Against the Grain

A Deep History of the Earliest States

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trol."[30] The control and confinement of populations as the reason and function of city walls depends in large part on demonstrating that the flight of subjects was a real preoccupation of the early state—the subject of Chapter 5.

WRITING MAKES STATES: RECORD KEEPING AND LEGIBILITY

> To be governed is to be at every operation, at every transaction, noted, registered, counted, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, prevented, reformed, corrected, punished.
> —Pierre-Joseph Prudhon

Peasantries with long experience of on-the-ground statecraft have always understood that the state is a recording, registering, and measuring machine. So when a government surveyor arrives with a plane table, or census takers come with their clipboards and questionnaires to register households, the subjects understand that trouble in the form of conscription, forced labor, land seizures, head taxes, or new taxes on croplands cannot be far behind. They understand implicitly that behind the coercive machinery lie piles of paperwork: lists, documents, tax rolls, population registers, regulations, requisitions, orders—paperwork that is for the most part mystifying and beyond their ken. The firm identification in their minds between paper documents and the source of their oppressions has meant that the first act of many peasant rebellions has been to burn down the local records office where these documents are housed. Grasping the fact that the state *saw* its land and subjects through record keeping, the peas-

antry implicitly assumed that *blinding* the state might end their woes. As an ancient Sumerian saying aptly puts it: "You can have a king and you can have a lord, but the man to fear is the tax collector."[31]

Southern Mesopotamia was the heartland of not one but several related state-making experiments between roughly 3,300 and 2,350 BCE. Like China's Warring States period or the later Greek city-states, the southern alluvium was the site of rivalrous city-polities whose fortunes waxed and waned. Among the best known were Kish, Ur, and, above all, Uruk. Something utterly remarkable and without historical parallel was taking place here. On one hand, groups of priests, strong men, and local chiefs were scaling up and institutionalizing structures of power that had previously used only the idioms of kinship. They were creating for the first time something along the lines of what we would call a state, though they could not possibly have understood it in those terms. On the other hand, thousands of cultivators, artisans, traders, and laborers were being, as it were, repurposed as subjects and, to this end, counted, taxed, conscripted, put to work, and subordinated to a new form of control.

It is at roughly this time that writing makes its first appearance.[32] The coincidence of the pristine state and pristine writing tempts one to the crude functionalist conclusion that would-be state makers invented the forms of notation that were essential to statecraft. But it would not be too strong to assert that it is virtually impossible to conceive of even the earliest states without a systematic technology of numerical record keeping, even if it took the Inka form of strings of knots (*quipu*). The first condition of state appropriation

(for whatever purpose) must be an inventory of available resources—population, land, crop yields, livestock, storehouse stocks. This information is, however, like a cadastral survey, a snapshot soon out of date. As appropriation proceeds, continuous record keeping is required—of grain deliveries, corvée labor performed, requisitions, receipts, and so on. Once a polity comprises even a few thousand subjects, some form of notation and documentation beyond memory and oral tradition is required.

A powerful case for linking state administration and writing is that it seems to have been used in Mesopotamia essentially for bookkeeping purposes for more than half a millennium before it even began to reflect the civilizational glories we associate with writing: literature, mythology, praise hymns, kings lists and genealogies, chronicles, and religious texts.[33] The magnificent Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, dates from Ur's Third Dynasty (circa 2,100 BCE), a full millennium after cuneiform had been first used for state and commercial purposes.

What can one infer from the trove of cuneiform tablets that have been recovered and translated about actual governance on the ground in Sumer? They reveal, at a minimum, the massive effort through a system of notation to make a society, its manpower, and its production legible to its rulers and temple officials, and to extract grain and labor from it. Surely we know enough about even quite modern bureaucracies to realize that there is no necessary relation between the records on the one hand and the facts on the ground on the other. Documents are forged and fiddled for private advantage or to please superiors. Rules and regulations laid out

meticulously in the documents may be a dead letter on the ground. Land records may be corrupt, absent, or simply inaccurate. The order of the records office, like the order of the parade ground, too often masks rampant disorder in actual administration and on the battlefield. What the records can tell us, however, is something about the utopian, Linnaean order in statecraft that is implicit in the logic of record keeping, its categories, its units of measurement, and, above all, in the things it pays attention to. The "gleam in the eye" of what I think of as the "quartermaster state"—is most instructive. As a mark of this aspiration, the very symbol of kingship in Sumer was the "rod and line," almost certainly the tools of the surveyor.[34] We can see this state imagination at work in a brief examination of Mesopotamia and early Chinese administrative practice.

The earliest administrative tablets from Uruk (Level IV), circa 3,300–3,100 BCE, are lists, lists, and lists—mostly of grain, manpower, and taxes. The topics of the surviving tablets in order of frequency are barley (as rations and taxes), war captives, male and female slaves.[35] A preoccupation at Uruk IV and later in other centers is the population roll. As in all ancient kingdoms, maximizing population was an obsession that usually superseded the conquest of territory per se. Population—as producers, soldiers, and slaves—represented the wealth of the state. The city of Umma, a dependency of Ur, where a huge trove of tablets has been found dating from about 2,255 BCE, was especially precocious, occupying one hundred hectares and having between ten thousand and twenty thousand inhabitants—a large population to administer. At the core of Umma's project of legibility was a census

Figure 11. Cuneiform tablet depicting storehouse supplies and withdrawals. Photo courtesy of the British Museum

of population by location, age, and gender as the basis for assigning the head tax and corvée labor, and for conscription. It was the "immanent" project, never realized in practice except perhaps for the temple economy and dependent labor force. Landholdings, apparently both temple and private, were designated by their size, the quality of their soil, and the expected crop yield, which served as the basis for a tax assessment. Some of the Sumerian polities, especially Ur III, look like command-and-control economies, heavily centralized (on paper—or, rather, on tablet), militarized, and regimented, resembling what we know of militarized Sparta among the Greek city-states. One tablet records 840 rations of barley,

meted out, in all probability in the (mass produced?) beveled bowls holding two liters of barley. Other rations mention beer, groats, and flour. Labor gangs, whether of war captives, slaves, or corvée laborers, seem ubiquitous.

The entire exercise in early state formation is one of standardization and abstraction required to deal with units of labor, grain, land, and rations. Essential to that standardization is the very invention of a standard nomenclature, through writing, of all the essential categories—receipts, work orders, labor dues, and so on. The creation and imposition of a written code throughout the city-state replaced vernacular judgments and was itself a distance-demolishing technology that held sway throughout the small realm. Labor standards were developed for such tasks as ploughing, harrowing, or sowing. Something like "work points" were created, showing credits and debits in work assignments. Standards of classification and quality were specified for fish, oil, and textiles—which were differentiated by weight and mesh. Livestock, slaves, and laborers were classified by gender and age. In embryonic form, the vital statistics of an appropriating state aiming to extract as much value as possible from its land and people is already in evidence. How formidable this regimentation looked on the ground is another matter.

Writing appears in early China more than a millennium later along the Yellow River. It may have begun in the Erlitou cultural area, though no evidence survives. It is most famously known in the Shang Dynasty (1,600–1,050 BCE), through the finds of oracle bones used for divination. From then and on through the Warring States period (476–221 BCE), it was

continuously in use, particularly for purposes of state administration. Only with the famous, reforming, and short-lived Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), however, does the nexus between writing and state making become clearest. The Qin, rather like Ur III, was a systematizing, order-obsessed regime that laid out a rather comprehensive vision of the total mobilization of its resources. On paper, at least, it was even more ambitious. Neither in China nor in Mesopotamia was writing originally devised as a means of representing speech.

A precondition of the standardization and simplification the Qin aimed at was a reformed and unified script that eliminated a quarter of the ideograms, made it more rectilinear, and applied it throughout its territory. Since the script was not a transcription of a speech dialect, it had, inherently, a kind of universality.[36] As with other early precocious states, the process of standardization was applied to coinage and to units of weight, distance, and volume for, among other things, grain and land. The intention was to eliminate a host of local, vernacular, and idiosyncratic practices of measurement so that, for the first time, the ruler at the center could have a clear view of the wealth, production, and manpower resources at his disposal. It aimed at creating a centralized state rather than merely a strong city-state that was content to extract occasional tribute from a constellation of quasi-independent satellite towns. Sima Qian, a court historian under the Han, looked back favorably on Qin Emperor Shang Yang's accomplishment in fashioning his kingdom into an austere war machine: "For the fields, he opened up the *qian* and the *ma* (horizontal and vertical pathways), and set up boundaries." "He

equalized the military levies and land tax and standardized the measures of capacity, weights and length."[37] Later, work norms and tools were standardized as well.

In the context of regional military rivalry with competing statelets, it was important to squeeze as much as possible from the realm. This meant creating and updating as complete an inventory of resources as possible, given the available techniques. Meticulous household registration to facilitate the head tax and conscription was a sign of power, as was a large and growing population. Captives were settled near the court, and regulations restricted population movement. One of the hallmarks of early statecraft in agrarian kingdoms was to hold the population in place and prevent any unauthorized movement. Physical mobility and dispersal are the bane of the tax man.

Land, happily for the tax collector, does not move. But as the Qin recognized private landholding, it conducted an elaborate cadastral survey connecting each piece of cropland with an owner/taxpayer. Land was classified by soil quality, crops sown, and variation in rainfall, which allowed tax officials to compute an expected yield and arrive at a tax rate. The Qin tax system also provided for estimates of standing crops on an annual basis, permitting, at least in theory, for tax adjustments according to actual harvests.

We have thus far concentrated on the intention of state officials, through writing, statistics, censuses, and measurement, to move beyond sheer plunder and to more rationally extract labor and foodstuffs from their subjects. This project, while perhaps the most important, is hardly the only policy by which a state attempts to sculpt the landscape of the polity to

make it richer, more legible, and more amenable to appropriation. Though the early state did not invent irrigation and water control, it did extend irrigation and canals to facilitate transport and enlarge grain lands. Whenever it could it increased both the numbers and legibility of its productive population by forced resettlement of subjects and war captives. The "equal field" concept of the Qin was in large part to make sure that all subjects had enough land to pay taxes and to provide a population base for conscription. Under the Qin, reflecting the importance of population, the state not only forbade flight but instituted a pro-natalist policy, with tax breaks to women and their families who gave birth to new subjects. The late-Neolithic resettlement camp was the kernel of the earliest states, but much of early statecraft was an artful political landscaping to facilitate appropriation: more grain land, a larger and more concentrated population, and the information software made possible by written records that could make it all more accessible to the state. Efforts at root and branch political landscaping may have been the undoing of the most ambitious early states. The superregimented Third Dynasty of Ur lasted barely a century and the Qin only fifteen years.

If early writing is so inextricably bound to state making, what happens when the state disappears? What little evidence we do have suggests that without the structure of officials, administrative records, and hierarchical communication, literacy shrinks greatly if it does not disappear altogether. This should not be surprising inasmuch as in the earliest states, scriptural literacy was confined to a very thin veneer of the population, most of whom were officials. From roughly 1,200 to 800 BCE, Greek city-states disintegrated in an era known

as the Dark Age. When literacy reappeared it no longer took the old form of Linear B but was an entirely new script borrowed from the Phoenicians. It was not as if all Greek culture disappeared in the interim. Instead, it took oral forms, and we owe both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, later transcribed, to this period. Even the fragmentation of the Roman Empire, with its more extensive literary tradition, in the fifth century CE led to the near disappearance of literacy in Latin outside a few religious establishments. One suspects that in the earliest states, writing developed first as a technique of statecraft and was therefore as fragile and evanescent an achievement as the state itself.

What if we were to think of literacy in the earliest societies as one technology of communication, just as crop planting is one among many techniques of subsistence? The techniques of planting were known long before they found widespread use, and then only in particular ecological and demographic circumstances. In the same sense, it is not as if the world were "dark" until writing was invented, after which all societies adopted or aspired to adopt literacy. The first writing was, as well, an artifact of state building, concentration of population, and scale. It was inapplicable in other settings. One student of early writing in Mesopotamia suggested, admittedly speculatively, that writing was elsewhere resisted because of its indelible association with the state and taxes, just as ploughing was long resisted because of its indelible association with drudgery.

> [Why did] every distinctive community on the periphery reject the use of writing with so many archaeological cultures exposed to the complexity of southern Mesopotamia? One

could argue that this rejection of complexity was a conscious act. What is the reason for it? . . . Perhaps, far from being less intellectually qualified to deal with complexity, the peripheral peoples were smart enough to avoid its oppressive command structures for at least another 500 years, when it was imposed upon them by military conquest. . . . In every instance the periphery initially rejected the adoption of complexity even after direct exposure to it . . . and, in doing so, avoided the cage of the state for another half millennium.[38]

paternity of this argument, inasmuch as the authors seem unaware of its articulation six years earlier.

24. McNeill, "Frederick the Great and the Propagation of Potatoes."

25. Adams, "An Interdisciplinary Overview of a Mesopotamian City."

26. Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires*, 6.

27. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 56.

28. Lindner, *Nomads and Ottomans in Medieval Anatolia*, 65.

29. Yoffee and Cowgill, *The Collapse of Ancient States*, 49. Seth Richardson (personal communication) notes that the text for this quotation is a literary piece addressed to the gods and likely to be unrepresentative.

30. Porter, *Mobile Pastoralism*, 324. The term "wall" may be misleading, inasmuch as it may well refer to a string of settlements—fortified or unfortified—marking the limit of political control and conceptualized as a state boundary or perimeter.

31. Wang Haicheng, *Writing and the Ancient State*, 98.

32. There was apparently, prior to state formation, a proto-cuneiform in use a few centuries earlier in large urban institutions—presumably temples—for recording transactions and distributions. David Wengrow, personal communication, May 2015.

33. Nissen, "The Emergence of Writing in the Ancient Near East." Nissen adds, "The emergence of writing as here elaborated, should by no means lead one to proclaim the invention of writing as one of the great intellectual steps taken by mankind. Its impact on intellectual life was not so sudden as to justify the differentiating of a dark 'pre-historic' age from bright history. By the time writing appeared, most of the steps toward a higher, civilized form of living had been taken. Writing appears merely as a by-product along the course of rapid development towards a complex life in towns and states" (360). See also Pollock, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 168, who also claims that cuneiform was not used for temple hymns, myths, proverbs, and temple dedications until at least 2,500 BCE.

34. Crawford, *Ur*, 88.

35. Algaze, "Initial Social Complexity in Southwestern Asia."

36. This account of early writing in China is drawn largely from

Wang Haicheng, *Writing and the Ancient State*, and Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires*.

37. Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires*, 274.

38. Algaze, "Initial Social Complexity in Southwestern Asia," 220–222, quoting C. C. Lambert-Karlovsky. See also Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 220–237.

5. POPULATION CONTROL

1. Steinkeller and Hudson, "Introduction: Labor in the Early States: An Early Mesopotamian Perspective," *Labor in the Ancient World*, 1–35.

2. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

3. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, 1–28. Much the same logic is behind the frequently observed "backward bending supply curve for labor" in which precapitalist peoples will engage in wage work with a particular objective (sometimes called a "target income") in mind (wedding expenses, the purchase of a mule) and will, contrary to standard microeconomic logic, work less when the wage is higher, as they will meet their objective that much sooner.

4. Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth*, 73.

5. In agrarian societies, the patriarchal family is something of a microcosm of this situation. Holding onto the labor—physical and reproductive—of the women in the family as well as the labor of the children is central to its success, especially the success of its CEO, the patriarch!

6. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 221.

7. Richardson, "Early Mesopotamia," 9, 20. The verb "to herd" is, I think, not inadvertent; inasmuch as absconding subjects are compared to "a scattered herd of cattle" (29). Even the wars between the major states had the purpose of reducing the enemy's manpower, the key to successful statecraft (21–22).

8. Santos-Granero, *Vital Enemies*.

9. Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 2.

10. For the relationship of state building to slavery and slave raiding, see my *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 85–94.

11. Finley, "Was Greek Civilization Based on Slave Labour?"

12. Ibid., 164.