

# How Mesopotamia's Urban And Industrial Revolution Started Politics As We Know It Today



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03-05-2025 ~ Giorgio Buccellati's [At the Origins of Politics](#) takes readers to the early stages of a process that became the structure of modern life.

Archaeologist and scholar Giorgio Buccellati's book [At the Origins of Politics](#) describes how Mesopotamia's urban revolution in the late fourth millennium BC shaped a new mentality. The segmentation and specialization of industrial production required written recordkeeping, standardization of weights and measures, and surveying and allocation of land planning. This inherent logic of handicraft production and its related organization of trade and market exchange, especially with the palace and temple institutions, led to new forms of social interaction, with the state and its laws and religion consolidating the new managerial hierarchies.

I met Buccellati in 1994 at the first of what would become a decade-long series of Harvard-based colloquia to compile an economic history of the Bronze Age Near Eastern origins of money and interest, land tenure, and its public obligations. Since these innovations were shaped largely by relations with the temples and palaces, our group started by focusing on just what it meant to be public or

private.

It was fairly clear what “privatization” meant, but calling the palace or temples “public” was problematic. Royal price schedules for grain, silver, and other key commodities applied only to transactions with these large institutions, which were corporately distinct from the rest of the economy where prices were free to vary. Hammurabi’s laws focused on the relations between the palatial sector and the family-based economy on the land, which followed its own common law tradition for wergild-like personal offenses and other legal problems not involving the palace. How far beyond the palace did the state extend?

Buccellati’s paper focused on a broader philosophical idea of “public” as referring to the overall system of social and economic organization: “The dichotomy between public and private is coterminous with the [origin of the city](#).”[1] As he points out in *At the Origins of Politics*: “The increased size of the settlements created a critical mass, whereby face-to-face association no longer was possible among each member of the social group.” The relationship was political. “On the etymological level, the terms ‘urbanism’ and ‘politics’ are equivalent, given that they both derive from the word for ‘city’ in Latin and Greek respectively.” His term “state-city” emphasizes the overall political and administrative context.

He views industrialization as the economic dimension of the urban revolution that occurred in the late fourth millennium BC. The scale and social complexity of mining (or trading for metal) and metallurgy, beer-making, and weaving involved increasingly impersonal relationships as industrial organizations created products beyond the ability of individuals to make by themselves. The evolution was from direct personal contact to being part of a long, specialized chain.

Describing this takeoff as the first Axial Age, Buccellati explains how economic and social relations had been transformed over the 50,000-year evolution from small Paleolithic groups to urban industrial production, trade, and property relations. The technology and administration of production transformed the character of labor and what Buccellati calls para-perceptual thought. The moral principles of mutual aid, group solidarity, protection of the needy, and basic rights to means of self-support were retained from pre-urban practice but were administered on the state level.

“The state was never able to eliminate or even ignore the people... political

ideology became a way for the leadership to justify itself in front of the base," bolstered by religious attitudes to popularize an "Ideology of Control... the ideology of command, of leadership not necessarily based on coercive means." Even in the face of "ever-increasing gaps in prestige and economic ability," the rhetoric of kingship promoted "a sense of solidarity that transcends the limit of reciprocal face-to-face recognition."

For the king, the aim was to make "submission not just tolerable but actually desirable." That enabled Mesopotamian rule to be personal and indeed dynastic. "The king was not just the most powerful private individual; he embodied a distinct organism." Kings were described as serving heaven, as reflected in Hammurapi's stele depicting him presenting his laws to the god of justice, Shamash (or in some interpretations, receiving them from Shamash).

"The private model was thus superimposed from scratch on the public one," merging the state and religion as every new king pointed to his ancestors as if this meant continuity of the law. The principle of kings being hereditary was accepted "without ever being formulated in theoretical terms."

#### *From Living in a State of Nature to a Stratified Managerial Order*

Buccellati describes production as evolving from interpersonal and small scale to institutional and large scale. He describes how Paleolithic hunters and gatherers met their needs by using what they found in nature. They napped flints to make spear points and cutting tools, and wove plant fibers to make clothing, baskets, and other artifacts, but these materials were as they found them. And personal wealth took the form of shells or other objects found in nature. However, the increasing complexity of industrial organization transformed the character of producers in that they ceased to have face-to-face relations with the users of the objects they made. Products evolved increasingly beyond objects found in nature, and also beyond the ability of single individuals to make them as they required chains of transformation via metallurgy and manufacturing.

Although Buccellati does not focus on land tenure, money, and credit in this volume, his analytic schema of the transition from "nature" to man-made institutional structures suggests how land and credit relations evolved along similar lines, from informal and spontaneous to formal and standardized. If there was an archaic relationship with the land, it was for an Indigenous tribe to claim territory as belonging to itself for hunting and gathering and for ceremonial or

religious functions.

Most exchange was domestic, taking the form of reciprocal gifts, often of the same food types simply as a means of binding groups together in the spirit of mutual aid. But artifacts were traded among Indigenous communities already in the Ice Age, from one tribal group to another, sometimes passed along over long distances.

Gathering places for such exchange existed already in the Ice Age, often at river crossings or natural meeting points. These would have been seasonal sites, with chieftains responsible for keeping the lunisolar calendar to time when to travel to such spots. If anything, such gathering places were the opposite of the later city that Buccellati describes. The idea was to prevent any one group from dominating others or restricting territorial control. The result was akin to the amphictyonic centers of classical antiquity, neutral zones set aside from political cities and rivalries, with careful equality of participants as a condition for amicable relations.

Deities often were trees, woods, or natural rock formations such as those that survived in Germanic religion into the first millennium of our era, and Japan's Shinto religion. Lunar and solar deities were part of an astronomical cosmology reflecting the rhythms of nature. By the Bronze Age, gods took on the role of patrons of social authority and justice as urbanization transformed the natural environment.

Technology enabled the production of new shapes and "artifacts that have no analogy in nature." Mud bricks became standardized to build walls. "Stone is no longer seen as an adaptation of pre-existing forms" but was shaped to produce new building structures. Fire played an important role in controlling the environment, not only to cook food but also to bake mud bricks and harden ceramics, and to refine metal from ores and make alloys such as bronze to produce tools, weapons, and other implements. The potter's wheel and spindles for weaving were developed, and a managerial class came into being as manufacturing such products required increasingly complex organization, from producers and traders to armies.

The Neolithic agricultural revolution saw the standardization of land, allotted to community members in lots sufficient to support their families, with proportional

obligations attached—obliging their holders to serve in the army and provide seasonal corvée labor on communal building projects.

These obligations were what defined land tenure rights. That created a strict relationship with the emerging urban centers that transformed “the village as it existed in prehistory... in the sense of autonomous villages that found an end in themselves. ... Agricultural or manufactured production did not have as its end point the village, but rather and especially the urban markets.” Rural villages became part of the city, and local conflicts were settled by traveling urban judges.

### *Monetization of Exchange Between the Rural and Urban Centers*

Money evolved as part of the valuation dimension of exchange. Anthropologists studying surviving Indigenous communities have found that artifacts typically are valued for their rarity or lineage of ownership. In archaic times such objects were often buried with their wearers, having become part of their personal identity. In time, they took a proto-monetary signification of esteem. But it was in southern Mesopotamia that money became formalized as a measure of valuation, simultaneously for domestic agrarian and industrial exchange—mainly for grain and wool—and for foreign trade. In both cases, the palace and temples played a key role. A standardized measure of value was needed for the economy’s own industrial and institutional functioning, not merely for personal decoration and status.

Foreign trade was necessary to obtain raw materials not found in the region’s river-deposited soil. Copper and tin were the key metals that were needed, the alloy of which gave its name to the Bronze Age (3500-1200 BC), but silver was adopted as the main measure of value for palace transactions and those of entrepreneurs, presumably because of its role in religious symbolism. Silver and other commodities were obtained by a mercantile class of entrepreneurs, whose major customers were the palace and temples, which also supplied most of the textiles being exported.

The largest categories of debts and fiscal obligations were inter-sectoral, owed by citizens on the land and mercantile entrepreneurs to the palace sector and its temples. The seasonal character of agriculture made credit necessary to bridge the gap between planting and harvesting, to be paid on the threshing floor when the crop was in. Grain served as the main domestic agrarian measure of value and the medium for paying agrarian debts.

The palace and temples integrated their economic accounts by setting the silver mina and shekel that denominated the value of commodities obtained in foreign trade (and consignments of what was exchanged for them) as equal to corresponding measures of grain, while dividing the relevant measures into 60ths to facilitate the allocation of food and raw materials based on the 30-day administrative month used by the large institutions.

The resulting monetary system of account-keeping for credit and fiscal collection was part of a broader economic context in which standardized weights and measures were used to quantify and calculate the various magnitudes of the inputs required by the large institutions for producing commodities in their workshops, along with the amounts of the charges, fees, and rents payable to the institutions and fiscal collectors.

The surplus grain rent paid to the large institutions supported dependent labor in the weaving and handicraft workshops. Commodities no longer were made by individual craftpersons known to the users, but by many, whose identities were institutional and hence collective and impersonal as far as the buyers or users were concerned. The workforce consisted largely of war widows and orphans, and also slaves captured from the mountains surrounding Mesopotamia. (A typical word for slave was "mountain girl.")

The textiles woven by this labor were consigned to merchants to act as intermediaries between the large institutions or the growing class of private estate holders and foreign purchasers. Interest charges (usually equal to the original loan value for consignments of five years) served as a means for consigners and backers to obtain their share of the gain that merchants were expected to make on their trade.

Bucellati shows how the urban revolution's "evolutionary process in motion" to transform society and with it "the very nature of human existence." The development of writing, for instance, had a deep effect in transforming thought processes, much as the creation of languages had served to "externalize thought." It enabled the communication of ideas to others without having to rely on memory.

Originally used by the eighth millennium BC to oversee and quantify trade and exchange transactions, it came to be used for accounting and credit, and

increasingly to preserve, arrange and order thoughts, public announcements, treaties, poetry, and laws. The written word became a new medium for thought. Buccellati describes this “reification of thought” as part of the “removal from nature.” That was part of the evolving uniformity that spread from the production of commodities to shape the overall social order.

### *Debt Strains Lead Rulers to Protect Their Economies From Polarizing*

Industry and entrepreneurial foreign trade concentrated control and wealth in the hands of managers and “big men.” Their economic gains caused a wealthy class to emerge, initially within the large institutions, with credit being used to pry labor away from palace control. Creditor claims on indebted cultivators accumulated, largely at the institutional level of landholders, merchant-creditors, and also ale-women, whose customers ran up tabs for their beer, to be settled at “payday” on the threshing floor when crops were harvested.

It was inevitable that strains would develop as a result of the rising role of credit and debt relations, especially in times of flooding or crop failure. As rent and other payment arrears and interest charges mounted up, private lending (often by royal or temple officials acting on their own account) became the major initial way to obtain the labor of debtors, by requiring them to work off their debts. That prevented cultivators from performing the stipulated corvée and military service that they owed in exchange for their land tenure rights.

The result was a threefold conflict: first, creditors against debtors; second, creditors against the palace over the appropriation of labor via debt bondage; and third, the assertion of creditor power against traditional communal moral ideas of equity and mutual aid. Archaic communities traditionally sought to minimize economic inequality, perceiving much personal wealth as being achieved by exploiting others, above all by indebting them. By the third millennium, indebted cultivators faced the threat of being disenfranchised, losing their personal freedom and self-support land through foreclosure.

As Buccellati observed in our 1994 colloquium royal protection of homesteaders, canceling the overgrowth of personal debt resulted “more from a concern for the public domain than as a phenomenon of privatization.” Rulers from the third millennium BC onward protected palace claims on the labor of their citizens from being disrupted by debt strains of the type to which subsequent Western civilization has succumbed. Sumerian rulers made sure that these strains would

not be permanent because that would have been at the expense of the palace's own requirements for corvée and military service from agrarian debtors.

Buccellati pertinently notes that three main considerations shaped Near Eastern public laws: "the concept of rules, the sense of justice, [and] the decisive moments in resolving conflict." Hammurapi's "code" was simply a collection of judgments, but his *andurarum* proclamations were enforced by the courts to cancel personal debts (but not mercantile debts), liberate bondservants (but not slaves), and redistribute self-support land (but not townhouses) that had been forfeited to creditors or sold under economic duress. These Clean Slates were the most basic royal administrative acts of Mesopotamian rulers from Sumerian times onward. They were the moral pillar of the state.

### *The Mesopotamian State Solved the Debt Problem That Western Civilization Has Not*

Buccellati sees the transformation of production, economic control, and ways of perceiving and thinking about one's place in society as progressing toward a geopolitical peak with the Assyrian Empire. What enabled and made this sustained achievement so successful were royal laws to regularly restore economic balance on a system-wide level. Clean Slate proclamations prevented a creditor oligarchy from emerging to rival palace claims on the labor and crop surpluses of citizens on the land. In this respect, the distinction between financial and industrial gain-seeking—and the socially destructive character of usury and creditor self-interest—was recognized already in the third millennium BC in the Hymn to Shamash, the Akkadian god of justice (lines 103-106):

*What happens to the loan shark who invests his resources at the (highest) interest rate?*

*He will lose his purse just as he tries to get the most out of it.*

*But he who invests in the long term will convert one measure of silver into three.*

*He pleases Shamash and will [enrich his life](#).<sup>[2]</sup>*

Buccellati rightly states that "We are the heirs of Mesopotamian perception and political experience." Modern civilization, however, has retrogressed from the Bronze Age Mesopotamian achievement of avoiding deepening financial and economic imbalance. He notes that modern society defines property as being



alienable, but in the West securing property rights always has entailed the “right” to forfeit it to creditors or sell under duress—irreversibly. That has been the case ever since Near Eastern commercial and credit practices were brought to the Aegean and Mediterranean lands in the first millennium BC.

The West has adopted the basic economic practices invented in the fourth and third millennia BC, but not the economically protective measures that rulers took to annul the buildup of creditor claims to reverse the increase in debt bondage and loss of land by debtors. That decontextualization is what in my view makes the West “Western.”

Bronze Age Near Eastern practice was so different from the Western worldview that most modern historians resist recognizing and appreciating the relevance of the region’s takeoff in the fourth and third millennia BC. Indeed, today’s anti-state economic ideology denies that money and industrial enterprise could have been innovated by what Buccellati calls the state, that is, the palatial authority.

This ideology obscures a great question posed for the West: How is it that Near Eastern “divine kingship” achieved what Western democracy has failed to do: check the emergence of a creditor rent-seeking oligarchy, which in classical antiquity would strip the Greek, Italian, and other populations of their means of self-support that had formed the basis of economic liberty for the first 3,000 years of the Mesopotamian takeoff that this book so comprehensively describes.

#### *Notes:*

1. Buccellati, Giorgio, “The Role of Socio-Political Factors in the Emergence of ‘Public’ and ‘Private’ Domains in Early Mesopotamia,” in Hudson, Michael and Levine, Baruch (eds.), *Privatization in the Ancient Near East and Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass: Peabody Museum [Harvard], 1996):131.
2. In Giorgio Buccellati, *“When on High the Heavens...”: Mesopotamian Religion and Spirituality with Reference to the Biblical World* (London, 2024):194, citing Reiner, Erica, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut: Poetry from Babylonia and Assyria* (Ann Arbor, 1985): 68-84, and W.G. Lambert, W.G., *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960): 122-138.

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*Credit Line: This text is adapted from Michael Hudson's foreword to [At the Origins of Politics](#) by Giorgio Buccellati, and this excerpt was produced by [Human Bridges](#).*