SUMERIAN MERCHANTS AND THE PROBLEM OF PROFIT

By Marvin A. Powell

The theory that the Sumerian economy was controlled by the state or temple has until recently been a premise generally accepted by those who have attempted to deal with economic activity in the third millennium B.C.¹ This theory has necessarily had a profound effect upon the interpretation of the role of the merchant in this period of Mesopotamian history. Since our evidence is by no means sufficient to reconstruct merchant activity in detail, our view of this aspect of Mesopotamian economic life is decisively conditioned by our theory of the total economy. For this reason, I have sketched out in what follows the theoretical basis which underlies the position taken in the present paper, as well as my understanding of the theoretical position to which it stands opposed.²

During the 1920's, Anton Deimel reconstructed, on the basis of surviving tablets available to him, the basic structure of the archive of Bau in Girsu during the administrations of Lugalanda and Uru‘inimgina (Urūkāgīna). Operating with the evidence assembled by Deimel, and taking his rather tentative deductions to what seemed at the time to be the logical conclusion, Anna Schneider and others arrived at a view of Sumerian society in which the temple functioned as the heart and brain of the whole. In the context of such a view, which for many years has affected both Assyriological and popular literature on the subject, the merchant can hardly be interpreted otherwise than as an employee of that central controlling agency. Thus, the economy of the third millennium tended to be categorized under such rubrics as "theocracy" and "statism". The economy of this era was contrasted with the "capitalism" of the Old Babylonian period, and the differences between the economy reflected in the documents of the two eras were often assigned to the influx of new Semitic peoples, a classic case of explaining unknowns by another unknown or, perhaps, of the uncritical generalization of some specific Semitic stereotype such as the Carthaginian in Plautus' Poenulus.

Within a decade of the appearance of Anna Schneider's formulation of Deimel's data, Th. Jacobsen and I. M. Diakonoff independently remarked that this model of

¹ This paper is written as a general formulation of economic facts as they pertain to the motives underlying merchant activity. Documentation has been kept to a minimum, both to save space and because the specialist capable of dealing with the documents will not need it anyway. However, in fairness to my readers and to other scholars whose unpublished manuscripts I have read, I should state that part of the theories offered here owes its stimulus to papers by Tom B. Jones (Jacobson Festschrift), Gordon Young and Richard Nelson (Jones Festschrift), Daniel Snell's dissertation "Ledgers and Prices: Ur III Silver Balanced Accounts" (Yale Univ., 1975), and Nels Forde's revised monograph "The Sumerian Merchants of the Ur III Dynasty" (dated 1975). I am indebted to my Northern Illinois University colleagues, Thomas Blomquist and George Spencer, for discussing with me the problems of merchants in medieval Europe and India respectively, and finally, without implying in any way that they agree with my point of view, for discussing these and related matters with me: I. M. Diakonoff, Claus Wilcke, and Hartmut Waetzoldt.

² Full documentation for these theories will be found in my paper "Götter, Könige und 'Kapitalisten' in Mesopotamien des 3. Jahrtausends v. u. Z." (Oikumene, Budapest, c. 1977).
Sumerian state and society did not accord with the evidence from Sumerian and Akkadian literature. Jacobsen's paper, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia", published in 1943, was the first systematic presentation of the literary evidence. Diakonoff, and later on I. J. Gelb, elaborated on these criticisms, drawing on other types of written records. From these criticisms has emerged a school of thought which stands in opposition to the older theory of temple or state economy. Fundamental to this school of thought is the assumption that an economically significant portion of the economy was not under the control of the temple or state. How this portion of the economy is denominated is unimportant. One may assume that it corresponded in a general way to what we call "private property", subject as always to the social rules governing the use of such property.

This view of Mesopotamian economy in the third millennium requires a reappraisal of the role of the merchant in the economy, as well as of the motives underlying his economic activity. The basic premise underlying the conception of the merchant presented here is that the merchant operated primarily on the basis of profit and loss and that the state or temple never undertook systematically to underwrite his losses. The evidence for this, like the evidence for everything else in the third millennium is disparate, uneven, and indirect, but, on the whole, it is far more compelling than the evidence which can be brought forward to support the view that profit was not an important motive in merchant activity. At the same time, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that "important motive" does not imply "sole motive", because we are often unable to determine the motives in contemporary economic activity, not to speak of ancient or medieval times.

What evidence is there, then, that Sumerian moral values fostered or even tolerated merchant activity arising from the profit motive? The evidence from Sumerian literature is ambiguous in the sense that a statement to the effect that "the business of the merchant is to make money" is nowhere to be found. A large portion of Sumerian literature is concerned with cultic affairs, and in literature of this type one will search in vain in most literatures of the world for direct evidence of economic activity. All that can be said is that Sumerian literature of this type is neutral in its implications. However, when one turns to other surviving genres one senses something akin to the economic motive under discussion. The literature of disputation lays great weight on the value of competition itself. Shepherd and Farmer, Summer and Winter, Bird and Fish, Tree and Reed, and others sing their own praises with a zest and confidence born of the love for contending, and this same spirit pervades the legendary-epic literature as well. It is true, of course, that anthropological research has discovered societies in which the spirit of competition exists without the profit motive, but the truth of the matter is that none of these anthropological models is particularly illuminating when applied to our problem, because ancient Mesopotamia constitutes a distinct paradigmatic model whose only close relative is ancient Egypt.

Nevertheless, let it be granted that the existence of a predilection for competition is insufficient to prove the existence of a profit motive. However, if one reads through the Sumerian proverb literature, one is struck by two salient facts: (1) how little it reflects the temple and state bureaucracies known from the ubiquitous administrative documents of the late third millennium; (2) the social values expressed therein clash
with the assumption of a centrally organized economy in which each member of society, including the merchant, was essentially an employee of the central controlling authority. Even this is indirect evidence, but anyone who would deny to the Sumerians the blessed vice of venality will have to come to grips with the few proverbs that do mention merchants directly and which do seem to imply that the merchant’s business was to make money. I am thinking particularly of the following two: *dam-gâr-ra kug ta ba-an-ir, ú ṣe ta ba-an-ir* (precise meaning unclear) and *uru*št nam-bi nu-tar-re šassuk (*šaḡ-rūn*)-bi *dam-gâr-ra* (a city whose fate is not to be decided: its registrar of deeds is a merchant)³.

Turning now to the evidence of the archival records, which exceed in quantity all other types of written material deriving from the third millennium, one must bear in mind two fundamental points: (1) The overwhelming majority of all third-millennium records derive from the archives of great estates associated with the temple or central government. (2) Accounting on these estates is done purely from the standpoint of the estate itself. They are internal records which concern themselves with what takes place outside only insofar as it directly concerns the expenditure and income of the estate itself. Thus, the private profit or loss of persons doing business with the estate or even employed by it will be reflected in the archival records only when this profit or loss directly affects the income or expenditures of the accounting unit.

The bulk of documents of this type comes from various archives of the Ur III period. In fact, they are so numerous that one could almost be led to believe that nothing existed beyond the bureaucracy itself, until one reflects that it is the nature of bureaucracies to produce records and that contemporary bureaucracies the world over are still industriously engaged in essentially the same process that occupied Sumero-Akkadian bureaucrats some 4,000 years ago. One must constantly keep in mind that the essential life functions of those societies continue on, sometimes with the help of, not infrequently in spite of, and usually quite peripheral to the bureaucracy itself.

The group of documents which most clearly reflects merchant activity are the Ur III balanced accounts. The characteristic features of these accounts are well-known. They are divided into three basic sections: (1) *assets*, denoted by the phrase *šaḡ-NIG.GA-ra-kam*; (2) *expenditures*, which are enclosed by the two expressions *šā-bi-ta ... zi-ga-ām*, “out of this ... there was expended”; (3) *balance*, denoted by the expression *lá-ni*. The first and last of these call for brief comment. Without going into the complicated question of the precise reading of NIG.GA and whether it has an etymological relationship to *makkūru or namkūru*, we can say with certainty that it has nothing to do with the verb *gār = šakānu* and formally analyse the phrase *šaḡ-NIG.GA-ra-kam* as *šaḡ + NIG.GA-r + ak + am = ritš makkūru*, “head of goods” (= liquid capital, approximately) and illustrate the meaning of the phrase by the following diagram derived from the study of metrology.

³ E. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs* (1959), 512 f., 1.165 and no. 1.67 (pp. 74, 460, 503).
The term lá-₅₋ also derives from metrological usage, just as the term balance derives from Latin bilanx. The function and reading of ₅₋ in lá-₅₋ remains problematic, since the term is attested for Presargonic Girsu in the form lá-a₄ and the lexical evidence of Proto-Ea and Ea for a reading lá-ₜ₋ does not strike me as compelling. This, however, does not affect the interpretation of the term, which can have the meaning of both positive or negative balance. The origin of this usage is illustrated in Fig. 2.

Fig. 1. Origin of the Term sag-Nf₀.GA-ra.

Cf., e.g. L. Legrain, TRU 374: 12–15: sag ba-riel-ga ₂:sila₃:ta.

The process shown in A–C is called in Sumerian ki-lá tag. The ʒ gin added in C is called lá-a₄, “that which creates a state of equilibrium”. The actual weight of the silver is called ki-lá and would normally be expressed in writing as ₁ ma-na lá ʒ gin, an expression also derived from this same process.

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* References: J. Bauer, AWL (1967), 620, s.v. *lal-a*.  
* I attempted to solve this problem in my dissertation, “Sumerian Numeration and Metrology” (Univ. of Minnesota, 1971; Univ. Microfilms, 1973), 139–149, but the results were inconclusive.
These two expressions have a bearing on the question of merchant profit. The etymology of sag-nīg.ga-ra suggested above implies that sag means "that which is over and above the basic makkūru", and a survey of merchant balanced accounts and related documents reveals that there is no ground to suppose that the term denotes anything else but merchant property—whether individually or corporately owned is irrelevant. The balance of these assets after expenditure is termed lā-ni, which is, in almost every case, a positive balance and is carried forward to the next account and entered as si-tum (šītum) "remainder". The essential identity of lā-ni and šītum is reflected in the following line from nīg.ga = makkūru: nīg-kas₃₄ (šīd)-ka-lā-a = [šī-ta-at] [nī-k]a-sī, "the balance of a balanced account (is called) šītāt nikkasi". That this did not belong to the central accounting agency is illustrated by the fact that it could be loaned out as a private loan on interest (YOS 4, 37).

There is little, therefore, to suggest that the merchants of the Ur III period were agents of the state. Their precise connection with the state, as well as the benefits they derived from it, are likely to have been of many different kinds and to have varied with circumstance. That merchants appear in texts associated with state messengers or receive food rations is quite insufficient to establish that merchants were individual or corporate dependents of the state. Parallels from medieval Europe and India, as well as the obvious parallels from the present day, suggest that the relationship between merchants and the central government has always been close, but very complicated. For the merchant, the state was an important customer and, at times, a protector. For the state, the merchant was a source of goods which would otherwise be difficult to obtain and sometimes a source of liquid capital.

It is sometimes assumed that the Ur III balanced accounts were composed by the merchants to whom they refer. This, however, is a misconception, for the balanced accounts are purely archival records drawn up by a central accounting agency on the basis of tablets deposited with that agency upon the receipt of goods. These deposited tablets were normally sealed, and to this type of document belong many of the letter-orders of the Ur III period. In the unsealed archival documents, the existence of those orders or sealed receipts is reflected in the phrases dūb-bi 1-ām, dūb-bi 2-ām, etc., "its (i.e., the account's) tablet is one, its tablets are two, etc." When the archivist balanced the account, the sealed tablets were either destroyed or returned to their depositor. The merchant, no doubt, also kept some kind of private records, but the evidence for private book-keeping is extremely sparse for ancient and medieval times, and Mesopotamia is no exception to that rule. Private records probably had a limited lifetime before they were either destroyed or, in the case of tablets, reused. Thus, our knowledge of the merchant's side of economic activity rests upon what we can read between the lines of documents prepared by the archivists of central accounting agencies and upon the disparate evidence of private documents that have somehow survived and been discovered. A much higher proportion of private documents—but no private records corresponding to the Ur III balanced accounts—has been discovered at Nippur, but whether this is to be

* Recension B 32 (MSL 13, 115; cf. 113 i 1' and 97:36 for variants).
explained as an accident of archaeological discovery or whether one should assume that Nippur was some kind of financial and business emporium remains unclear, and I see no way of resolving the problem at present.

When one turns to the period prior to the Third Dynasty of Ur, the evidence for merchant activity in the documents becomes even more indirect. That there were merchants operating all the way back into the early third millennium is to be inferred from mention of them in archival documents (šāb.gal in Uruk III and dam-garax [GAR] from the Fara period onward). Merchants occur in the Presargonic archive from Girsu, frequently in the capacity of traders with foreign states, but there is little to be learned about their motives from the texts in which they occur. The most suggestive evidence in this respect comes from archival texts relating to animal husbandry and fishing.

The basic economic principle reflected in the cattle and fish texts is the profit motive. This was observed by A. Deimel, although he did not state it in this way. The temple relieved itself of the financial responsibility of maintaining hired or slave labour in these industries by the use of capital loans against a fixed rate of return. In the case of the fisheries, fishing rights seem to have been vested in the temple or state, which let them out against a specific quota of fish. In the case of cattle, the herder was also responsible for returning to the owner a fixed percentage of the herd. He himself was concerned to keep the increase as high as possible, because his profit consisted of those animals that exceeded the fixed percentage owed to the capitalist. This system seems to have been employed wherever feasible, even extending to land in the form of rents, but it is only in the records relating to fishing and cattle raising that the documents clearly reflect the debits and credits of individuals who dealt with the temple and thus allow us to infer the profit motive underlying these relationships. That this was not an exceptional practice in the third millennium is revealed by a group of documents from Umma dating to the Sargonic period which also deal with cattle and which presuppose essentially the same economic structure found at Girsu. A superficial survey of Ur III cattle texts indicates that the same is true of that period also. These documents constitute the third-millennium ancestors of the herding contracts from the Old Babylonian period and provide an important piece of evidence demonstrating the continuity of economic institutions from the third millennium into the Old Babylonian period.

It is this important feature of cultural continuity to which I wish to draw attention in concluding. A. L. Oppenheim remarked that Mesopotamia stands out among the societies of the Ancient Near East in its open acceptance of the economic principle of capital loans for interest. It is now apparent that this type of loan was not an invention of the Old Babylonian period but was already well-known in Presargonic Girsu. This is illustrated not only by documents recording loans with interest but also by the fact that both Enmetena and Uru‘inimgina were forced to undertake

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7 Cf. Orientalia 20 (1926), 1 ff.; 21 (1926), 1 ff.; 26 (1927), 1 ff.
8 Cf. Orientalia 21 (1926), 40 ff.
9 An Or 2 (1931), 92.
11 Ancient Mesopotamia (1964), 88 f.
political measures to rectify social inequities arising from economic processes. These pieces of evidence bear witness to a type of economic structure that corresponds more closely to a model of market economy than to a model which posits some kind of central redistributive agency such as the temple or state. Moreover, the evidence shows third millennium state executives functioning in much the same regulative activities as their Old Babylonian counterparts. This is not to suggest that market economy dominated third or second millennium Mesopotamian economic processes, but there is sufficient reason to believe that it was a significant factor in the total economic picture. Thus, the distinctions between third and second millennium economic activity cannot have been as great as sometimes supposed, and the differences which appear in the Ur III account documents, on the one hand, and in the merchant documents from Karum Kaneš, on the other, do not reflect basically different economic systems but two sides of what is basically the same system.