Chapter 1: Writing and City Life

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Why do we say that it was not natural fertility and high levels of food production that were the causes of early urbanisation?

Southern Mesopotamia was agriculturally rich, with irrigation channels from the Euphrates, abundant wheat and barley, herds of sheep and goats, fish and dates. But rural prosperity alone does not create a city. Towns arise when an economy grows beyond food production into trade, manufacture and services, so that people no longer produce everything for themselves. This brings a division of labour: a seal-carver needs bronze tools and coloured stones he cannot make or fetch himself, and the toolmaker needs metal and charcoal supplied by others. The south had little stone, good wood or metal, so these had to be obtained by trade from Turkey, Iran and across the Gulf in exchange for textiles and farm produce. Such exchange needed organised trade, storage and distribution of food and materials, coordination of many activities, people who gave orders, efficient water transport and written records. Temples, rulers and their authority to command labour supplied this organisation. Hence urbanisation grew from specialisation, trade and social organisation, not from fertile land and surplus alone.

Q2 Which of the following were necessary conditions and which the causes, of early urbanisation, and which would you say were the outcome of the growth of cities: (a) highly productive agriculture, (b) water transport, (c) the lack of metal and stone, (d) the division of labour, (e) the use of seals, (f) the military power of kings that made labour compulsory?

Necessary conditions: (a) highly productive agriculture, which supplied the food surplus that city people depended on, and (b) water transport, the cheapest way to carry grain, fuel and materials into cities along rivers and canals.

Causes: (c) the lack of metal and stone in the south, which forced Mesopotamians to trade for them and so required organised exchange and expeditions; and (f) the military power of kings, which made labour compulsory, so that war captives and local people built temples, fetched materials and worked for rations, giving rulers command over large workforces.

Outcomes of city growth: (d) the division of labour, a mark of urban life in which craftspeople became specialists and depended on others, and (e) the use of seals, a craft produced by skilled carvers that marked the owner's role in public life, securing goods and authenticating letters.

Q3 Why were mobile animal herders not necessarily a threat to town life?

Herders and townspeople needed each other. Herders exchanged young animals, cheese, leather and meat for grain and metal tools, and the manure of a penned flock benefited farmers. Nomadic groups from the western desert often entered the farming heartland as herders, harvest labourers or hired soldiers, and some became prosperous and settled down. A few even set up their own rule, as the Akkadians, Amorites, Assyrians and Aramaeans did. The Amorite kings of Mari respected Mesopotamian gods and also raised a temple to Dagan, god of the steppe. Mesopotamian society was thus open to different peoples and cultures, and its vitality was perhaps due to this intermixture. Conflict was possible: a shepherd might lead his flock across a sown field, herders could raid villages, and settlers could deny them water. The kings of Mari therefore kept watch on herders' camps. But this was not constant hostility, and herders were not a necessary threat to town life.

Q4 Why would the early temple have been much like a house?

The temple was regarded as the house of a god, such as the Moon God of Ur or Inanna, the Goddess of Love and War. The earliest known temple, built around 5000 BCE, was only a small shrine of unbaked bricks. Villagers built and rebuilt temples at chosen spots in their settlements, and some early ones were possibly not unlike an ordinary house. Later, temples were built of brick and grew larger, with several rooms arranged around open courtyards, as ordinary houses also had. Like a household, the temple received the family's offerings: people brought the god grain, curd and fish. One difference was that temple outer walls went in and out at regular intervals, which no ordinary building had. Over time the temple took on many more functions, becoming the owner of fields, fisheries and herds, a place of processing and production, and the main urban institution.

Q5 Of the new institutions that came into being once city life had begun, which would have depended on the initiative of the king?

Several institutions relied on the king's initiative. First, organised trade: in the Enmerkar epic the ruler of Uruk sent a messenger to Aratta for lapis lazuli and metals, and the poem shows kingship organising trade. Writing was linked to this effort, since Enmerkar had a tablet formed when his messenger could not carry the messages accurately. Second, compulsory labour: rulers commanded war captives and local people to fetch stones and metal ores and to make bricks and build temples, paying them rations. Third, temple building and its organisation: victorious chiefs offered booty to the gods, beautified temples, sent men for fine stones and metal, and arranged the efficient distribution of temple wealth with careful accounts. Fourth, a standing military force and defensive walls, such as at Uruk, as leaders gathered settlers close to them. Fifth, royal palaces and workshops, like the great palace of Zimrilim at Mari. Later kings also set up libraries, as Assurbanipal did at Nineveh.

Q6 What do ancient stories tell us about the civilisation of Mesopotamia?

Ancient stories preserve memories of change and show the values of Mesopotamian civilisation. The Flood story, found in the Bible and in the Mesopotamian tradition, where the hero is Ziusudra or Utnapishtim, probably expressed memories of important changes in history. The Sumerian epic about Enmerkar of Uruk shows that early trade was organised by kingship and that writing arose to carry messages over long distances. It also suggests that writing was seen as a sign of the superiority of Mesopotamian urban culture. The Gilgamesh Epic, written on twelve tablets, tells of a great hero who failed to find immortality, and returned to Uruk. He then took comfort in the city wall and its fired-brick foundations rather than in his sons living on, as a tribal hero would have done. This shows the pride Mesopotamians took in city life, where many communities lived side by side, and how they recalled cities in poetry after wars destroyed them. The stories also show a tradition of writing and learning, which later kings such as Assurbanipal and Nabonidus valued.