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Land and Liberty in Southern Babylonia during the Third Millennium BCE

Abstract:

During the third millennium BCE, southern Babylonia experienced dramatic political shifts. For most of the millennium, independent city-states coexisted, sometimes in conflict with one another or with Kish in northern Babylonia. In the last few centuries, however, southern Babylonia was united by conquest under the Sargonic dynastic and then the Third Dynasty of Ur. Despite these political shifts, the land-tenure system remained relatively the same the whole millennium, especially due to enduring environmental and institutional factors. Due in part to the need for large-scale irrigation, the vast majority of arable land was owned by rulers, governors, and temple administrators. Otherwise, the ability to own or possess arable land was dependent on one's freedom and other aspects of one's status. While there were a variety of synchronic and diachronic nuances, there were three statuses: a majority of citizens, a moderate minority of serflike individuals and a smaller minority of enslaved people. Citizens were legally free, conscripted part time and owned or possessed arable land. Serflike individuals were legally free, conscripted full time, and occasionally possessed arable land. Enslaved people were legally unfree, subjected to full-time slave labor and did not possess arable land. Although these statuses could be vague throughout the third millennium, they were clearly recognizable during the last century under the Third Dynasty of Ur. As such, this presentation examines both the continuities and developments in the relationship between land and liberty in southern Babylonia during the third millennium, focusing on the Early Dynastic, Sargonic and Ur III periods.

Bio:

Andrew Pottorf completed his PhD in Assyriology from Harvard University in 2022. His research is focused on the socioeconomic history of the Ur III period (ca. 2100–2000 BCE) in its broader historical context, especially with regard to social stratification. From 2022 to 2023, he taught Biblical Hebrew and Sumerian at Boston College and Harvard, respectively, before starting his current position as Affiliated Lecturer and Teaching Associate in Assyriology at the University of Cambridge.