THE LIMITS OF POWER

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"It's good to be king" is the title of Chacmool 2008, and this is certainly what ancient rulers (as well as ironic archaeology students) say. Indeed, they declare that there has always been a king, that the cosmos and the gods require there to be a king to function, and that certainly it's good for everyone that there is a king. The development of ancient states is in fact centrally concerned with this fundamental transformation in ideology: there should be kings, should be slaves, should rich and poor, priests and farmers, etc. In Mesopotamian texts, including in the earliest historical inscriptions, around 2500 BC, kings declare that they are generous and pious leaders, good shepherds of the people, and they will protect widows and orphans from the rich and powerful.

Now, kings certainly did live privileged lives and there are markers of their ultra-high status, which we find in their dwellings and graves and in the depictions of their role in the high ceremonies of religion and state. But were kings good for others? To a certain extent, this depends on who is doing the judging of what is good. Let me give an egregious example: the "Third Dynasty" of Ur, ca. 2100-2000 B.C. was a time when kings of Ur ruled over a territorial state by conquering various Mesopotamian city-states, putting to an end the characteristically endemic warfare among these cities, establishing a centralized bureaucracy and tax system, constructing magnificent buildings, commissioning the crafting of art objects and acquiring foreign preciosities to decorate them, and sponsoring Mesopotamian scribal professors and poets to write elegant hymns of praise in their honor (which we still study as classics in Sumerian language courses).

For Samuel Noah Kramer it was "the best of times," a glorious episode in the early history of Mesopotamia, before Sumerian died out; indeed it was a Sumerian renaissance in which the power of kings was key to the prosperity of the land. For Igor M. Diakonoff it was "the worst of times." The warrior kings of Ur ruthlessly conquered other Mesopotamian cities and more distant places, invented ranks of bureaucrats to administer the taxes that Ur kings required of subject rulers and citizens, and paid small rations to the workers who built the ziggurats and temples. Furthermore, the cities of the land rebelled against the Ur kings, withheld their taxes, and finally put an end to the dynasty during the reign of its fifth king, who had been blackmailed and humiliated by one of his own governors.

There are (at least) two issues at stake in how archaeologists regard the power of ancient states, what I might call the semiotics of power. First, it is not so simple as to say that archaeologists find the residues of power in ancient states, although we do find them. What we also find, perhaps find more frequently than we claim, are the representations of power, that is, what the powerful, in our case, kings, want you to believe. Second, a semiotic approach requires that messages not only have senders but also recipients.

In the Ur III example I have given, Kramer believed that kings were good because they created ancient literature that could be transmitted through the ages to those who could read the texts, which in his

case required a few millennia, some archaeological discoveries, a process of decipherment, and an ability to appreciate the genius of the past. History is but a "slaughterbench," to use Hegel's image. For Diakonoff, a Soviet Marxist and dissident, kings' power was certainly not directed for the greater good of their societies, no matter their lofty and generous words.

I've spent some time with this example because some archaeologists who read ancient texts have hardly considered the ancient recipients of the messages of the buildings, artifacts, and texts. I participated in a seminar about twenty years ago-- that is, in the age when Maya texts were being first read with confidence-- that assembled Maya archaeologists and text people to discuss "Maya political history." My role as an outsider to the gathered Mayanists was to restrain the text people who wanted to read history directly from the inscriptions. This led to a certain anomie, for example, because one famous Maya archaeologist argued that since some texts were patently tendentious, they could not be regarded as real history. That scholar had a strange view of history in which only what really happened was history, not the ideologies that ancient kings wanted to portray and how the past could be used to legitimize the ancient present. Texts are not "truer" or "more false" than other parts of the archaeological record: both are representations of events and behavior, such as power, and have to be investigated as such.

There are some images I want to consider that show messages which are clear but whose recipients are not. First, there is the image of an inscription carved into a hillside by a Persian monarch. It was written in a script that only a few highly trained Persian scribes could read and in languages that even fewer Persians of any kind could read. Furthermore, it was carved in a place where no one could really see the writing! Another image is of the so-called Law Code of Hammurabi. It was written to fit the shape of the stone monument, that is, from top to bottom, whereas Mesopotamian documents were written normally from left to right. Additionally, the shape of the writing is deliberately archaizing, using the script of a much earlier period. Whereas the text says that any aggrieved citizen of Babylonian should come to the stela and read about the case concerning him, no one could actually read the code as it was carved in this stela.

So, who was the audience of these inscriptions? This is a complicated question, but one part of the audience was simply the gods themselves, who were honored in the texts. Another part of the audience was the scribes who copied the code in schools, not for its legal value, but for its grammatical excellence. The code was not only NOT used in any real court, but also some decisions in the so-called code are flatly contradicted in real decisions by judges.

POWER

The subject of power is, of course, enormous, indeed the central concept in political analysis. In anthropology, the subject has had an original history, since anthropologists are used to thinking of power even without sovereigns or even distinctive political institutions. Archaeologists, who are an institutionalized species of anthropologists (at least they are where I come from), owe much more to the way power was discussed by Marx and Weber than they do to Hobbes, who saw power from the perspective of the sovereign. This is fortunate, since latter-day Weberians, such as S.N. Eisenstadt, W.G.

Runciman, and Michael Mann and Eric Wolf have insisted on the multiple forms of power in any society.

It seems odd to me that anthropologists are so attracted to Foucault, who is almost Hobbesian in his emphasis on power inhering in central authorities with the message reproduced in individuals' bodies and minds. The process is unrelenting, enhancing the discipline, control, punishment of the central authority and meeting little resistance. If we need a French philosopher to follow, it would be preferable to look to de Certeau, who was interested in the subversive power in thoughts and actions and the tensions at the heart of all social life.

We could call this kind of research the "geography of power," and I can illustrate what I mean by this with a Mesopotamian example. The kings of the dynasty of Sargon of Akkade, about 2350-2200 BC, were the ones who unified the Mesopotamian city-states into a territorial state. One of the things they did was to build a new capital city, Akkade, which symbolized their new kind of state, not just one victorious city-state achieving an ephemeral hegemony over others, but a genuine, centralized, patrimonially bureaucratized administration in the land. Another innovation was to invent new titles for the kings, especially the title "King of the Four Quarters" of the World, king of everywhere. The inscriptions of the kings then duly cited the various conquests of the kings, far to the north, way to the south, far in the east and west, too. Although some of the kings, Sargon himself, and his grandson, Naram-Sin, were successful military leaders, many of the places listed as conquered, were impossibly far, indeed only known by name by the Mesopotamian scribes who composed the lists of conquests. However, the very title, "King of the Four Quarters" of the Universe required the kings to have campaigned successfully to the ends of the universe, and this they duly recorded (Michalowski 1993).

Of course, the Akkadian dynasty collapsed, mainly because the kings could not persuade or force the various Mesopotamian city-states that it was in their interest to be part of a territorial state. But also, the military ventures of the Akkadian kings, which were indeed far-ranging and ambitious, far overreached the economic and political systems in the homeland which struggled to support them. This, it seems to me, is a characteristic of just about all the early states I know, namely that it is relatively easy to exert military power over local and distant places, but extremely hard to establish links to the local power structures which fund and must support the ideological system of military action. (I remind you that I'm speaking of the distant past, not our present world situation, although you can draw your own conclusions about that).

LIMITATIONS ON POWER

My topic on the "limits of power" is as rich as the exercise of power itself and probably more attuned to our own times and interests. In the history of the archaeology of ancient states, in the 1960s through the 80s, archaeologists were preoccupied with defining and then finding the state in the archaeological record; for example, the reconstruction of settlement systems with 3-tiers of sizes of sites, , it was argued, betrayed the existence of the state. In the 90s, probably under the influence of things like practice theory, archaeologists tended to turn from finding the state to investigating what states do. In the new millennium, we are now much more

concerned with what states don't do (Yoffee 2005).

I add my voice to these new research missions with some vignettes of non-state power within some Mesopotamian states, first in economic and social relations and then in organized resistance to the power of states. I begin with an example from the Ur III dynasty, the most centralized state in early Mesopotamian history. One of the leading commentators on Ur III's economy (who will remain anonymous) has said that 'private' is a useless term, as in 'private sector of the economy'. Everything is an extension of the state, which in Weber's terms is a patrimonial system, one in which all households are dependent on the state. All arable land is owned is owned by the state, and everyone is a subject of the state, which parcels out plots of land for their subjects' subsistence (according to our analyst).

However, he goes on to note that after taxes and work obligations (which he calls quotas) are fulfilled, people are completely free to engage in independent economic activity. Although potters (Steinkeller 1996) and foresters (Steinkeller 1987) in villages owed a certain amount of days of work and products per year, amounting to about half the year in fact, they had their own means of production and could sell or barter their agricultural products. Although merchants supplied foreign goods for the palace, they owned their own capital, owned storage facilities, owned their own ships and were associated in a guild which was a self-governing body. One merchant had his own navy, with eight captains, and some of his foreign ventures were purely private. Merchants functioned like bankers and made payments in silver in lieu of their own products.

It seems to me on the basis of these analyses—and these are the best investigations of Ur III economy that exist—one can reach conclusions that are different from our analyst's. Let me put the arguments in a slightly different context: Would someone writing, say in AD 4000, about the US or Canadian economy, ca. 2008, find that there was no private land, because all landowners had to pay property taxes to the state, which could seize the property for lack of payment, that there was no private money because there were federally-insured deposits, and there was no private agriculture because the state subsidized farmers?

If we are allowed to skip down in time about a millennium and half to the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods in Mesopotamia, when there was even more powerful states, Mesopotamians found themselves in positions to exploit the economy of the states in new ways and to create unprecedented private wealth, indeed private banks. It's not that the state wasn't part and parcel of the lives of Mesopotamians in these periods, but that Mesopotamians on the political periphery were able to negotiate with the central apparatus of the states themselves for their own benefit.

As to the limits of power in social organizations, a number of recent studies have shown the existence of assemblies and councils in the third millennium BC, where references are scanty, and in the Old Babylonian (Seri 2006) and Old Assyrian periods (Veenhof 2008) where the data are plentiful. We could call these local assemblies institutions of authority on the periphery. That is, local trouble cases in cities were settled not by juridical apparatus of states but by councils of elders. The powers of these assemblies did not attenuate over time and under the might

of Neo-Assyrian rulers, for example, they kept law and order, gathered communal funds for projects, and represented citizens in the Neo-Assyrian court.

RESISTANCE TO POWER

I also want to present a case of organized resistance to centralized power in Mesopotamia, specifically from the southmost geographical periphery of the land, called in texts "The Sealand," a region of marshes (drained by Saddam Hussain in the 90s, land of Marsh Arabs, shi'a rebels against Saddam, and now being regenerated). The latest references to the Sealand are from the first millennium BC, the land where Chaldeans lived, their base from which to fight Assyrians, north Mesopotamians who tried to control the south. Notably, Chaldeans, and the foremost tribe in the Chaldean confederation, Bit Yakin, also fought the Babylonian puppets of the Assyrians. The Babylonians loyal to Assyria were almost overwhelmed in the rebellion against Assurbanipal, before the Assyrian king won in the bloody Mesopotamian civil war (Van De Mieroop 2007).

The earliest references to kings of the Sealand come from the end of the Old Babylonian period, about 1000 years before the Neo-Assyrian period. Then, Sealand kings fought against rulers from the Hammurabi dynasty in the eighteen and seventeenth centuries BC. Partly on the basis of events a millennium later, I want to venture a speculation on the activities of the Sealand kings who fought the Old Babylonian successors of Hammurabi.

First, we know that the entire retinue of the famous temple of Ishtar in the southern city of Uruk, on the edge of the Sealand, as it were, migrated from Uruk to Kish, which was after Uruk the most famous center for the devotion of the goddess Ishtar. This migration, which occurred in the time of the rebellion of Sealand kings, included lesser goddesses, priests, and all manner of attendants and celebrants in ceremonies honoring the goddess. Most famous, at least in a small group of texts that have been studied, are kezertu-women, women of low standing who performed in ritual dramas of a sexual nature, erroneously described as "sacred prostitutes" by Western scholars unfamiliar with the belief-systems of many peoples in which such activities occur (Yoffee 1998).

But let me not divert from the main theme. We know the proximate causes of this remarkable migration: the city of Uruk, along with other cities of the south, was abandoned late in the reign of the son of King Hammurabi of Babylon, who had conquered the south. No texts from southern cities exist after this time, at least for a few hundreds of years. We also know from the archaeological surveys of Uruk by German teams that not one sherd dating to the later Old Babylonian period has been found.

Reasons given for this regional abandonment have been that the Euphrates changed its course at this time, either an engineered change by Babylonian kings fighting rebels in the south, or by a natural shift in the bed of the river. Since the temple of Ishtar and its personnel had to move (along with other citizens of Uruk, of whom we know little), Kish was a logical place to move to. I'm reluctant to concede this shift in river courses, however, since all the southern cities were reoccupied after the collapse of the Babylonian dynasty and managed to persist for another millennium and half in the places they were earlier in the period.

I argue (or just speculate) that this abandonment was a conscious tactic of local

resistance in the south against the domination of the city of Babylon, which had conquered the region under Hammurabi, who with his son and successor, had oppressed it greatly. The local, "peripheral" leaders who found the Babylonians were called "Kings of the Sealand," and we know some of their names. Just as Chaldeans from the Sealand nearly 1000 years later fought successful guerilla actions from their marshy home, Sealand kings were hard to confront and eventually won the day.

My main speculation is that those Sealanders represented the disaffected part of the local population who fought against the leaders of southern cities. These leaders were in fact appointed by Hammurabi, the ruler of distant Babylon, 200 kms to the north of Uruk. That is, the conquerors from central Mesopotamia presumably found ready allies among the urban elites, while the rural Sealanders led the rebellion. This is a scenario of factionalism that pitted Southerners against Southerners. The victorious Sealanders then depopulated the cities, the base of their urban enemies who had conspired with the northern Babylonians, forcing the urban folk out of their cities, either into the countryside which they controlled, or to more distant cities like Kish.

THE POWER OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Having mentioned Chaldeans, Sealand dwellers of the middle of the first millennium B.C., and kings of Babylon, like Nebuchadnezzar (who destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and built Babylon to its greatest fame) and Belshazzar, the unfortunate king depicted in the Book of Daniel, to whom a fiery hand wrote on the wall at a banquet, interpreted by Jews in Babylon as presaging the fall of the city, which soon occurred via the hand of Cyrus the Great of Persia), it is worth concluding with a note on the power of archaeology. Chaldeans, that is Roman Catholic Christians who have lived in Iraq almost two millenniums, but now are mainly found in Detroit and San Diego, consider themselves descendants of ancient Chaldeans. Although the name Chaldean never died out, it was with the excavations in the nineteenth century in Iraq that the glories of Babylon, the temples and other buildings, and the clay tablets that detail everyday life and royal propaganda, that the Chaldean church was revivified. Chaldeans could thereby claim to have older ties to the Iraqi landscape than Muslims. And in America Chaldeans could claim that they were first and foremost Christians, not Iraqis.

Finally, the power of archaeology is seen in the works of Jared Diamond, especially in his book on collapse (Diamond 2005). This book is essentially and usefully a warning that we are mismanaging our environments and that if we do not take action against global warming, our planet will suffer the direst of consequences. It is to archaeology that Diamond turns, since he argues that we must learn from the past in order not to repeat ancient errors, and that ancient states and cultures fell precisely because they mismanaged their environments.

His star case is Easter Island, Rapa Nui, of course, and Diamond says that islanders cut down their forests in order to fashion log rollers to move giant moai from quarries to their display places. However, others have refuted Diamond (Hunt and Lipo 2009). Rats had migrated with Polynesians to Rapa Nui, and rats were at least partly accountable for the destruction of palm trees as well as Polynesian farmers who burned forests to plant crops. The real destruction of the

population, however, was not due to deforestation, but to European contact with the Island and the transmission of diseases that decimated the population. For Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo, this is not ecocide at all but genocide.

Furthermore, it turns out that none of Diamond's cases of large-scale environmental destruction account for the collapse of the Maya, of ancestral Puebloans, of Mesopotamian states, and other places Diamond cavalierly cites (McAnany and Yoffee 2009a). It is not my purpose today, however, to elaborate on Diamond's errors. Rather, he has shown all too clearly the importance of why archaeologists need to get things right as best we can and that we also need to communicate what our knowledge can mean in our modern societies: what are our responsibilities to the present, especially to people who are descendants of past societies? how do we learn from the past? and in what ways is the past both similar to and quite different from today?

Our global society has now reached a point at which we can change—perhaps irrevocably—the face of the planet on which we live. We have never before been so powerful, but we also have never before been so aware of what came before, of challenges faced, and of crises averted.

Our past and the resilience of human populations form the basis on which twenty-first century humans attempt to understand our lives. We have inherited daunting environmental and social challenges and added more of our own making, but we can also appreciate the long course of humans who have solved problems in the past and thus still survive today. The challenges ahead are profound and require inspired problem-solving and human resilience. Fortunately, these are powerful attributes that human societies have long displayed (paraphrasing from the introduction to McAnany and Yoffee 2009b).

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