

## P H I L O L O G Y



## Ancient Society and Economy

*I. J. Gelb*

This report gives the gist of a paper that was read in the "Special Session on Archaeology of Syria: 'The Origins of Cities of Mesopotamia in the Third Millennium B.C.'" In order to avoid further confusion in geographical terminology, two names were introduced in the paper: "Ebla" for northern Syria and "Lagash" for southern Mesopotamia or ancient Babylonia. The names of Ebla and Lagash were chosen to be used symbolically for Syria and Babylonia for obvious reasons, "Ebla" because it is the only site from which documentation is available, and "Lagash" because it contains the best documentation.

For a person who, like myself, has worked for years on the socio-economic history of ancient Babylonia, working on Ebla has been like working in a different world.

The vast majority of the sources pertaining to Lagash and its area concern agriculture, including not only plowed fields but also the adjoining pastures, orchards, and forests, processing of agricultural products, manufacture of finished goods, and registration of the incoming and outgoing products in the chancellery and its affiliates.

Contrasting with the Lagash sources, one finds almost no texts pertaining to agriculture at Ebla, as the overwhelming mass of the economic and administrative sources of Ebla deal with the production of sheep's wool (and much less of linen and goat's hair), manufacture of textiles, and the registration of finished products for internal consumption and export in the chancellery and its affiliates.

Facing the archival treasures of Ebla, I felt somewhat like Francisco Pizarro when he entered an Inca storehouse in Cuzco and was overwhelmed by the mountain of wool blankets piled up from floor to ceiling. He had seen nothing like it in Spain. Contrast, if you will, Pizarro's experience in Cuzco with the descriptions of the astonishing fertility of Babylonia and of the fields that produced hundredfold and two hundredfold its seed.

The important point that the growth of early civilization depends on wool has not received the attention it deserves

from political scientists: most have assumed that grain alone could nourish the growth of higher forms of civilization.

While the manufacture of metal products was well known both at Ebla and Lagash, strange as it may appear, both Syria and Babylonia are almost devoid of natural resources. Of these, copper and tin had to be imported from far-away countries both in Syria and Babylonia and while stone and timber were available in Syria, it was lacking in Babylonia and had to be imported from nearby mountains. Several years ago in a lecture to an Arab club in Chicago I said, "There was no stone, no wool, no metal in ancient Babylonia, all they had was dirt and water." I still remember the white faces of the audience who misunderstood the common American use of the word "dirt" for "soil" (as in "dirt-farmer").

	Latitude	Temp.	Rainfall	Hydro- graphy	Soil
<b>North Syria (Ebla)</b>	36° N	Summer 25° Winter 8° (aver.)	22 cm variable	small rivers	middling
<b>South Mesop. (Lagash)</b>	32° N	Summer 35° Winter 12° (aver.)	12 cm variable (irrele- vant)	large rivers	alluvial, v. rich

#### Ebla and Lagash: Environmental Contrast

The contrasting features of Ebla and Lagash are charted in the accompanying figure. The figure extends from the climatic and physical features on the left, to the industrial and commercial features on the right.

For years I thought and taught that great civilization first arose along large rivers, leading to full canalization, full-scale irrigation, and fully developed agriculture. This is true of the Mesopotamian civilization on the Tigris and Euphrates, the Egyptian civilization on the Nile, and similarly, of the Indus

civilization on the Indus River, and the Chinese civilization on the Hoang-Ho. At the same time I had assumed the existence of several mountainous or semi-mountainous bridges with a secondary type of civilization: Syria and Palestine linking Mesopotamia and Egypt, Anatolia linking the Near East and Europe, Iran linking Mesopotamia and the rest of Asia, and Nubia linking Egypt and the rest of Africa.

The discovery of the great literate civilization that blossomed at Ebla allows us to test the development of the early civilization as outlined above.

- 1) It may still be true that civilization first arose along large rivers in prehistorical times and was based on agriculture.

Arable Land	Produce	Pastures	Animal Husbandry	Produce	Main Import	Main Export
only 1/40 irrigated	middling (self-sufficient)	extensive	sheep = 20 × cattle (grass-fed)	wool (surplus)	metals	textiles
all irrigated	high (surplus)	very limited	sheep = 6 × cattle (grain-fed + plant-fed)	wool (self-sufficient)	metals, stone, timber	grain

- 2) But it is also true that higher forms of civilization were based in early historical times not only on agriculture but also on the raising of sheep.
- 3) Thus progress in early civilizations was achieved on the basis of leisure provided by two kinds of surplus:
  - a) surplus of grain in the case of Lagash and Babylonia
  - b) surplus of wool in the case of Ebla and Syria, and
- 4) The native availability of natural resources, such as stone, timber, and metal played no role or a very limited role in the history of early civilizations.