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**Comparative Method in the Study of the Society and Economy
of the Ancient Near East**

About twenty years ago, while preparing a paper on *Social Stratification in the Old Akkadian Period* for the Twenty-fifth International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow, I made a discovery which was destined to influence my scholarly orientation in the years to come. Strange as it may seem, I suddenly found that the Old Akkadian texts which I had been studying for so many years from the point of view of writing, grammar, and lexicon have not only form, but also content; and that their content is of fundamental importance for the understanding of the social and economic history of ancient Mesopotamia, and with it, of the history of mankind. Ever since 1960 I have worked intensively on many aspects of the socio-economic history of ancient Mesopotamia, especially social stratification and, connected with this, the structure of the household and land tenure. The work was of a twofold nature: first, collecting and interpreting materials from cuneiform texts of the third millennium B.C.; and second, reading and excerpting studies on the social and economic history of countries and areas outside of Mesopotamia, including not only the Near East and the Classical and Post-Classical world, but also India, China, and even Pre-Columbian America and Medieval Europe. I have collected the excerpts made from these studies in four large folders, which I have dubbed "CPB" (Common-Place Book).

I have cited excerpts from the CPB throughout my past work, either as illustrations or as supporting evidence, unaffected by the controversy that has been raging for years among scholars on the relative merits of the comparative approach. As it is well known, some scholars insist that the texts should speak for themselves and are suspicious, often quite scornful, of conclusions related to outside evidence. Other scholars believe just as firmly that it is impossible to understand the social and economic aspects of the texts they are studying without an acquaintance with parallel

developments in the areas and periods outside the sphere of their primary competence.

The comparative approach is basic in the work of cultural anthropologists. Note, e.g.: "Confidence in the comparative procedure which equates modern hunters and gatherers with the actual protagonists of the Stone Age is fortified by the remarkable social congruence observed among these peoples (Australian aborigines, Bushmen, Andaman Islanders, etc.), even though they are historically as separated from one another as the Stone Age is distanced from modern times ... In an unchanging environment the social characteristics are unchanging"¹.

As pointed out to me by Piotr Steinkeller, a whole monograph on the application of comparative methodology to anthropological sciences has been published recently².

Utchenko and Diakonoff³ write as follows on the merits of the comparative approach: "If we are to gain anything like a real, concretely based conception of all these processes [that eventually led to the formation of classes] we must make use of the abundant ethnographic data on the so-called less developed peoples of today. Whether the use of such material is justified in reconstructing relations or institutions of the ancient past is disputable, but, to the present author's way of thinking, it will always be more trustworthy than, and therefore preferable to, purely speculative constructions".

Comparative method is taken for granted in the work of all scholars who seek answers to the why's and how's of human history — the philosophers of history — from Giambattista Vico to Toynbee, as well as to all materialistic historians, from Marx on.

The best evaluations of comparative methodology I know are those of Marc Bloch⁴ and Arnold J. Toynbee⁵. Other statements favoring the comparative approach, which have caught my eye, may be found in the writings of Henri Frank-

¹ Marshall D. Sahlins, *The Origin of Society*, "Scientific American" 203/3, September, 1960, p. 77.

² Gopāla Śaraṇa, *The Methodology of Anthropological Comparisons: An Analysis of Comparative Methods in Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Tucson, Arizona, 1975.

³ S. L. Utchenko and I. M. Diakonoff, *Social Stratification of Ancient Society*. A paper presented at the 13th International Congress of Historians, Moscow 1970, p. 5.

⁴ Cf. especially Marc Bloch, *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, "Revue de synthèse historique" XLVI, 1928, pp. 15–50, republished in his *Mélanges historiques I*, Paris 1963, pp. 16–40 and translated into English in Frederic C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma, editors, *Enterprise and Secular Change: Readings in Economic History*, Homewood, Illinois, 1953, pp. 494–521.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History I*, London 1934, pp. 441–464.

fort⁶, Horst Klengel⁷, Paul Koschaker⁸, Abraham Malamat⁹, Johannes Renger¹⁰, and Michael B. Rowton¹¹. Comparative approach characterizes the work of several other students of the Ancient Near East, among them, Robert McC. Adams, Mario Liverani, and Mogens T. Larsen.

By contrast, some scholars, mostly philologists, at least in the West, are generally averse to the comparative method. I shall limit my illustrations to two cases.

In criticizing the general theory of collective land ownership among "primitive peoples," T. Toutain¹² writes: "In any case, a method which would, in such a matter, draw conclusions from one country to another is in my opinion thoroughly dangerous." In refuting T. Toutain's sweeping condemnation of the comparative method, Thomson¹³ pointed out that "the inductive method ... when it is confined ... to a small corner of the field, which cannot be understood except in relation to the whole", has the effect of precluding "the possibility of establishing general conclusions". In utilizing the comparative approach, Thomson proceeded to describe the early Greek land tenure with the help of parallel materials from Africa, India, and England.

O. Oppenheim¹⁴, writing in comments to the comparative approach employed by D. Diakonoff in an article published in the same volume, states: "My remarks on the 'capitalistic situations' or 'subsystems' intend primarily to convey the necessity of a synchronic approach to Mesopotamian economics as against the strictly diachronic approach employed by Professor D. Diakonoff. The latter is certainly less complicated and easily yields presentations sweeping through the centuries. The synchronic approach is far more difficult and the complexities it reveals at every turn defy the successful application of preconceived patterns." Oppenheim's harsh judgment seems rather difficult to reconcile with his avowed hope "that Assyriology will eventually move from the Humanities into cultural anthropology", of just a few years earlier¹⁵.

⁶ Cf., e.g., Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, London 1951, pp. 63f.

⁷ *Beiträge zur Entstehung des Staates*, edited by Joachim Herrmann and Irmgard Sellnow, Berlin 1973, p. 38.

⁸ "Deutsche Rechtswissenschaft" IV, 1939, p. 70.

⁹ Archives européennes de sociologie XIV, 1975, p. 126.

¹⁰ XVIII. Rencontre assyriologique internationale, "Bayer. Akad. d. Wiss., Abh. d. philos.-hist. Kl.", NF, Heft 75, München 1972, p. 167, and *A Volume of Studies Offered to I. J. Gelb*, Los Angeles 1973, pp. 260ff. (= "Orientalia", n.s., XLII).

¹¹ *A Volume of Studies Offered to I. J. Gelb*, p. 250.

¹² Jules Toutain, *The Economic Life of the Ancient World*, London 1930. Translated from the French, p. 13.

¹³ George Thomson, *Studies in Ancient Greek Society I: The Prehistoric Aegean*, London 1949. Reprinted in 1965, pp. 301f.

¹⁴ A. Leo Oppenheim, "Comment" [to Diakonoff], *Third International Conference of Economic History 1965*, Third Part, Paris and LaHaye 1969, p. 36.

¹⁵ "Current Anthropology" I, 1960, p. 419a.

Earlier this year, I was witness to a few anti-comparativist statements uttered at the international conference on "State and Temple Economy in the Ancient Near East" in Louvain/Leuven, April 10th-14th, 1978. At the same time, all the younger scholars who were willing to talk to me on the subject spoke unequivocally in favor of the comparative approach.

There is no question about my steadfast position in favor of the comparative approach, as should be clear to anyone even slightly acquainted with my work on writing, for example. I have discussed the merits of the comparative approach previously, especially in the application of the concepts of structure and topology to the study of ancient Mesopotamian society and economy¹⁶. Let it be clearly understood that the comparative approach does not entail, a priori, any identification, full or partial, of the phenomena or developments which are being compared. What it does involve is reading as many studies on the subject as possible in areas outside of one's specialization, comparing the phenomena or developments, and ultimately reaching conclusions as to their identity or diversity. Furthermore, the comparative approach is a necessity for anyone who, like myself, is not quite at home in the fields of economics and cultural anthropology. When I started working intensively on my texts I soon discovered that while I could translate, more or less, the words, I could not find their *Sitz im Leben*, their place and meaning within the overall structure of ancient society and economy. I was forced early to the conclusion that in order to understand the words and the texts, I must go outside of my field in search of comparable concepts, ideas, and developments.

In justification of the comparative approach as applied to the ancient Near East, I should like first to cite a few cases in which the understanding of the texts was made possible only with the help of comparative material.

Deimel¹⁷ gathered and transliterated a number of Pre-Sargonic texts from Lagash which bear upon the yearly allotment of land for prebend and rent purposes. What Deimel did not explain, and I did not understand, was the reason why not one large plot of land, but several small plots of land lying in different areas were allotted to one and the same individual. The explanation occurred to me only when I read that in medieval England, fields were allotted in such a way that each individual received a just apportionment of 1) dry land on the heath for his stock, 2) tillable land at the foot of the heath, and 3) wet grassland by the river for hay and summer grazing¹⁸. It was nothing but icing on the cake to learn that among the Incas as well the allotted parcels were often scattered, one parcel near the lake for grain (that is, maize), the second in the hills for quina (that is, the bark of a tree producing quinine), and the third in the mountains for potatoes¹⁹. In later years, I found much new

¹⁶ I. J. Gelb, *Approaches to the Study of Ancient Society*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society" LXXXVII, 1967, pp. 1-8.

¹⁷ "Orientalia" IV, pp. 2-30 and VI, pp. 14-22.

¹⁸ C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1954, p. 26.

¹⁹ Sergio De Santis, *Les communautés de villages chez les Incas, les Aztèques et les Mayas*, "La Pensée", n.s., No. 122, Aug. 1965, p. 82.

evidence for similar practices in allotting land in several plots classified as good, bad, and middling in other areas where cooperative or village economy flourished.

In the Ur III texts, most often in ration lists, we often meet with such expressions as *guruš 1/2*, *guruš á-1/2*, *gemé 1/2*, *1/2 gemé*, *gemé á-1/2* (and similarly with other fractions). Simply translated, these expressions mean half man (or woman) or man (or woman) at half work or wage. The given fractions do not mean that the men or women so designated were worth half the value of a full worker, as proposed in the translation "halbwertige Arbeiter" in Deimel, ŠI 143, 64. Nor do they imply that the man or woman received only a portion of rations (or wages), since the texts clearly show that the individuals listed with fractions received the same amount of rations as the individuals listed without fractions. Cf., e.g. Reissner, TUT 162 end, according to which each of the 14 *gemé á-1/2* received the same amount of rations as each of the 114 (full) *gemé*, namely 30 liters of barley per month and 3 pounds of wool per year. The lack of correlation between fractions preceding the names of individuals and rations listed in the texts is apparent also from such texts as CT IX 34, Legrain, TRU 379, Barton, HLC III 103, 160, and 105, 236. That the fractions refer not to rations but to the amount of work (*á* is "work," later "wages") performed by the individual for the household is clear from the texts listing "man-days," that is, the days of work performed by an individual, be it man, woman, or child. Cf., e.g., TCL V 5665:1-3, according to which the work of 141 *1/3 gemé* ("women") working for 13 months adds up to 55,120 "man-days" (i.e., $141 \frac{1}{3} \text{ gemé} \times 30 \text{ days} \times 13 \text{ months}$); or RA XLVII 141 i 1-6, according to which the work of 12 *gemé* working for 25 days and 12 *gemé* plus 6 *gemé á-1/2* working for 6 days adds up to a total of 390 "man-days" (i.e., $300 + 72 + 18$). The reason for the use of fractions in Mesopotamian texts became obvious to me when I discovered some beautiful parallels in the English Domesday Book. There we find an expression "1/2 villein," implying that such a villein had duties in the manor only half the time, or that the tenant-in-chief was in possession of a man working half-time²⁰. I even found a word *semibos* "1/2 bull" in the same study²¹. One can make a fair guess at the meaning of *semibos* without studying the Domesday Book. For good measure, support comes from Iraq, where, among poorer farmers, "every horse consists of four quarters," for the purposes of its ownership and utilization²².

There are several solid studies by W. F. Leemans, M. T. Larsen, K. R. Veenhof, P. Garelli, and L. L. Orlin on Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian merchants. They treat of such topics as objects of trade, routes and means

²⁰ R. Welldon Fin n, *An Introduction to Domesday Book*, London 1963, pp. 117, 131, and 143.

²¹ Ibid., p. 109.

²² A. P. G. Poyck, *Farm Studies in Iraq. An Agro-Economic Study of the Agriculture in the Hilla-Diwaniya Area in Iraq*. "Mededelingen van de Landbouwhogeschool te Wageningen, Nederland", 62/1, Wageningen 1962, p. 50.

of transportation, merchant organizations, and relations of merchants to the king or the state. Even wider in scope are works by J. H a s e b r o e k on Greek commerce and economy. Unexpectedly, it was K a t z's discussion²³ of the role of merchants in Aztec society and economy that opened my eyes to many characteristics of Mesopotamian merchants which were not clear to me before: that the merchants, perhaps uniquely within a given society, formed a group separate from the rest of the society, with its own laws, organization, and jurisdiction; that the merchant organizations, with their election and rotation of officials, were more democratic than the contemporary state apparatus; and that their city quarters and cities of asylum were considered extraterritorial in relation to political boundaries and affiliations. Musing over the contents of the *Periplus of the Red Sea*, written by an anonymous merchant of the first or second century A.D., I reached a tentative conclusion, now confirmed in my mind, that merchants were not only more democratically-minded and more literate than rulers and priests, but that they were also much more exact in reference to the location of cities, countries, and their produce. Contrast this work, if you will, with the fantasies about India which were produced in Cosmas Indicopleustes' *Christian Topography* of the sixth century A.D.

In the article cited in footnote 16, I wrote not only of comparative methodology, but also of the typological approach that ultimately leads to the organization of structures. Finley's²⁴ conclusion (in respect to Mycenaean land tenure): "A typology must be established, and from that working base, systematic comparative analysis will be fruitful. Out of it, I believe, the palace economy will emerge as the pivotal institution", is acceptable to me, although I firmly believe that at least a preliminary comparative analysis must precede a fully established typology. Finley's "pivotal institution" is my "structure," and both correspond to what is known as "model" in anthropological sciences.

A deep and extensive penetration into the original sources, coupled with the application of comparative methodology, allows the reconstruction of the following model for Mesopotamia of the third millenium B.C.

The dominating feature of the country is household economy, as realized in two types of large households (*oikoi*): 1) public households of the crown (palace), temple, and nobles, whose representatives held land in their capacity as officials of the state, and, theoretically, only for the duration of their office; and 2) familial households owned by large kinship groupings. The relative size and importance of these different types of holdings vary greatly from period to period.

The major labor force in these households consisted of semi-free, *glebae adscripti*, *guruš*-serfs. Those who had means of production in land received on prebend or in rent from the master household worked for it directly only during a part of the year,

²³ F. K a t z, *Die sozialökonomische Verhältnisse bei den Azteken im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, "Ethnogr.-arch. Forschungen" III/2, Berlin 1956, pp. 57-81.

²⁴ M. I. F i n l e y, *The Mycenaean Tablets and Economic History*, "The Economic History Review", Second Series X, 1957-1958, pp. 139ff.

when they received rations; while those who had no means of production worked for the household all year round, mainly in processing of commodities, and received rations throughout the year.

The rations provided to the workers were no more and no less than what was needed to make them produce efficiently. The daily grain ration was about two liters of barley per man and one liter per woman.

The average house of an average individual was small, occupying about forty square meters in area.

Chattel slaves were insignificant in number and were employed almost exclusively in domestic service.

In contrast to the concrete results obtained with the help of the comparative approach, I shall cite a few conclusions reached without the utilization of parallel developments outside of Mesopotamia and which, in my judgment, are no longer tenable. In some cases, I regret to say, these conclusions were also affected by misinterpretation of purely philological data. All citations have been omitted, since they can be found easily in my past publications.

Contrary to the position here taken, which stresses the coexistence of several types of households, with a shifting degree of emphasis on one type or another, some scholars proposed theories of temple economy ("Tempelwirtschaft"), according to which all land belonged to the temple in the Pre-Sargonic period, or of state economy ("Staatswirtschaft," "Etatismus"), according to which all land belonged to the state in the Ur III period.

Contrary to my belief that the productive labor in agriculture consisted of *guruš*-serfs and that chattel slaves were employed almost exclusively in domestic service, it has been proposed that slave laborers were utilized in agriculture and that they received rations from the palace.

Contrary to straight Assyriological facts that the standard ration consisted of about two liters of barley per man per day, as also supported, *pari passu*, for example, by the evidence from Egypt and Greece, some scholars proposed that the standard daily ration consisted of about sixty liters. The difference is 1 to 30 or, in modern terms, between an average salary of \$ 10,000 and one of \$ 300,000.

Contrary to the assumption of an average house being about forty square meters in size, several scholars argued that the area of an average house was about two hundred square meters. The difference is 1 to 5 or, in modern terms, between an average home of five rooms and one of twenty-five rooms.

In conclusion, I wish to state the following:

There is no doubt in my mind that solid, descriptive-synchronic studies of ancient society and economy can be produced without or with a minimum of comparative material. Such studies have been produced in the past and they are well welcome by both pro- and anticomparativists.

I also firmly believe that overall models or reconstructions cannot be achieved without the help of the comparative method. However, the comparative method is not a panacea that solves everything. In the long run, it is quality based on scholarly

rigor that counts, and models constructed on insufficient evidence with the help of the comparative method are no better than those constructed without it.

There is nothing sacred about my model and my reconstruction of the household economy. Another model and another reconstruction have been proposed by Diakonoff and his followers. I am quite confident, however, that there are greater similarities between Diakonoff and me than there are between our reconstructions achieved with the help of the comparative method and those of scholars who work only with the facts that they think they can read from the texts.

Overall, I can do no better than to offer the following quotation: "History certainly justified a dictum of Einstein, that no great discovery was ever made in science except by one who lifted his nose above the grindstone of details and ventured on a more comprehensive vision"²⁵.

²⁵ Morris R. Cohen, *The Meaning of Human History*, 2nd ed., La Salle, Illinois, 1961, p. 210, cited in Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* XII, Oxford 1961, p. 136, and Elias H. Tuma, *Twenty-six Centuries of Agrarian Reform: A Comparative Analysis*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1965, p. 249.