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Critique of Guillermo Algaze's "The Sumerian Takeoff"

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My discomfort with this article is primarily with its didactic, positivistic tone, rather than its ably argued, if somewhat too narrowly focused, contents. We are informed already in the Abstract, on the authority of “economic geographers” without knowledge of the ancient Near Eastern background, that “regional variations in economic activity and population agglomeration are *always* the result of self-reinforcing processes of resource production, accumulation, exchange, and innovation.” And again, “that emergence of early cities in the southern Mesopotamian alluvium *must* be understood in terms of, both, the unique ecological conditions that existed across the region during the fourth millennium... and the enduring geographical framework...” (emphases added).

Such apodictic statements have the somewhat musty flavor of pronouncements of limited sets of law-like regularities that were popular in anthropology some decades ago. They tend to impose a self-enclosed, reductionistic framework on processes of change that were highly complex and cannot be understood so deterministically. And while prehistoric archaeological findings alone may not (presently) be sufficient to uncover many of the complexities involved, I think it is vital also to take fully into account the deepening and amplification of causal interpretations that later Mesopotamian (and other) historical materials make possible.

Here is a very brief synopsis of a more balanced, and I think more plausible, explanatory framework:

- 1.) The account given of southern Mesopotamian convergence of environmental and socio-technical advantages ignores major factors of unpredictability in agricultural productivity, due primarily to fluctuations in irrigation water supplies. Resultant risks had to exercise a decisive influence on long-term developmental change and transformation.
- 2.) Maximization of agricultural output was surely an attractive target that was always sought but only sometimes approached. Serious, repeated shortfalls could be catastrophic when fields plowed and seeded in October/November later failed to receive adequate water supplies to produce expected (or sometimes any) harvests.
- 3.) This placed a premium on large-scale, centrally controlled harvests, on longer-term storage, on imposing discipline needed to restrict popular consumption in order to maintain reserves, and then quite naturally, on prioritizing distribution in favor of elites and inner circles of assured loyalty.
- 4.) Southern Mesopotamian peer-polities were all commonly exposed to these and related risks, although in any given year there were gross differences in how deeply they were individually affected. Some, with

relatively full granaries, thus became targets of any urban neighbors facing subsistence crises. Whether by persuasion or compulsion, an in-gathering of rural population – urban growth – both maximized GDP in good years and assured a population base permitting larger defensive forces. Of course, it could also exacerbate an internal crisis in a bad year (or sequence of years).

5.) Taken together, this uncertainty led toward growing, but also increasingly stratified and regimented, urban populations. Comparatively well disciplined military cadres thus became available, whether for offensive or defensive service. To my knowledge, there were no comparable factors of inducement then operating in surrounding regions.

6.) I would argue that the “self-reinforcing” maximization of an inherent ecological advantage through good, benevolent management, initiated through what Algaze later describes as “the central role of trade as a spur,” simply does not constitute an adequate explanation for the southern Mesopotamian “Takeoff”. The process he highlights certainly must have played a part. But no less, and I think probably more, important was the military superiority these southern city-states attained, gained in their constant rivalry for highly promising but risky and uncertain subsistence resources, that accounts for southern city-state growth and (to a large degree coercively imposed) advances in socio-political-technical as well as military organization.

7.) Of course, the absence of critical resources in southern Mesopotamia – especially timber and metals – also attracted predatory city-state attention. The population at large, and not merely the politico-religious elites, thus would often have supported offensive, long-distance efforts.

8.) With this background, expansive Urukian incursions west, north and east become much more readily understandable. I do not exclude the possibility that some incursions may have been immediate outgrowths of particular southern subsistence crises.

9.) Warfare, and its many indirect as well as direct consequences, is very hard for both site-oriented and regionally oriented prehistoric archaeologists to identify. Hence it has not been readily taken into account as a major developmental factor. But throughout history it has repeatedly been one. That is, of course, another vast field of discussion, but cf. the Roman Empire and the entire European expansion of the 15th – 18th centuries.

References:

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