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ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA, SOCIO-ECONOMIC
HISTORY

ed. by I.M. Diakonoff.

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Because of the language barrier, the work of Soviet scholars is imperfectly known in the West. Realizing that such a lack of information existed, the Institute of the Peoples of Asia published the work under review. Ancient Mesopotamia is a collection of articles and summaries of larger works. They range in time from Early Dynastic Sumer to the Seleucid period and deal with various aspects of social and economic history. The articles have been chosen with care. They represent both the history of Mesopotamia and the history of Soviet scholarship. As will be seen, the interests of Soviet scholars center on social structure, particularly slavery, and land tenure. The editor, I. M. Diakonoff, is well known in the West. He is the dean of Soviet Assyriologists and at present heads the Ancient Oriental Philology Group of the Institute of the Peoples of Asia in Leningrad. In 1963, he was Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago.

All the articles in the book are digests of articles or summaries of larger works, some of which have been drastically edited. This great compression makes the book as a whole hard to review. Most of the articles are extremely detailed and condensed. Because of the importance of the material, the major conclusions of each author have been summarized, rather than merely stating the contents of each article. Due to the difficulties incident to the writing of this review, no attempt has been made to argue the pros and cons of the views or the Marxist theory behind them. Fortunately, Mesopotamia has not been part of the general polemic

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between Marxist and non-Marxist historians.¹ Consequently, the Soviet historians of this period are more flexible in their views than their counterparts in medieval or modern history.

Vasilii Vasilievitch Struve (1889-1965)

"The problem of the genesis, development and disintegration of the slave societies of the ancient Orient" [1933]

Struve, originally an Egyptologist and later curator of the ancient oriental collection of the Hermitage Museum, set the tone for later Soviet work in this article. Originally delivered as a four-hour report, it established the current Soviet interpretation of the Mesopotamian economy. In it, Struve developed the thesis, later modified, that the ancient world was based upon the ownership and exploitation of slaves. In Marxist terminology, a person is exploited if someone else lives on the product of his labor without giving economic compensation in a meaningful amount. While a slave, as the agent of his owner, may own means of production--including another slave--he cannot truly own real property and therefore is excluded from the rest of society. Struve's major opponent was the Hebraist N. M. Nikolsky (1877-1959). Nikolsky maintained, primarily on the basis of secondary sources, that Mesopotamia had a feudal economy. This view was strongly attacked and he later retracted it. Nonetheless, his insistence on the importance of rural and family communes had great influence, particularly on the work of Diakonoff.

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"Some new data on the organization of labour and on social structure in Sumer during the reign of the IIIrd dynasty of Ur" [1948]

In this article, Struve defends his position on the dominance of slave-holding against various criticisms.

¹ See, however, Sir Leonard Woolley, The Beginnings of Civilization (New York, 1963), chapters 3 and 5.

Alexander Ilyitch Tyumenev (1880-1959)

"The state economy in ancient Sumer" [1956]

Tyumenev was a prominent classicist who began studying Sumerian at the age of 55. This article summarizes a major study of temple and royal estates in Sumer from the fourth to the second millennium. While Tyumenev agrees with Struve that Sumerian society was based upon slavery, he differs noticeably otherwise. Struve had maintained that the exploited laborers of this period were primarily war captives and debt slaves. Tyumenev, however, argues that they were part of the general population who were gradually reduced to the status of slaves. He avers that a large percentage of the land was not in the hands of the state and the temple, as is sometimes claimed, but belonged to the free citizens. Nonetheless, these free citizens were also exploited so that they held an economic position similar to, but not identical with, the slaves.

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"The working personnel on the estate of the temple of dBa-ú in Lagaš during the period of Lugalanda and Urukagina (25th-24th cent. B.C.)" [1954]

This article was included in his larger work, of which the preceding article was a summary. In it, Tyumenev describes how the working personnel of the temple estate were organized. He finds, among other things, that thirty per cent of the population of Lagash worked directly for the temple, the remainder being occasionally called for corvée duty on irrigation and construction projects.

Muhammad Dandamayev (b. 1928)

"Achaemenid Babylonia" [1963-1965]

Dandamayev is the head of the Ancient Oriental History Group of the Institute of the Peoples of Asia in Leningrad. In this article, he discusses the system of taxation, particularly the temple tithe, and the changes in types of land ownership during the Persian period.

Igor M. Diakonoff (b. 1915)

"The rise of the despotic state in ancient Mesopotamia" [1956]

This is a summary of Diakonoff's monograph Society and State in Ancient Mesopotamia: Sumer (Moscow, 1959) [In Russian]. Diakonoff, the most versatile and well-known of Soviet Assyriologists, undertakes in the first part of his article to analyze Sumerian and Old Babylonian society. The second part is a historical survey of the same period concentrating on the origin and development of the social structure and the economic basis of state power.

Diakonoff divides Sumerian society into four groups. The first group is the upper ruling class. One economic characteristic of this group is their ownership of slaves. The second group is the free property holders. To this group belongs part of the ruling, slave-owning class--mainly minor officials. They were not exploited during the period under consideration, but only after the first millennium. The third group is the king's dependents, such as the muškênum and the rêdûm. Although they were not slaves, their economic status was similar. This group may be subdivided into the poor property owners and the laborers. In Marxist terms, the laborers were subject to non-economic coercion. In other words, they were poor and were forced to work for inadequate wages. The fourth group is, of course, the slaves. Diakonoff stresses the importance of democratic communal self-government during this period.

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"Agrarian conditions in Middle Assyria" [1949]

This is an extract of a larger work illustrating Diakonoff's method. Concentrating on the texts published in KAJ, he describes the rise of the royal estates and the progressive ruin of the peasantry.

Ninel B. Jankowska (b. 1925)

"Extended family commune and civil self-government in Arrapha in the fifteenth-fourteenth century B.C." [1957-1962]

Miss Jankowska is curator of the cuneiform collection of the Hermitage Museum and a noted Marxist theoretician. This article is a summary of five separate papers.

She describes the process of extending the family by means of adoption and its effects on land possession and self-government. Furthermore, she explains the rise of the supplementary labor forces such as the hapiru. She considers that they came into being because of shifts in economic status and the redistribution of ownership rights to real estate in the second millennium.

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"Some problems of the economy of the Assyrian empire" [1947]

This article has won wide acceptance among Soviet scholars. It is an analysis of the immediate origins of the tribute given to Assyria, replete with maps. Miss Jankowska considers the tribute to be the equivalent of foreign trade. On the basis of this analysis, she maintains that the Assyrian empire rose because of economic necessity. Because peaceful exchange of goods was impossible, Assyria was compelled to force an exchange of raw materials from underdeveloped areas by means of tribute and some trade. Since the underdeveloped areas did not receive an equivalent amount in return for what they gave to Assyria, they gradually grew more impoverished. As a consequence, Assyria had to expand militarily in order to seize control of areas closer to the sources of the raw materials.

If this analysis is accurate, then we can say that the impoverishment of the conquered lands was one of the underlying causes of the repeated revolts against the Sargonids which ultimately led to the political collapse of Assyria.

Vladimir A. Jakobson (b. 1930)

"The social structure of the neo-Assyrian empire" [1965]

Jakobson is a lawyer who specializes in the history of cuneiform law. Basing his studies on the royal grants and various legal documents, he comes to certain conclusions with regard to the social structure of the Assyrian empire. The upper nobility were liable to taxation on their land--a major source of income--but were usually granted immunity by the king. The lower nobility, i.e., the minor officials, were totally dependent on the king. Since administrative

offices were customarily, and not legally, hereditary, the land generally devolved on the son. Otherwise, whoever succeeded to the office received the land. The poor freeman and the slave were in the same position legally and economically. The distinctions were that the freeman was subject to military service and that the slave could be sold.

Gagik Kh. Sarkisian (b. 1926)

"City land in Seleucid Babylonia" [1953]

Sarkisian, a member of the Institute of History at Erevan, challenges a commonly held view that there was extensive Hellenistic influence in the development of the Mesopotamian city during the Seleucid period. He argues that, although the Babylonian city developed out of the earlier temple economies and the Hellenistic city developed out of the Greek polis, they had similar constitutions and social structures. Furthermore, both treated the adjoining city land (chōra in Greek) and its inhabitants similarly. Thus, the cities of Babylon, Borsippa and Cutha were ultimately tied together in a manner reminiscent of the Hellenistic sympolitea. Consequently, the Hellenistic polis was not a new and totally unknown importation into Babylonia.

Diakonoff notes in his introduction that if this volume is well received another volume concentrating on peripheral areas will be published. We hope that such a book will be published soon as it will not only fill a gap in our knowledge of the Soviet viewpoint, but will enhance our understanding of these areas.