

Some Modern Critiques of Early Urbanization

Study Question

1. What are three consequences of early urbanization?

Sumer's city-states had many accomplishments to their credit, but some historians have pointed out that their civilization came at the cost of increasing warfare, growing social inequality, and the oppression of women. These modern critiques reflect the importance of studying the past in order to understand the present more fully.

Politically, each of the major cities of Sumer was also a state, ruling over the contiguous agricultural areas and often in conflict with neighboring city-states. The artwork of the city-states often depicts royal armies, military expeditions, conquests, and a general appreciation, even an exaltation, of warfare. The fighting seems to have been frequent, and the main combatants were the largest of the city-states. Battles were fought hand-to-hand and also from donkey-drawn chariots.

The warfare was especially destructive because the kings and soldiers believed that they were upholding the honor of their gods. When cities are sacred, conflicts between them mean holy war, fights to the finish. The "Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur," which was addressed to Ningal, goddess of the Ekushnugal Temple, describes that city's utter destruction after the Elamites sacked it, exiled its ruler, and destroyed the temple c. 1950 B.C.E.:

After your city had been destroyed, how now can you exist!
After your house had been destroyed, how has your heart led you on!
Your city has become a strange city; how now can you exist!
Your house has become a house of tears, how has your heart led you on!
Your city which has been made into ruins—you are no longer its mistress!
Your righteous house which has been given over to the pickaxe—you no longer inhabit it,
Your people have been led to slaughter—you are no longer their queen. (Kramer, *The Sumerians*, p. 142)

Lewis Mumford, one of the most respected modern commentators on the history of cities, regarded this early union of power, religion, and continuous warfare as a permanent curse of urban life. He wrote, "even when it is disguised by seemingly hardheaded economic demands, uniformly turns into a religious performance; nothing less than a wholesale ritual sacrifice."

The first Sumerian cities fostered division of labor into occupational categories. We have noted the roles of kings, priests, landowners, architects, scribes, long-distance traders, local merchants, artisans, cooks, farmers, soldiers, laborers—the whole panoply of occupational categories absent in villages but forming the backbone of a sophisticated urban economy and society. Priests and kings held great wealth and power and largely controlled the means of production, but it is not clear that they formed an exclusive category of "haves" versus "have nots." The spectrum seems to have been more varied, including a substantial group of middle classes. But there is, nevertheless, much evidence of the enormous power of the aristocracy.

At the bottom of the economic hierarchy were slaves. People entered slavery in four ways: some were captured in battle; some were sentenced to slavery as punishment for crimes; some sold themselves (or their family members) into slavery to cope with poverty and debt; and some were born into slavery. We have no record of the number or proportion of slaves in the general population of Sumer and its cities. The law codes' extensive regulations of slaves and slavery suggest, however, their widespread existence.

The socialist philosopher-historian Karl Marx argued that the rise of cities brought about "the division of the population into two great classes." Marx's formulation was too stark, ignoring the broad range of classes in the city, but he does force us to think about the class structure in our own cities, including the relationship between rich and poor, and its implications for the health of society.

Finally, the transformation of society from a rural, egalitarian, kin base to an urban, hierarchical, territorial, and class base may have provided the entering wedge for the subordination of women. Some women in Sumer had great power. Several seem to have held independent high administrative posts in major temples controlling large land holdings. The high status of Lady Pu-abu (c. 2500 B.C.E.) was revealed in her burial. She was adorned with gold and buried with several other bodies, presumably servants, suggesting a woman of high rank, perhaps a queen. Shagshag, wife of King Uruinimgina (also known as Urukagina), c. 2300 B.C.E., held great powers in the name of her husband.

Women in Sumer generally had certain basic rights, including the rights to hold property, engage in business, and serve as legal witness. Nevertheless, it is clear that women's legal rights were limited by their husbands. Even powerful women were often only pawns in the power struggles of men.

Feminist historian Gerda Lerner argues that before the evolution of city-states, with their warfare and hierarchical class structures, the status of women had been more equal. Kin groups had been the basic economic units of society, and women had had more power in these family groups than they did in the city-states that displaced them. Lerner claims that inequalities between men and women are not products of unchanging biological differences. Rather, the inequalities have been created by humans—and they can be altered by humans.

Hammurabi's Law Code

Study Questions

1. What are some of the qualities of the Hammurabi's Law Code in Babylon? For example, is it retributive (tooth for tooth, eye for eye)? Are punishments severe or lenient by our standards today?
2. What does the law code reveal about economic activities found in Babylon?
3. Based on the law code, what are some of the values and attitudes found in Babylonian society, regarding, in particular, gender, class, and certain protections of its citizens?

Hammurabi's Law Code

(1700s BCE)

1955. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by James B. Pritchard and Translated by Theophile J. Meek. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Language modernized by Wayne Ackerson.

Originally one of many small city-state empires in Mesopotamia, Babylon became the center of a large empire under its king, Hammurabi. Hammurabi ruled from approximately 1792 to 1750 B.C.E., and was a tremendously successful ruler. Not only did he build an empire for his city, he also helped that city become the new Near Eastern cultural center. Hammurabi's scribes carefully maintained old Sumerian records, encouraged literacy among the upper classes, and made religious changes (elevating Babylon's patron god, Marduk, to the top divine position).

Notwithstanding Hammurabi's military skill, his most noted contribution was the creation of the world's first written, comprehensive law code. Law codes had always existed (usually passed down orally), and some had been written, but even the previous written ones were not complete and comprehensive. Though usually called Hammurabi's law code, the collection of laws is more a list of decisions made by judges in the past than laws passed by the king himself. Hammurabi claimed that these laws were sanctioned by the gods, and had copies carved on markers to be placed in prominent locations such as temple courtyards. Despite Hammurabi's efforts at empire-building, within a few years of his death his kingdom began to crumble.

[In many translations, the word "seignior" is used to describe an upper class man or occasionally any man. Here, the word has been changed, for simplicity, to "upper class man"].

1. If an upper class man accused another upper class man and brought a charge of murder against him, but has not proven it, his accuser shall be executed.
3. If an upper class man came forward with false testimony in a case, and has not proven the word he spoke, if that case was a death-penalty case, that man shall be put to death.
4. If he came forward with false testimony concerning grain or money, he shall bear the punishment in that case.
22. If an upper class man is caught committing robbery, he shall be executed.
25. If a fire broke out in an upper class man's home and another upper class man, who went to help put out the fire, steals the goods of the home's owner, that upper class man shall be thrown into that fire.

98. If an upper class man gave money to another upper class man for a partnership, they shall divide equally in the presence of god the profit or loss which was incurred.

104. If a merchant lent grain, wool, oil, or any goods at all to a trader to retail, the trader shall write down the value and pay it back to the merchant, with the trader obtaining a sealed receipt for the money that he pays to the merchant.

106. If a trader borrowed money from a merchant and has then disputed the fact with his merchant, that merchant in the presence of god and witnesses shall prove that the trader borrowed the money and the trader shall pay three times the amount of the original loan.

128. If an upper class man marries a woman but did not draw up the marriage contracts for her, she is not his wife.

129. If the wife of an upper class man has been caught while sleeping with another man, they shall tie them both up and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman wishes to spare his wife, then the king may in turn order his subject spared.

142. If a woman hates her husband so much that she says "You may not have me", her case may be investigated by the city council, and if she is careful and innocent, even though her husband has been going out and treating her poorly, that woman, without incurring any blame at all, may take her dowry and return to her father.

143. If she was not careful, however, but was too busy socializing and neglected her household duties and humiliated her husband, that woman shall be thrown into the water.

153. If an upper class man's wife has caused her husband's death because of another man, the woman shall be impaled on stakes.

154. If an upper class man sleeps with his daughter, he shall be forced to leave the city.

188. If an artisan took a son as a foster child and taught him his trade or craft, he may never be reclaimed.

189. If he has not taught him his trade or craft, that child may return to his father's home.

195. If a son hits his father, the son's hand shall be cut off.

196. If an upper class man destroyed the eye of another noble, his eye shall also be destroyed.

197. If he has broken another noble's bone, his bone shall also be broken.

198. If he destroyed the eye or broken the bone of a commoner, he shall pay one mina of silver.

199. If he has destroyed the eye or broken a bone of an upper class man's slave, he shall pay half the slave's value.

202. If an upper class man slaps the face of an upper class man who is superior to him, he shall be whipped sixty times with an oxtail whip in public.

203. If a noble slaps another noble's face who is of the same rank, he shall pay one mina of silver.

204. If a commoner slaps the face of another commoner, he shall pay ten shekels of silver.

205. If an upper class man's slave has slapped the face of a noble, his ear shall be cut off.

215. If a doctor performed surgery on an upper class man with a bronze lancet and save his life, or he opened up the eye-socket of the man with a bronze lancet and saved his eye, he shall be paid ten shekels of silver.

218. If a doctor performed surgery on an upper class man with a bronze lancet and has caused the man's death, or he opened up the eye-socket of an upper class man and has destroyed his eye, the doctor's hand shall be cut off.

228. If a builder built a house for an upper class man and finished it, the man shall pay the builder two shekels of silver per sar (a measurement of about 42 square yards).

229. If a builder built a house for an upper class man but the house falls down due to poor craftsmanship and kills the upper class man, the builder shall be executed.

230. If it has caused the death of a son of the home's owner, the son of the builder shall be executed.

231. If it caused the death of the homeowner's slave, the slave shall be replaced or paid for.

Glossary

mina

An ancient coin worth 500 shekels (a more common coin)