

ANCIENT SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

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THE PAST YEAR has been devoted to intensive work on the two-year project "Source Book for the Social and Economic History of the Ancient Near East," which has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation.

The basic objectives of the project were outlined in last year's Annual Report. To sum up, the project will result in the preparation of a book which will contain a rich selection of original sources pertaining to the structure of society and economy of the ancient Near East. The book is intended to serve as a research tool for anthropologists and historians who do not read ancient languages but are interested in the social and economic history of the ancient Near East, as well as for scholars who know the languages but are not primarily interested in socio-economic matters.

The investigation concentrates on Mesopotamia in the 3rd millennium B.C. This choice is not accidental, since it was in this area and period that the formative developments of Near Eastern civilization took place. Fortunately for modern scholars, the developments of this crucial age find detailed documentation in masses of cuneiform tablets, thereby making it possible to see the origin of Near Eastern civilization in its making, and, at the same time, to reconstruct the earliest recorded history of mankind.

The documents utilized in the project are mainly of administrative/economic and legal nature. Thousands of sources were studied during the preliminary part of the investigation. Some seventy of the most representative and best preserved documents were then selected to be included in the "Source Book." Each document is presented in the "Source

Book” in the form of an independent article, consisting of a thorough description and discussion of the text and a synoptic chart, illustrating its structure and content. The articles vary in length, depending on the scope and significance of the topic. Among the topics represented in the “Source Book” are, to mention just the most important, Social Stratification, Household and Family, Land Tenure, Animal Husbandry, Trade, and Law. Special effort has been made to place the documents in their proper socio-economic context, mainly by virtue of comparisons with parallel phenomena in the later periods of ancient Near Eastern civilization and in other cultures. The articles presently are in various stages of completion. When finished, the “Source Book” should offer a rounded and exhaustive picture of the society and economy of the ancient Near East.

A unique feature of the project is that for the first time in the history of ancient Near Eastern studies a comprehensive investigation of the society and economy as a whole has been undertaken. This approach offers the advantage of studying the social and economic phenomena in the net of interconnections, and by doing so, enhancing their understanding. As a result, the project has already produced important contributions in several areas, either in the form of outright solutions or new interpretations.

The work on the project is now in an advanced stage. It is carried out with full-time assistance of Piotr Steinkeller and part-time assistance of Lawrence Smith and Howard Farber, both Ph.D. candidates at the University of Chicago. Recently, the project has enjoyed the assistance of Elizabeth Bailey, a graduate student of Assyriology.