifts).

Total: 9 men, lords of the field, receivers of the silver, descendants of (the clan of) Shi'uni.

Third field

73 iku (= 67 acres) of land, its price is $243\frac{1}{3}$ gursaggal (= 58,320 quarts) of barley. Its silver is at the rate of 1 shekel of silver for 1 gursaggal of barley. The price of the field is $243\frac{1}{3}$ shekels (= 4.6 pounds) of silver.

The additional payment is $36\frac{1}{2}$ shekels (= 0.7 pounds) of silver.

2 PN's (received) a total of 2 garments as the gift for the field.

Total: 2 men, lords of the field, receivers of the silver, descendants of (the clan of) Lamum, the priest of Zababa.

Totals and summary

Total: 1333 iku (= 1166 acres) of land.

North side abutting the property of Shilugarud. West side abutting the property of Lamum, royal land. East side abutting the Tigris River. South side abutting the property of Enbu-ilum of the household of the Queen.

Field of the town of Baz.

5 PN's, witnesses (of the sellers) of the fields.

190 men, citizens of the city (province) of Dur-Sin "ate bread."*

49 PN's, citizens of the city (province) of Akkade, witnesses (of the buyer) of the fields.

Manishtushu, King of Kish, bought a field of the town of Baz in the city (province) of Dur-Sin.

Commentary

The additional payment is a fixed percentage of the sale price. In this example it is 15% but in one instance in the Manishtushu Obelisk it is 20% and in other documents it varies, usually between 5% and 20%. The reason for this payment is unknown.

The abbreviation PN stands for personal name.

In the sale of the first field, 17 members of the clan of Mezizi are involved in the transaction in varying degrees. The lords of the field receive the price, but are divided into two grades: those receiving gifts and those not receiving gifts. These are presumably the members of the branch of the clan owning the parcel of land being sold, and the seller listed first among the sellers and who receives the best and most valuable gifts is the head of that branch. The other sellers who receive less valuable gifts or no gifts are the more junior members of the branch. The brother-lords of the field are presumably the heads of the collateral branches of the clan and receive neither price nor gifts, but simply attend the transaction, thereby giving their approval to the sale of the land.

The phrase “ate bread” and other evidence from the sale documents indicate that a feast was held (probably provided by the buyer) to celebrate the completion of the transaction.