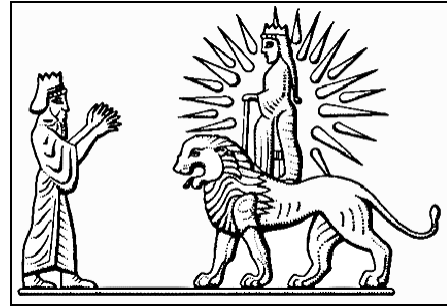


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## *“Toward a Definition of Private Economic Activity in Third Millennium Babylonia”*

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## TOWARD A DEFINITION OF PRIVATE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN THIRD MILLENNIUM BABYLONIA\*

Piotr Steinkeller

If hope is the perception of the infinite — if it is the discovery of how the unlimited possibilities of our species emerge in history through a series of trials and experiments — sometimes the work of the historian can come very close to it.

Aldo Schiavone, *The End of the Past: Ancient Rome and the Modern West*

### The Problem

As is evident from its title, this paper addresses the question of private economic activity in Babylonia during the Third Millennium BCE. Here I need to point out that the designation “Third Millennium” in practice means only the last three centuries of that millennium, i.e., the period between 2300 and 2000 BCE. This is for the simple reason that no written evidence of any substance for this issue is available beforehand. In particular, I will be dealing with the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2100-2000 BCE), which, as is well known, is exceedingly well documented. In spite of the fact that the Ur III period was unusual and even unique in some respects, it is nevertheless fully representative of how the early Babylonian society and economy were organized and functioned. Thus, most of the conclusions about Ur III times are also applicable to the preceding, i.e., Pre-Sargonic and Sargonic, periods.

It is generally recognized that two schools of thought dominate on the issue of private or independent economic activity. One group of scholars assumes that such activity played an exceedingly limited — if any — role in the economic life of early Mesopotamia and judges it, therefore, to have been of only marginal importance. This position has to a large extent been influenced by the work Karl Polanyi and his collaborators and various followers.

The other camp thinks that, next to the state-owned and -operated economic enterprises, there existed a large and thriving private economy, whose existence is simply obscured by the bias of written records, which, as unquestionably is the

\* Abbreviations used are those of the Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and of the Sumerian Dictionary of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania with the following additions:

McNeil Messenger Texts = R. C. McNeil, *The “Messenger Texts” of the Third Ur Dynasty* (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971).

Sigrist Yale = M. Sigrist, *Texts from the Yale Babylonian Collections*, Parts 1 and 2, Sumerian Archival Texts 2 and 3 (Bethesda, 2000).

Touzalin M. = Touzalin, *L’administration palatiale à l’époque de la troisième dynastie d’Ur: Textes inédits du Musée d’Alep* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Université de Tours, 1982).

case, favor the activities of large public institutions.<sup>1</sup> As for the character of that putative economy, some scholars think that it constituted something very close to a capitalistic model, while others visualize it more along the lines of a collective or communal system.

The proponents of the latter view usually, if not uniformly, use the term “private sector” to describe that independent area of economic activity.<sup>2</sup> This terminological usage is highly significant, since it reflects an assumption that the economy in question represented a completely independent entity, which was physically separate from the official or state economy. In practical terms, this would necessarily mean that virtually every professional group fell under two sub-categories: those who worked exclusively for the state and those who were self-employed respectively. To offer a concrete example, this position would have it that, next to the craftsmen, let us say, carpenters, in the employ of the so-called “great institutions,” there also existed carpenters who owned private workshops and worked exclusively for themselves. Such an understanding of private economic activity also presupposes a physical co-existence of institutional and private or communal land. In other words, in the same community there would be state-owned fields, and just next to them one would find tracts of private or communal land. This is a very simplified description, of course, but this is essentially how the private or independent economic sphere is usually imagined.

Even though I have on occasion been accused of overstressing the role of the state in the Ur III economy<sup>3</sup> — which may have persuaded some that I am a member of the former camp — in fact I would be the first to argue that there was a great deal of private economic activity in early Babylonia. That was particularly true of the Ur III period, which is the focus of this presentation. But that private activity manifested itself in quite a different manner than usually thought by scholars.

### Public and Private in Ur III Times

Rather than representing a completely separate entity, the private economic activity was an extension or, more precisely, the other side of the state economy. The best analogy I can offer to illustrate the relationship between the two is the

- 1 See, e.g., G. Van Driel, “Land in Ancient Mesopotamia: ‘That what remains undocumented does not exist,’” in *Landless and Hungry?: Access to Land in Early and Traditional Societies*, ed. by B. Haring and R. de Maaijer (Leiden, 1998), 19-49. For a corrective view, see Steinkeller, “Money-Lending Practices in Ur III Babylonia: The Issue of Economic Motivation,” in *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by M. Hudson and M. Van De Mierop (Bethesda, 2002), 115.
- 2 See, e.g., M. Van De Mierop, JNES 59 (2000) 42: “... I would suggest that the public, communal, and private sectors of the economy coexisted throughout Mesopotamian (and ancient Near Eastern) history in general with ever-changing relations and importance; yet never was one dominant to the exclusion of the others.”
- 3 I assume that I am one of the scholars at whom Van De Mierop, Or. NS 62 (1993) 448, directs the following criticism: “... the Ur III economy, [is] a subject that still suffers from an excessive emphasis on the state’s role.”

double helix of the DNA structure. If one visualizes the Ur III economy and society as an all embracing vessel shaped as a pyramid, with the king at its apex, one could say that this entire pyramid was woven out of intermeshing threads of public (or state) and private (or independent) activity. For this reason, the term “private” is not only useless but also confusing and harmful when applied to ancient realities, particularly as far the Ur III economy and society are concerned. In fact, I would argue that much of the controversy surrounding the Ur III organization is simply a misunderstanding, which is directly attributable that unfortunate usage. Since the label “private” unavoidably conjures up all the modern meanings and connotations carried by this word — especially the notion of “private” as an exclusive category — to avoid imposing those concepts on alien situations it is best to abandon this label altogether — unless one understands that “private” when applied to the Ur III situation means something specifically different. Needless to say, one should also dispense with the term “sector” when talking of the various areas of the early Mesopotamian economy, since this term is even more suggestive of sharp borders and mutual exclusiveness.

#### More about the Ur III Organization

To continue my discussion of the Ur III organization, it must be emphasized that the Ur III state was a classic example of the patrimonial system. As defined by Max Weber, in a patrimonial state all the economic and human resources are integrated into a single socio-economic organism subordinated to one ruling body. In spite of its apparent monolithic nature, such a system is actually a sum of individual households linked together by a network of mutual rights and obligations. All of those households form a single pyramidal structure, at whose top stand the king and his family. From an economic perspective, the most important point about a patrimonial state is that its economy is necessarily embedded in social relations.<sup>4</sup>

As for the Ur III economy specifically, it is clear that under the Ur III kings all the arable land, including the holdings of temple estates, constituted the property of the king. This land was distributed by the crown among the dependents of the state in the form of subsistence allotments (ŠUKU), depending on their social position and profession in exchange for services. This principle was in force throughout the entire society, excluding here, of course, slaves and the lowest ranks of the working class — the menials. The native term that served to designate a state dependent is éren. Although in the extant documentation this term is usually applied to the lowest-ranking dependants of the state, it is clear that in its broad sense it means any subject of the king. Even the members of the

4 For the Weberian model of patrimonial domination and its applicability to the societies of the Ancient Near East, see the recent book by J. D. Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Chicago, 2001).

royal family ranked as éren vis-à-vis the king. Because of this, one could even describe the Ur III society as an érenage system.

### The Ur III quota system

Another key feature of the Ur III economy is that it operated according to a quota system, which determined each individual's obligation vis-à-vis the state, depending on his specific social and occupational position. During the period of their employment, state dependents were alimeted with grain, wool, and oil allotments. As I described it earlier, the higher-ranking among them were in addition provided with the plots of arable land. After their particular obligation or work-duty was fulfilled, they had complete freedom to engage in an independent economic activity.<sup>5</sup>

### The Craftsmen

In the case of craftsmen, for example, this meant that, having delivered the required number of man-days to the state, they were free to work entirely for themselves and to sell or barter their wares on a free market, so to speak.

Here a good case in point are the Ur III potters. In a fairly recent article,<sup>6</sup> I was able to demonstrate that these craftsmen owed six months (or fifteen days per month in practical terms) of full-time labor to the state. Furthermore, it is clear that, rather than being part of state-owned enterprises, they worked in family-owned workshops, and were organized into family groups. Thus, they had at their disposal not only the time but also the material means — the means of production, if you will — to work independently for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

5 One is reminded here of the system of compulsory deliveries which operated, at different times and in various forms, in the former Soviet block, especially in agriculture. Very much like in Ur III Babylonia, in communist Poland the independent farmer was required to deliver to the state a portion of his produce, for which he was paid a nominal price. The remainder he could theoretically sell freely, though not in a real free-market environment, since the state reserved the right of preemption, and since it regulated prices. Unlike in the Soviet system, however, whose character was unmistakably predatory, in the Ur III economy the quotas were set at reasonable levels, indicating an essentially equitable nature of this arrangement.

6 "The Organization of Crafts in Third Millennium Babylonia: The Case of Potters," AOF 23 (1996) 232-53.

7 In this connection, it may be noted that the same mixture of "private" and "state" elements was posited for the craft production of ancient Egypt by Ch. J. Eyre: "The existence of a free market in manufactured goods does not necessarily imply the existence of 'free' craftsmen running purely private enterprises. Nor does the dependence of craftsmen and craft production on institutional structures — temple, king, or the estate of a great lord — exclude them from private marketing" ("The Market Women of Pharaonic Egypt," in *Le commerce en Égypte ancienne*, ed. by N. Grimal and B. Menu, Bibliothèque d'Étude 121 [Cairo, 1998], 176).

## Local Markets in Third Millennium Babylonia?

I hasten to offer the following caveat, however. There is no written evidence that the potters or, for that matter, any other category of craftsmen, actually sold or bartered their products. But, in fact, one does not expect to find such records, since it is difficult — if not impossible — to imagine any circumstances that would occasion the recording of such transactions. This notwithstanding, the conclusion that the commercial activity of this kind did exist, and that it was in fact exceedingly common, is unavoidable — and even necessary — since otherwise there is no way of explaining how ordinary people obtained their household goods, such as pots and furniture, various personal articles, such as shoes and garments, and foodstuffs other than cereals, such vegetables, fruits, dairy products, meat, and spices. This follows from the simple fact that none of the above products were distributed in any fashion by the central authorities. Thus, the only explanation possible is all these products were obtained through purchase or barter in a local market setting. As we shall see later, there are even grounds to think that some of these goods were held on hand and sold by professional traders.

Although no direct information on barter practices and local markets in the Third Millennium Babylonia is available — apart from the terms for the peddlers of salt, alkali, and kohl<sup>8</sup> — indirectly such evidence is provided by the Egyptian depictions of market scenes,<sup>9</sup> which show (and sometime describe verbally) people engaged in buying and selling. The goods sold or exchanged in such scenes are precisely those I have posited for the hypothetical Ur III market. Victuals — vegetables, fruits, fish, bread, and beer — predominate among them, but a wide assortment of manufactured goods is in evidence as well: furniture, pottery vessels, sandals, fish-hooks, fans, and garments. While the foodstuffs are usually exchanged in a classic (commodity for commodity) barter fashion, manufactured goods tend to be paid for in grain.<sup>10</sup> With good reason, Christopher Eyre thinks that “a local market [of this type] was of structural necessity for the distribution of perishables, and commodities not produced within the [private] household.”<sup>11</sup> This exchange, he concludes, was “small in scale, but exchange, not

8 lú-mun-sa<sub>10</sub>, lú-naga-sa<sub>10</sub>, lú-šimbi-sa<sub>10</sub>, “sellers of salt, alkali, and kohl” (Early Dynastic Lu List E lines 179-181 = MSL 12, 19). Cf. J. Krecher, ZA 63 (1974) 151 n. 1; Steinkeller, *Sale Documents of the Ur III Period*, FAOS 17 (Stuttgart, 1989) 157 n. 457.

9 The majority of such representations date to the Old Kingdom; some come from the New Kingdom. See W. Helck and E. Otto, eds., *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Band III (1980) 1191-94; I. Hodjash and O. D. Berlev, “A Market-Scene in the Mastaba of *D3d3-m-nḥ* (*Tp-m-nḥ*),” AFO 7 (1980) 31-49; Ch. J. Eyre, “Work in the Old Kingdom,” in *Labor in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by M. A. Powell, AOS 68 (New Haven, 1987), 31-32; idem, “Market Women,” 173-91; B. J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London, 1989), 253-55. I owe all these references to Dr. Mark Lehner.

10 Hodjash and Berlev, “Market Scene,” 48-49.

11 Eyre, “Market Women,” 185.



redistribution.”<sup>12</sup> I believe that these characterizations, like the Egyptian representations of market scenes, are apt descriptions of what the Ur III situation must have been like.

Here it is important to realize that the allotments of barley with which state dependents were regularly alimeted by the state did not — as commonly thought by Assyriologists — constitute a rationing system properly speaking. The use of the term “rations” to describe these payments is incorrect, since the volumes of grain distributed in this way vastly exceeded the dietary requirements of their recipients. Because of this, they should more accurately be classified as salaries. Although the principal part of such a barley salary — called *še-ba* in Sumerian — would be consumed as food by its intended recipient and his dependents, enough of it was left to be used as a means of exchange to acquire other foodstuffs and whatever else might have been needed by the household.

### More about the Quota System

The Ur III quota system operated across the board, as is demonstrated by the examples of other professional groups. One such group were the foresters, who were concerned with the management and exploitation of the thickets or copses growing along rivers and canals.<sup>13</sup> Like the craftsmen, the foresters also operated in family groups. And they too worked for the state during half of the year. Most of their labor was spent on producing the prescribed volumes of forest products, which included, apart from timber, various grasses and a spice-plant called *gazi* in Sumerian (*kasû* in Akkadian), though occasionally they were assigned to other tasks as well. In exchange for their services, they received barley, oil, and wool salaries and were provided with the plots of arable land. It is virtually certain that during the remainder of the year these individuals worked exclusively for themselves, harvesting the same kinds of products. Although explicit information again is lacking, we may assume that they exchanged or sold those products on local markets. We even have some suggestive data that one of the parties involved in such transactions were the merchants — about whom I will talk shortly. The evidence in question is the fact that is one of the items appearing in the accounts of merchants is the *gazi* plant, which, as I noted earlier, is known to have been harvested by the foresters.

Another professional group that worked according to the quota system were the shepherds. The Ur III shepherds were part of a contractual arrangement with

12 Ibid., p. 188.

13 See Steinkeller, “The Foresters of Umma: Toward a Definition of Ur III Labor,” in *Labor in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by M. A. Powell, AOS 68 (New Haven, 1987), 73-115; idem, “Archival Practices at Babylonia in the Third Millennium,” in *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World*, ed. by M. Brosius (Oxford, 2003), 49-52; W. Sallaberger, “Ur III-Zeit,” in *Mesopotamien: Akkade-Zeit und Ur III-Zeit*, ed. by P. Attinger and M. Wäffler, OBO 160/3 (Fribourg, 1999), 326-30.

the state, in which temple- or state-owned herds of sheep and cattle were consigned to them for herding.<sup>14</sup> According to this arrangement, the shepherds took care of such herds on a nearly permanent basis, and were obliged to deliver to the state prescribed quantities of livestock and dairy products. Once this obligation was met, they were free to keep the surpluses for themselves.

As we shall see later on, still other examples in this connection were the fishermen, the collectors of salt, and the growers of fruit-trees and vegetables.

### The Merchants

But by far the best illustration of the dual nature of the Ur III economy, that particular mixture of public and private elements, is provided by merchants or traders (Sumerian *dam-gàr*).<sup>15</sup> As everybody else in the Ur III state, merchants enjoyed the status of *éren*, i.e., state dependents.<sup>16</sup> As such, they held plots of subsistence land and were beneficiaries of other forms of alimentation by the state.<sup>17</sup> Their work for the state entailed the procurement of foreign goods and,

14 See R. K. Englund, "Regulating Dairy Production in the Ur III Period," *Or. NS* (1995) 383-84, 388, 394.

15 The basic studies of the Ur III merchants and their activities are H. Neumann, "Handel und Händler in der Zeit der III. Dynastie von Ur," *AOF* 6 (1979) 15-67; idem, "Zu den Geschäften des Kaufmanns Ur-Dumuzida aus Umma," *AOF* 20 (1993) 69-86; D. C. Snell, *Ledgers and Prices: Early Mesopotamian Merchant Accounts*, YNER 8 (New Haven, 1982); S. J. Garfinkle, *Private Enterprise in Babylonia at the End of the Third Millennium BC* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2000); Steinkeller, "Archival Practices," 52-55; Van Driel, *Elusive Silver: In Search of a Role for a Market in an Agrarian Environment Aspects of Mesopotamia's Society* (Leiden, 2002), 3-30.

While it has been slow in coming, the recognition that "public" and "private" are largely useless categories when applied to the activities of Ur III merchants is gaining more and more ground in Assyriology. See J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London, 1992), 219-21, and, especially, M. Jursa, *Prywatyzacja i zysk?: Przedsiębiorcy a gospodarka instytucjonalna w Mezopotamii od 3 do 1 tysiąclecia przed Chr.* (Poznań, 2002), 66-75. Of particular relevance here is the following statement by Jursa: "Thus, economically speaking, it is not very important if the merchants are considered state agents or private entrepreneurs; they were both, in a certain sense, and elements of a planned economy in their dealings with the institutional sector at home blended easily with free, cost-conscious and profit oriented trading otherwise" (*ibid.*, 69 — the English translation kindly supplied by Jursa).

16 The Umma tax-census TCL 5 6166 i 6-7 includes, among the 3,610 tax-paying *éren* listed there, sixty-seven merchants. Cf. also below n. 20. A detailed study of this document will be offered by this author elsewhere.

17 Plots of the subsistence land (*ŠUKU*) in the hands of merchants are documented at Nippur (Owen NATN 166) and Lagaš (MVN 7 274:15; MVN 11 65:15 [the holder is a *ga-eš<sub>8</sub>*, "seafaring merchant"]; ASJ 4 [1982] 118-19 no. 19 iv 8'-9'). From Umma, we have the records of rental land (*GÁNA apin-lá*) leased to the merchants (Jones-Snyder SET 243 i 22-23, ii 47, iv 97-99; Watson Birmingham 2 234:9; MVN 16 682:3-6, rev. 1'-2'; MVN 18 374 iii' 4'-8'; etc.). Since the leasing of rental land was generally restricted to the holders of subsistence plots, one can be certain that the Umma merchants held *ŠUKU* plots as well. At the very least, it is known that they had such plots at Nippur (Owen NATN 166:13'-15', discussed



even more importantly, the distribution throughout the state economy of perishables and other commodities that could not efficiently be handled by the central redistributive mechanisms.<sup>18</sup> The same individuals, in their free time so to speak, were involved in purely private commercial activities, such as money-lending and, possibly, a limited form of retail trade.

Since the merchants offer a wonderful insight into how the Ur III economy was organized and operated, it will be instructive to examine their activities in detail. The best textual evidence on these professionals comes from the city of Umma, the capital of the one of the largest provinces of the Ur III state.<sup>19</sup> The Umma government employed some thirty merchants,<sup>20</sup> whose main task was to procure for it a wide assortment of goods not available locally, and to facilitate the distribution of these goods throughout the provincial economy. In addition, the merchants participated in the collection and distribution of various local products (primarily perishables), such as fruits, vegetables, salt, animal fats, and fish, a task that was too small and cumbersome for the central administration to handle.<sup>21</sup> Since this particular facet of the merchants' activities is of particular interest for the question of the existence of a "market economy" in Ur III times, we shall examine it in detail later on. First, however, a description of the merchants' standing vis-à-vis the local government and of their *modus operandi* is in order.

below p. 96). For other forms of the state alimentation, note, for example, Sigrist Rochester 160 ii 32, where the well-known Umma merchant Šeš-kala receives a garment as part of general garment-distribution.

- 18 It may be taken for granted that, apart from providing those professional services, the merchants were also required to make corvée-labor contributions to the state. Like the other types of the higher-ranking state dependents, they would usually comply with this requirement by providing substitutes. However, in some instances they apparently contributed such labor themselves, as in Sigrist Yale 829, where the merchant Ur-Ištaran is classified as a half-time worker. Significantly, the person taking charge of Ur-Ištaran in this text is Ur-Dumuzida, who very likely is identical with the well-known Umma merchant of that name.
- 19 For the Umma merchants, see the bibliography listed in n. 15. However, none of these studies may be considered fully adequate, since all them — beginning with Snell's *Ledgers and Prices* and ending with Van Driel's *Elusive Silver* — treat their subject in a strictly monographic way, i.e., in isolation from the overall structure of Umma's economy and society. As I believe, no understanding of these professionals' activities (both public and private) is possible without considering the entire picture of their interactions with the local government and the Umma society at large. Such a study is yet to be written. Much of the ensuing discussion of the Umma merchants goes back to my unpublished paper "Commercial Activity in the Ur III Period and the Issue of Prices," read at the 9th International Congress of Economic History, Bern, 1986. A summary of this paper was offered by Neumann, "Ur-Dumuzida aus Umma," 73-76.
- 20 This estimate is based on the mentions of merchants in the records of the Fiscal Office. I assume that the figure of sixty-seven merchants given in TCL 5 6166 (see above n. 16) includes the junior members of their families.
- 21 Yet another service that the merchants provided to the Umma government was their participation in the collection and delivery of the bala taxes. This aspect of their activities is poorly known and deserves a detailed study. See, provisionally, Van Driel, *Elusive Silver*, 7; T. M. Sharlach, *Provincial Taxation and the Ur III State* (in press).

## The Merchants and the Umma Institutional Economy

In their dealings with the Umma government, the merchants were directly subordinated to the so-called Fiscal Office, which was concerned with the collection of taxes and very likely served as the command center of the entire provincial economy.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between the merchants and the Fiscal Office was governed by the following basic principles. The Fiscal Office had a standing account with each merchant, into which it periodically funneled bulk capital, in the form of grain, silver, and wool. The transfers of capital were duly recorded in sealed receipt tablets, which were retained by the Fiscal Office. At the same time and completely independently, various offices and departments of the Umma economy made withdrawals, according to their particular needs, of the goods that the merchant kept on hand in his warehouse. These transactions were recorded in another set of sealed receipts, which were kept by the merchant. At yearly or shorter time intervals the merchant presented the receipts in his possession to the Fiscal Office. The Fiscal Office then digested its own set of receipts,<sup>23</sup> calculated the total of the advanced capital against the merchant's expenditures, and balanced his account. The end product was a document commonly known as a "merchant balanced account," numerous examples of which survive.

Apart from this standard procedure, in which the movement of capital and the movement of goods proceeded in two separate channels, the Fiscal Office could also place specific purchase-orders with the merchant. Such transactions usually involved either non-standard commodities or large volumes of standard wares. The capital advanced to the merchant to make such purchases was sometimes included in the merchant's account, either among his assets<sup>24</sup> or among his debits.<sup>25</sup> In most cases, however, "special orders" were recorded separately, in standard receipt tablets.<sup>26</sup> Those, like the merchant's other receipts, would eventually be digested in the merchant's account among his assets. Also unrelated to the standard procedure were the transactions in which the Fiscal Office

22 See Steinkeller, "Archival Practices," 42.

23 This was done by grouping the receipt tablets according to individual recipients. See MVN 15:127:1, which concerns the receipts of an administrator named Ur-Šulpae: a list of commodities kišib Ur-<sup>d</sup>Šul-pa-è ki dam-gàr-ne-ta Ur-<sup>d</sup>Nun-gal ba-an-dib, "the receipt-tablets of Ur-Šulpae (i.e., tablets recording the disbursements of the commodities in question to Ur-Šulpae) Ur-Nungal (received) from the merchants (and) passed further on (in the accounting chain)" (MVN 15 127:1-40). Cf. Sigrist Syracuse 483; AUCT 1 540.

24 See, e.g., TCL 5 6056:24-25.

25 See, e.g., Chiera STA 22 iii 28 - iv 2.

26 A good example here is YOS 4 47, in which the merchants Ur-Dumuzida and Ur-Šulpae, father and son (see MVN 13 860 seal), receive from Lu-kala, the head of the Fiscal Office, 8 1/2 minas of silver to buy gold: 8 1/2 ma-na kug-babbar kug-zi-ga (for kug-sig<sub>17</sub>) sa<sub>10</sub>-sa<sub>10</sub>-dè ki Lú-kal-la-ta Ur-<sup>d</sup>Dumu-zi-da ù Ur-<sup>d</sup>Šul-pa-è šu ba-ti. Outside of Umma, such records are MVN 5 281 (100.0.0 še gur níg-sám<sup>am</sup> gi-šè) and Sauren New York Public Library 45 (42 2/3 ma-na 9 gín lá igi-6-gál kug-babbar níg-sám-ma šim-<sup>gis</sup>eren).

consigned to the merchants particular items for sale, the best documented examples here being those dealing with consignments of slaves.<sup>27</sup>

In accordance with the standard Ur III accounting procedure, the receipts that were used to compile merchant balanced accounts would subsequently be passed on to other Umma offices and economic establishments to compile or to verify their own records.<sup>28</sup> At the end of the accounting chain, they would have been sent back to the Fiscal Office, where, after having been sorted according to the merchants' identities, they would have been stored in individual containers, each pertaining to the activities of a single merchant.

In order to make my explanation of the *modus operandi* of the Umma merchants plausible, two points need to be demonstrated: 1) that they owned their own capital; and 2) that they owned (or at last that they had access to) extensive storing facilities. The evidence in support of both points is provided by the Umma text Nikolski 2 447,<sup>29</sup> dated to the eleventh month of Amar-Suen's third regnal

27 See, e.g., 3 1/2 gín kug-babbar sám<sup>am</sup> Nin-ú-šim-e dumu-SAL Al-lu ki Lugal-sig<sub>5</sub> dam-gàr-ta mu-DU (JRAS 1939, BM 105412:1-4); 10 gín kug-babbar lá-NI su-ga Inim-ma-ni-zi dam-gàr sám<sup>am</sup> sag ... kug mu-DU (MVN 9 212:6-10); 8 [gí]n kug sám<sup>am</sup> árad ki Šeš-kal-la-ta (Nikolski 2 401:8-9).

28 See the sources cited above in n. 23.

29 See Englund, *Organisation und Verwaltung der Ur III-Fischerei*, BBVO 10 (Berlin, 1990), 41-42, for an edition and translation. Cf. also Jursa, *Prywatyzacja i zysk?*, 70. I offer herewith a new edition, since, as believe, my interpretation furthers the understanding of this exceedingly important source:

- 1) 45.0.0 še gur lugal
- 2) 1 dug-kur-ku-dù ì
- 3) kug-bi (blank)  
(space)
- 4) é A-kal-la kur-gá-ra-ta
- 5) 3 dug-kur-ku-dù ì
- 6) 1 pisan dub šu
- 7) 1 pisan im dub sila-a gál-la
- 8) dam Ur-Ab-zu-ka-ke<sub>4</sub> in-du<sub>8</sub>
- 9) é-ganba Ur-sila-luh-ka-ta
- 10) ní-gur<sub>11</sub> Ur-sila-luh-ka
- 11) Ur-Ab-zu ù dam Ur-Ab-zu-ka-ke<sub>4</sub>
- 12) á bí-dar ba-an-de<sub>6</sub>
- 13) lú-kin-gi<sub>4</sub>-a énsi-ka-ke<sub>4</sub>
- 14) é-ganba Ur-sila-luh-<sup>7</sup>ha?!<sup>7</sup>-ka
- 15) kišib mi-ni-gá-ar
- 16) dam Ur-Ab-zu-ka-ke<sub>4</sub> in-du<sub>8</sub>
- 17) ba-gi-in
- 18) igi énsi-ka-šè
- 19) igi Ur-kug-nun-na dumu Árad-da-ni-šè
- 20) igi A-kal-la nu-bànda-šè
- 21) igi Lú-<sup>d</sup>Nanna dumu Inim-<sup>d</sup>Šára-šè
- 22) igi Sipad-kug-ge dumu Ír-hu-la-šè
- 23) igi Ur-<sup>gis</sup>gigir nu-bànda-šè
- 24) igi Inim-<sup>d</sup>Inana dumu Gu-du-du-šè
- 25) igi Ur-<sup>d</sup>Suen dumu Gu-du-du-šè
- 26) igi Gù-dé-a nu-bànda-šè

year, which records a legal case concerning the estate of the merchant Ur-silaluh. As one can conclude from the Ur-silaluh's balanced account which was prepared, subsequent to his death, by the Fiscal Office in the thirteenth month of Amar-Suen's second year,<sup>30</sup> Ur-silaluh must have died sometime during the year Amar-Suen 2. Nikolski 2 447 thus deals with the events that happened subsequently. According to that source, a certain Ur-Abzu and his unnamed wife seized and carried away the property of Ur-silaluh, which had been kept in his warehouse or store (*é-ganba*). The property in question included forty-five bushels of barley and four kurkudu jars of oil, as well as two containers with tablets. The wife of Ur-Abzu later released the confiscated goods.<sup>31</sup> Those were subsequently put back in Ur-silaluh's warehouse under the seal of the representative of the governor of Umma. Finally, the case was investigated and verified in the presence of the governor and

27) *igi Lú-<sup>d</sup>Nanna ugula dam-gàr-ne-šè*

28) *ba-gi-in*

(space)

29) *iti-pap-ú-e mu kug gu-za <sup>d</sup>En-líl-lá ba-dím (AS 3/xi)*

45 bushels of barley (and) 1 k. jar of oil, its silver value being unknown, (have been released) from the house of A-kala, the minstrel.

(In addition), the wife of Ur-Abzu has released (from her own house?) 3 k. jars of oil, 1 basket with the cancelled/old tablets, (and) 1 basket with the tablets (recording) outstanding transactions.

Ur-Abzu and the wife of Ur-Abzu sequestered (these goods originally) and took them away from the warehouse of Ur-silaluh, from among the property of Ur-silaluh.

The messenger of the governor (of Umma) has now sealed the warehouse of Ur-silaluh.

It has been verified that the wife of Ur-Abzu has indeed released (and returned all these goods).

All this has been verified before 10 witnesses [who include the governor of Umma and the foreman of the merchants]. Date.

Although A. Falkenstein, *Gerichtsurkunden* 3, 90, and, following him, PSD A/2, 50-51, assume that *á ... dar* means "to seize illegally," the meaning of this expression is "to sequester" or the neutral "to take hold of." This is demonstrated conclusively by the texts *Forde Nebraska* 1 = MVN 4 71 (+ *Yildiz-Gomi Umma* V 3119, matching one of the entries of these two sources), in which various royal officials sequester (i.e., seize lawfully) reeds, willow and poplar wood, and *bur-zi* vessels from the governor of Umma. The sense "to sequester" is also clear in the following example: 100.0.0 *še gur lugal <sup>d</sup>Ir-ra-ku-ra-ad-e á bí-in-dar <sup>d</sup>Ir-ra-ku-<ra>-ad-e Ur-<sup>d</sup>Li<sub>9</sub>-si<sub>4</sub>-ra su-su-dam*, "Erra-qurad has sequestered 100 bushels of barley; Erra-qurad will now restore (this barley) to Ur-Lisi (i.e., the governor of Umma)"; seal: *<sup>d</sup>Ir-ra-[ku-ra-ad] / zadim <sup>d</sup>Nin-líl-lá / lú-DUN / <sup>d</sup>En-líl-lá*, "Erra-qurad, the lapidary of Ninlil, the subordinate of Enlil" (*Sigrist Yale* 2199:1-6 and seal). Cf. also *še á dar-ra* in *Forde Nebraska* 6:15.

30 Snell, *Ledgers and Prices*, pl. I no. 1.

31 Since no mention is made of Ur-Abzu, he was either no longer alive at that time or, more likely, away from Umma. It is tempting to speculate that Ur-Abzu too was a merchant; a merchant of that name is in fact documented at Umma (*Yildiz-Gomi Umma* V 3336:4 [*Šu-Suen* 3/iv]). If so, Ur-silaluh and Ur-Abzu may have been partners, which would explain why the latter had legal claims to Ur-silaluh's estate. The seized property was stored by Ur-Abzu's wife in two different locations, one of which appears to have been her own residence. The other location was the house of the minstrel A-kala, who may have been her relative or acquaintance.

various other high officials. The latter included, quite revealingly, the “foreman of the merchants” (ugula dam-gàr-ne).

Given the fact that at the time of his death Ur-silaluh owed only two shekels and 140 grains of silver to the Fiscal Office,<sup>32</sup> the goods stored in his warehouse unquestionably represented his own property. Since Nikolski 2 447 mentions only the goods that were seized by Ur-Abzu and his wife, it is possible that Ur-silaluh’s total property was considerably larger and of more complex composition.

In the foregoing discussion I have assumed that the Fiscal Office kept a separate account with each of the merchants who worked for the Umma government. But this may have been true only as far as the accounting procedure was concerned. It appears that, in reality, in their dealings with the Fiscal Office the merchants acted as a corporate body, which was collectively responsible for all merchant transactions.

The data at hand do not indicate that the Umma merchants shared a common warehouse. Rather, as Nikolski 2 447 suggests, each of them owned separate storing facilities.<sup>33</sup> There are also strong reasons to think that they carried on their business activity as families centered on individual households.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that their resources were (at least occasionally) pooled together,<sup>35</sup> and that the Fiscal Office contracted with them collectively. For the last point, note that in certain instances the merchants are referred to not individually by name but by the collective dam-gàr-ne.<sup>36</sup> This approach was advantageous both to the Fiscal Office and the merchants, as it assured that the latter could always satisfy the current needs of the Umma government. For the purposes of accountability, however, it was necessary for the Fiscal Office to balance merchants’ accounts on an individual basis.

In fact, the Umma merchants appear to have been associated in a guild or a similar type of corporate body, which would explain why the local government treated them collectively. The existence of this organization is strongly indicated by the presence in Umma of an official called “foreman of the merchants” (ugula dam-gàr-ne) (see Nikolski 2 447 discussed earlier). An Ur III tablet of uncertain

32 Snell, *Ledgers and Prices*, pl. I no. 1:19.

33 That the Ur III merchants owned private storing facilities is further shown by the Lagaš text TLB 3 53, which concerns a huge volume of wool (14 talents and 33 minas) that was withdrawn from the house of the merchant Lu-Kinunir.

34 It is also known that the Umma merchants owned their own ships, since on occasion they are reimbursed by the Umma administration for the use of their ships. See, e.g., Jean Šumer et Akkad LXXVI:134 iv 8-10: 9.4.0 gur á má dam-gàr-ne kišib Lugal-ba-an-šag<sub>5</sub>. Further, note TCL 5 6047 iv 3-5, where the merchant Ur-Dumuzida sells a large ship, apparently to the military organization (1 má 60.0.0 gur Ur-<sup>d</sup>Dumu-zi-da dam-gàr-šè ba-an-ši-sa<sub>10</sub> má éren-na i-me-a Šu-<sup>d</sup>Nin-mug-ga nam-érim-e ba-sum).

35 See, e.g., Sauren New York Library 335, where the merchant Ur-Dumuzida delivers to the Fiscal Office silver on behalf of his colleagues Lu-Inana and Lugal-niglagare.

36 As in Sigrist Syracuse 483, MVN 15 127, and Watson Birmingham 2 134.



provenance names a related title *ha-za-núm dam-gàr-ne*, “mayor of the merchants,”<sup>37</sup> showing that similar organizations existed elsewhere in the Ur III state. Such guilds may even have had their own headquarters. This is suggested by the fact that in the Nippur text Owen NATN 511,<sup>38</sup> which records a legal dispute between the merchants Ur-Nuska and Ada’a, the proceedings are said to have taken place in the *é-dam-gàr*, evidently the headquarters of the Nippur guild.

We may speculate that these merchant organizations were self-governing bodies, which represented the merchants vis-à-vis the local government, regulated the distribution of capital among their members, coordinated their purchasing operations, and mediated conflicts among them. They probably also bore legal responsibility for the actions of their members and vouched for the honesty of prices charged to the state.

Importantly, the membership in such self-governing bodies did not prevent the merchants from being at the same time institutionally tied to the state. Thus the well-known Umma merchant Ur-Dumuzida<sup>39</sup> — and very likely many of his colleagues as well — was a member of the household of the god Šara.<sup>40</sup> In another instance, a source of uncertain provenance divides fourteen merchants (who very likely too had their own organization) into the men of the governor and the dependents of the managers of the temple-households.<sup>41</sup> That a person could have such a “dual” membership should not surprise us; in fact, this situation is absolutely typical of Ur III social conditions. Self-governing organizations like the merchant guilds were in evidence throughout the society, but, as I have stressed elsewhere, such bodies were always embedded in the state organization; they never operated outside of it.<sup>42</sup>

Since the merchants were institutionally part of the provincial organization, it follows — if only from the Weberian model! — that they also fell under the administration of the central government. This is demonstrated by the Nippur text NATN 166, which lists subsistence plots of the merchants from Adab, Umma, and Uruk. This source shows, firstly, that the merchant guilds of those three provinces had branch offices in Nippur — a point of considerable interest in itself. More important, however, is the fact that the plots in question must have been direct grants from the state, since they involved non-Nippureans. The obvious implication of this is that the Ur III merchant, apart from working on behalf of his native province, provided similar services to the central government.

37 Steinkeller, *Sale Documents*, 324-25 no. 125:14 (republished by T. Gomi and S. Sato in Gomi-Sato British Museum 220).

38 For this text, see also below p. 97.

39 See Neumann, “Zu den Geschäften des Kaufmanns Ur-Dumuzida aus Umma,” AOF 20 (1993) 69-86.

40 Ur-<sup>d</sup>Šul-pa-<sup>r</sup>ē<sup>1</sup> / dumu Ur-<sup>d</sup>Dumu-zi-da / dam-gàr <sup>d</sup>Šara-<sup>r</sup>ka<sup>1</sup> (MVN 13 860 seal).

41 8 merchants, receiving jointly 168 bushels of sesame, *dam-gàr lú énsi-me<-éš>*, *kišib PN<sub>1</sub>*; 6 merchants, receiving jointly 80 bushels of sesame, *dam-gàr sanga-me-éš*, *kišib PN<sub>2</sub>*; *šu-nígin 248.0.0 <še giš-i> šu-ti-a dam-gàr-e-ne šag<sub>4</sub> é<sup>d</sup>Da-mu* (Sigrist Yale 2219:1-19).

42 See the following description, where “state organization” should be substituted for “temple Millennium Southern Babylonia,” to appear in *Robert McC. Adams Festschrift*, ed. by E. C. Stone (Los Angeles, 2004).



## How the Merchants acquired their Wares

Not surprisingly, the documentation extant bears only on those facets of the merchants' activities in which they directly interacted with the government. There is virtually no information on how they acquired their wares, either local or foreign. In the case of the former, a circumstantial picture may be constructed based on the indirect sources — and I will return to this problem later.

As for the foreign goods, we are in a nearly complete darkness, though it may be assumed — quite confidently, in my view — that the merchants or their agents traveled outside the province (and perhaps even abroad) to obtain them. While no records of trips made by Umma merchants survive, we know that their colleagues from Nippur ventured quite afar. According to the text Owen NATN 551, which records a legal dispute between the merchants Ur-Nuska and Ada'a, both of whom are well-documented as money-lenders at Nippur, Ur-Nuska had sent to Ada'a three minas of silver to purchase 120 bushels of sesame in Zimudar, a locality in the Diyala Region. The text makes it clear that Ada'a stayed at that time in Zimudar, since he communicates with Ur-Nuska through his messenger, a certain Ušpurani.

While discussing long-distance trade, it will be useful to note that an institutional form of long-distance trade also operated in Ur III times. The trader Pu'udu, who shipped barley to Makkan (modern Oman) on behalf of the state<sup>43</sup> and supplied precious stones to the court of Ur,<sup>44</sup> appears to have run an equivalent of the modern foreign-trade ministry. He had under his command an extensive navy organization, which included eight “captains of big ships” (nu-bànda má-gal-gal-m[e]) and six “officers in charge of sixty men (each)” (ugula [géš]-[da-me]) (meaning the combined personnel of 360 men).<sup>45</sup> Pu'udu was a person of exceedingly high standing, as is underscored by the fact that his son Kug-Nanna appears to have married into the royal family.<sup>46</sup> Another son, Lu-Enlila, held the title of “sea-faring merchant” (ga-eš<sub>8</sub> a-ab-ba-ka) (which he apparently inherited from his father) and officiated as a judge at Ur.<sup>47</sup> Lu-Enlila's seal<sup>48</sup> was of the extremely rare in-na-ba type, which represented a personal gift from the king. Since in a text from Ur Lu-Enlila pays a large volume of grain to the state as

43 600.0.0 še gur gún Má-gan-šè ki énsi Gír-su<sup>ki</sup>-ta Pù-ú-du šu ba-ti kišib Ur-gi<sub>6</sub>-par<sub>4</sub> dumu Šu-na-ka ì-dub A-šag<sub>4</sub>-NI-zi-na (ITT 2 776:1-8).

44 1 pair of fancy sandals presented to Pù-ú-du ud<sup>na4</sup> duh-ši-a mu-ni-ku<sub>4</sub>-ra-a, “when he brought in the duhšia gems” (MVN 13 672:1-3). Cf. Steinkeller, ZA72 (1982) 249 n. 40.

45 M. Hilgert, *Drehem Administrative Documents from the Reign of Šulgi*, OIP 115 (Chicago, 1998), 161-62 no. 210:1-18.

46 A circumstantial case to that effect is presented by the following set of data, which suggest that Kug-Nanna married the princess Geme-Nanna: Géme-<sup>d</sup>Nanna dumu-lugal (CTMMA 17:16 [Amar-Suen 4/vii]); McNeil Messenger Texts, 135, 139 NBC 782:9 [Amar-Suen 8/ix]; Géme-<sup>d</sup>Nanna é-gi<sub>4</sub>-a Pù-ú-du šag<sub>4</sub> úrim<sup>ki</sup>-ma (PDT 2 1068:2-4 [Šulgi 46/ix]); mu Géme-<sup>d</sup>Nanna é-gi<sub>4</sub>-a Pù-ú-du-šè gir Kug-<sup>d</sup>Nanna sukkal (Legrain TRU 344:6-7 [Amar-Suen 6/iv]); Kug-<sup>d</sup>Nanna dumu Pu-ú-du (PDT 1 691:3 [Šu-Suen 3/ii]).

47 UET 3 41:13 and seal = Steinkeller, *Sale Documents*, 302-03 no. 109.

48 UET 3 41 = Steinkeller, *Sale Documents*, 302-03 no. 109.

the “tithe of sea-faring trade,”<sup>49</sup> some of his foreign ventures were purely private in character. As these data strongly suggest, in the area of long-distance trade too “public” and “private” were two sides of the same coin.<sup>50</sup>

### Merchants’ Independent Economic Activity

Our sources are even more silent as regards the purely private enterprises of the Umma merchants. We can be certain, however, that such activities did exist. As we have seen earlier, in their dealings with the Umma administration the merchants functioned very much like bankers, since the arrangement in question provided them with a constant supply of liquid capital. Although the merchant would have spent most of this capital to keep his warehouse fully stocked, he could use the remainder to finance his own ventures or investments. The most obvious way in which he would put this capital to work was to advance it to private individuals as interest-bearing loans, as was the case during the same period in the city of Nippur. Unfortunately, however, the few private loan documents that come from Umma cannot be linked confidently with any of the known Umma merchants.<sup>51</sup> Chances are, nevertheless, that such documents remain stored in the merchants’ private houses at Umma, which are yet to be excavated.

Significantly, this kind of commercial activity was not an exclusive prerogative of merchants. Across the social and professional spectrum, individuals of means and ambition, such as, for example, a chief shepherd named SI.A-a,<sup>52</sup> enthusiastically — and to all appearances very successfully — engaged in money-lending, as well as in a peculiar, but not unique to the Ur III period, type of real-estate speculation.<sup>53</sup>

### Merchants’ Participation in Local Trade

While banking operations may have been one element of the merchants’ “private” activities, another such element — and possibly an equally important one — was

49 𒀭240?𒀭+30.0.0 še gur lu[gal] mu-D[U] 𒀭zag-10𒀭 nam-ga-eš<sub>8</sub> a-a[b-ba(-ka)] ki Lú!-<sup>d</sup>En-líl-lá dumu Pù-ú-du-[ta] (UET 9 962:1-5). Other sources concerning the activities of Lu-Enlila are UET 3 702, 704, 751, 1171, 1511, 1666, and 1689, the last four of which were discussed by A. L. Oppenheim, *JAOS* 74 (1954) 13.

50 Here note that the seafaring merchants (ga-eš<sub>8</sub>) too held subsistence plots, which proves that (at least some of them) were state dependents. See MVN 11 65:15 cited above in n. 17.

51 The best candidates for such documents are YOS 4 54, MVN 15 30, and the unpublished tablet cited below in n. 63, which involve a lender Šeš-kala, who possibly is identical with the Umma merchant of that name. However, since Šeš-kala is an extremely common name, this is far from certain.

52 See Steinkeller, “Money-Lending Practices,” 118-19; Garfinkle, *Private Enterprise*, 45-118.

53 Steinkeller, “Money-Lending Practices,” 118-24.

connected with their handling of the various commodities produced locally,<sup>54</sup> which, as already noted, were mostly perishables, such fish, fats, and various fruits.

Of central importance here is the fact that the suppliers of those commodities were, apparently without an exception, institutionally connected with the Umma government. Among those suppliers were the producers of salt,<sup>55</sup> the growers of fruit-trees, vegetables, herbs, and sesame, the foresters, the processors of fats, and the fishermen, the last supplying, apart from fish and various related products, also bird plumage (pa mušen in Sumerian). All such producers, it needs to be emphasized, were an integral part of the overall economic and social structure, in that they, like the other types of state-dependants, were required to deliver a portion of their particular product to the state and to make corvée-labor contributions; in exchange, they held subsistence fields and received food and other forms of alimentation. As I have stressed elsewhere,<sup>56</sup> the incorporation of such marginal (both in the geographical and social sense) groups into the state structures was a hallmark of the Third Millennium social and economic organization of southern Babylonia, particularly in Ur III times.<sup>57</sup>

As required by their status, the professional groups in question made prescribed deliveries of their products to the local government, more specifically, to Umma's Fiscal Office. There survive many records of such deliveries, among them those of the gazi plant, fish, and salt.<sup>58</sup> It is significant that the same

54 "Locally" means that they were naturally available in southern Babylonia. It should be stressed, however, that most of these products came from marginal ecological niches.

55 D. L. Potts, *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations* (Ithaca, 1997), 105, speculated that "[Amorite] nomadic groups may also have been employed by the Ur III state to gather salt." Cf. also Postgate, *BiOr* 60 (2003) 7. While it is possible (and even likely) that the semi-nomadic Amorites with no institutional ties to the state were actively involved in salt-gathering in Ur III times, and that the state did obtain some salt from such groups occasionally, it is notable that the regular suppliers of salt to the Umma government were firmly part of the state organization, as demonstrated by their being holders of ŠUKU plots and tax-payers (see below n. 59). This does not mean that they *could not have been* of Amorite extraction. Two of the known salters bore names — Gu'ugug and Na'u'a (see below n. 59) — that are certainly foreign though not demonstrably Amorite. It is also certain (because of their trade) that those salters lived and operated in a marginal geographical area, but this did not make them *social* outsiders.

56 "Land-Tenure Conditions," 291-93.

57 It is unlikely that this situation continued into Old Babylonian and later times.

58 See, e.g., N. Koslova, *Ur III-Texte der St. Petersburger Eremitage*, SANTAG 6 (Wiesbaden, 2000), 259-70 no. 340, a balanced account of the spices, onions, fish, and fowl handled by the Fiscal Office (nig-ŠID-ak mun-gazi Gu-du-du iti 12-kam). The income section of that source lists the gazi plant delivered by the foresters (ii 29 - iii 1); the gazi, spices, onions, and fowl delivered by the gardeners and other individuals (iii 2 - iv 9, iv 18 - v 2); and the fish supplied by the fishermen (iv 10-18). For other deliveries of the gazi by the foresters, corresponding closely to the amount mentioned in the account just cited, see Steinkeller, "Foresters," 92, 96, 110-11 no. 42. Similar regular deliveries came from the Umma producers of salt (for whom see also the following note). See BIN 5 166 (Šulgi 46), 169 (Šulgi 48), and MVN 20 66 (Amar-Suen 1), where the unnamed "salters" (lú-mun) deliver in each case ca. 1 bushel of salt to the well-known Umma administrator Lanimu.

professionals also make payments in silver in lieu of their products, likewise to the Fiscal Office.<sup>59</sup> Since the amounts of silver involved are consistently high, it is unlikely that these payments<sup>60</sup> represented a tax or some other due levied additionally on the products in question. We have to assume, therefore, is that the quota owed the state is likewise meant in such instances, indicating, in turn, that

59 Among the contributors of these payments, the best-documented ones are the producers of salt. A salter named Gu'ugug paid his share, designated as "the silver of the salt," over a period of nine years: 11 1/4 shekels in Amar-Suen 8 in lieu of the payment due for the year Amar-Suen 7 (MVN 1 247:1-2, 5-6); 2 shekels in Šu-Suen 1 as a repayment of the outstanding balance (Nikolski 2 400:4-5); 15 shekels in Šu-Suen 2 (Sigrist Yale 1275); and 10 shekels in Šu-Suen 6 (Jean Šumer et Akkad XCVI:56 lines 1-2). Note that in Sigrist Rochester 160 ii 33 the same Gu'ugug is allotted a single garment. Other known salters are Na'u'a, whose payments are documented for the years Šulgi 37, 40 and 41 in the amounts of 3, 1, and 3 shekels respectively (MVN 14 26; Sigrist Syracuse 12); and Lu-Enlila, who paid 10 shekels for the year Amar-Suen 7 (MVN 1 247:3-6). In other instances the payers are simply identified by their professional name lú-mun, "salters" (Sigrist Princeton 541:9-10 [10 shekels]; WZKM 59/60 [1963/64] 111 no. 7 [10 shekels]; BIN 5 109:1-2 [60 shekels]; BIN 5 304 [40 shekels]). Importantly, in the first two examples the payment is described as kug gún-na, "silver of the tribute/tax." In the case of Gu'ugug, information on his ŠUKU holdings survives. According to *Orient* 21, BM 106075 iii 25, Gu'ugug's share of the produce from his ŠUKU plot was 3 bushels of barley.

Another professional group whose payments are amply documented is the fishermen. For example, a fisherman Hun-DU.DU, who is otherwise known to have been a member of the temple-household of Šara (Hu-DU.DU šu-ku<sub>6</sub> <sup>d</sup>Šára — Sigrist Rochester 160 iv 36-38), delivers 10 shekels of silver as kug ku<sub>6</sub> a-šag<sub>4</sub> <sup>d</sup>Šára, "silver of the fish from the fields of Šara" (BIN 5 109:5-6). He apparently was one of the seven fishermen of Šara that were part of the operation run by the chief fisherman Ur-Suen (AnOr 1 88:326-336). We also know the size of his ŠUKU allotment, which was 9 iku of land (*Orient* 21 BM 105330 iv 27'-28'). Other named fishermen making payments to the Fiscal Office were Lugal-kugani, Lu-duga, Adaga, and the above mentioned Ur-Suen. Lugal-kugani delivered 10 1/3 shekels of silver as kug pa mušen, "silver of the bird plumage" (Nikolski 2 401:11) and [x] minas of silver as kug enkud, "silver of the fisheries inspector" (Sigrist Princeton 541:1-3). The payments of Lu-duga are recorded in VO 8 (1989) pl. XII no. 67:1-2, Watson Birmingham 2 81:1-2, and Watson Birmingham 2 82:9-10, in the amounts of 5 shekels, 12 1/2 shekels and 3? grains, and 4 5/6 shekels of silver respectively. Adaga once delivered 10 shekels of silver (Sauren New York Public Library 100:1-4). As for Ur-Suen, three of his payments are documented: 10 shekels of silver mu ku<sub>6</sub> pa mušen-[šê], "in lieu of the fish (and) bird plumage" (Sauren New York Library 367:1-2); 6 shekels of silver as kug ku<sub>6</sub> A-šag<sub>4</sub>-lá-tur "the silver of the fish of the field Ašag-la-tur" (MVN 14 157:4-6); and 11 2/3 shekels and 24 grains of silver without any designation (MVN 9 212:3-4). We also have information on Ur-Suen's ŠUKU allotment: according to *Orient* 21, BM 105330 iv 31'-33', he held 6 iku of land; his actual harvest share was 10 bushels of barley (*Orient* 21, BM 106075 ii 24).

Similar dues are represented by kug zú-lum(-ma), "silver of the dates" (MVN 14 39; Sigrist Syracuse 413, 416, 421; TCL 5 6045 i 11; Grégoire AAS 67; BIN 5 147; VO 8 [1989] pl. XII no. 66; Touzalin, 455 M 3719, 459 M 3920:1-2; etc.), kug <sup>g</sup>is pèš, "silver of the figs" (Touzalin, 459 M 3920:3, 460 M 3777:3-4); kug <sup>g</sup>is hašhur, "silver of the apples" (Sigrist Princeton 547; TCL 5 6045 i 12), and the deliveries of silver made by the producers of sesame (engar giš-i(-ka)-ke<sub>4</sub>-ne) (Watson Birmingham 2 78; Sigrist Princeton 559; Szlechter TJA, 55 IOS 26, 57 IOS 29; etc.).

60 Englund's speculation, *Ur III-Fischerei*, 162-64, that these are simply silver equivalencies, rather than the actual payments of silver, is without any foundation.

the producer made his payments to the state either in kind or in silver. In the latter case, he undoubtedly had first sold the state's share of his product to a third party, since this is the only way in which he could have obtained silver. As for that third party, it almost certainly was the Umma merchants, for the simple reason that the products in question are identical with the wares handled by the latter.

Tentatively, then, the triangular arrangement between the producer, the merchant, and the Fiscal Office may be reconstructed as follows.

The merchant bought from the producer the bulk of his product, including the share the producer owed to the state. The equivalent of that share, converted into silver was subsequently paid — either by the producer himself or (more likely) the merchant<sup>61</sup> — to Umma's Fiscal Office. As for the merchant's purchases, only the state's share of the product he acquired in this way represented his true investment, since the balance of it he would "resell" to the Fiscal Office, apparently for the same price he had paid to the producer. To describe it more correctly, he would be reimbursed for those purchases by the Fiscal Office.<sup>62</sup>

Since the goods acquired in this fashion by the merchants would be withdrawn by various Umma offices in due course, the merchants simply represented an instrument by which Umma's central administration purchased the surplus of these particular products from its own dependants, and then distributed it throughout the local economy. The fact remains, however, that a transfer of money (be it silver or commodities) to private individuals did take place, leaving in the hands of the latter substantial liquid capital.

It is also possible that Umma's institutional economy consistently used up less of the goods in question than the totals acquired by the merchants. If so, the merchants would have enough of such products left to them to sell them on a local market — the purchasers being, of course, mainly the members of Umma's socio-economic organization. Assuming that they sold for more than they had paid for

61 This depends on the medium in which the merchant paid the producer. If silver was involved (which is doubtful, though not impossible), the payer could have been the producer himself. Note, however, that in at least one instance the payer of such dues definitely was the merchant: 5 gín kug zú-lum ki Ur-<sup>d</sup>Utu dam-gâr-ta (VO 8 [1989] pl. XII no. 66:1-2).

62 This may be illustrated by the following hypothetical example, involving a salter whose total capacity production is 300 minas of salt. Assuming that the state's cut was 33% (which is highly probable, though not supportable with the data in hand), then what the salter owes to the state is 100 minas of salt. The merchant buys the entire product for 30 shekels of silver — at the standard ratio of 1 shekel of silver per 10 minas of salt (Snell, *Ledgers and Prices*, 157-58). Either he or the salter himself then pays 10 shekels of silver to the Fiscal Office in lieu of the 33% cut. This leaves the salter with an income of 20 shekels of silver (or its equivalent in barley or other commodities, depending on how the price was paid). The merchant subsequently distributes 200 minas of salt among the various Umma offices, for which he is reimbursed with 20 shekels of silver by the Fiscal Office. The remaining 100 minas of salt represent his own investment; he may sell them either to the Fiscal Office (apparently at no profit) or on a local market (presumably at profit). The last point depends on how much salt Umma's institutional economy requires and on how much salt the salter is able to produce. If the latter exceeds the former, then the merchant is left with a surplus that he may sell to "private" individuals.



— and this is the scenario I favor<sup>63</sup> — this activity would provide them with yet another source of sizable income.

### Market Economy in Ur III Times?

With all of the capital that was readily available to a large section of Umma's society — coming from their salaries paid in barley (*še-ba*) and/or the income they derived from the sale of their surplus products — the retail trade of the sort I have described could have been quite substantial. All in all, this would mean that a significant volume of trading took place outside of the auspices of the central government, in particular if, as I argued earlier, a lot of barter activity was carried out independently of the merchants.

If we now compare the Ur III situation with that obtaining for the following, i.e., Old Babylonian period, the most dramatic difference is that, unlike in Ur III times and earlier, in the Old Babylonian period the crown was no longer directly involved in agricultural production. Whereas in the Ur III state and earlier the whole agriculture cycle, from seeding down to the collection of harvest, was carried out by state institutions, in Old Babylonian times that task had been farmed out to private entrepreneurs. From now on, these professionals, who were clearly linear — and possibly even genetic — descendants of the Ur III merchants, take care of the whole operation. In this way, the proportions between the public and the private components of the economy had changed quite significantly; in comparison with the preceding period, in Old Babylonian times the area of private activity was significantly larger. But the nature of the relationship between the two components remained the same. The Old Babylonian kingdom (or kingdoms, to be more exact) too was a patrimonial state. The merchants that took care of the agricultural production on behalf of the state were,

63 One may speculate that the merchant was entitled by law to a margin roughly equivalent to the interest he charged on silver and grain, i.e., 20% and 33% respectively. It is significant that the Ur III sources sometimes talk of the *maš dam-gàr*, “merchant's interest” without naming any specific rate. See, e.g., YOS 4 7:6; MVN 11 162:2, 8. There also existed the “king's interest” (possibly 10%, identical with the tithe) which was apparently lower than the “merchant's interest,” as is suggested by the following loan document: 1 1/2 *gín kug-babbar* / *ki Šeš-kal-la-ta* / 1 1/2 *gín kug-babbar* / *ki Inim-Šá-ra-ta* / *Lugal-níg-lagar-e šu ba-ti* / *iti-nesag-šè<sup>1</sup> maš lugal* / *i-gá-gá ù-da* (syllabic for *ud-da*?) *di-da dib maš dam-gàr gá-gá-dam* / *iti-še-gur<sub>10</sub>-kud* / *mu En-mah-gal-an-na en<sup>d</sup>Nanna ba-hun* / seal of *Lugal-níg-lagar-e dumu Al-NI-<sup>1</sup>..., “Lugal-niglagare received 1 1/2 shekels of silver from Šeš-kala (and) 1 1/2 shekels of silver from Inim-šara. Until the month Nesag (he will repay it and) he will add the ‘king's interest.’ (He swore) to add the ‘merchant's interest’ if he enters a legal dispute (regarding this loan); date; seal (an unpublished tablet in the collection of the Museum of Primitive Art and Culture, Peace Dale, Rhode Island, cited courtesy of Steven W. Cole). Thus, the rate of the merchant's interest not only was standard but also recognized and regulated by the state. The margin that the merchant could charge was likely set by the state as well. By analogy with loans that margin too may have been known as “merchant's interest,” though I cannot substantiate this supposition with any certain examples.*



like their Ur III counterparts, state dependents, whose households, as in the Ur III period, were subordinated to that of the king. This made them an integral part of the patrimonial structure. Apart from being involved in private business activities, these individuals provided a variety of services to the crown, not only as commercial agents, but also as high officials of the state.<sup>64</sup>

But let us return to the Ur III economy. As we have seen, the presence in it of various forms of private economic activity is crystal clear. The question must be asked therefore: are these features sufficient grounds for characterizing the economy of Ur III times as a market economy? I do not think so. In a minimal form, markets existed in all ancient societies, as well as in the so-called primitive cultures of more recent times. This is an undisputed fact. Even Karl Polanyi eventually acknowledged the presence of some market-style economy in the Ancient Near East.<sup>65</sup>

I believe that Fernand Braudel was right on the target when he said that “Historically, one can speak of a market economy, in my view, when prices in the markets of a given area fluctuate in unison, a phenomenon the more characteristic since it may occur over a number of different jurisdictions or sovereignties. In this sense, there was a market economy well before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — the first in all history ..., to experience the self-regulating economy. Prices have fluctuated since ancient times; by the twelfth century they were fluctuating in unison throughout Europe ... That said, I would not claim that this market economy, reasonably approximating to fair competition, covered the entire economy, far from it. Nor does it do so today any more than yesterday, although the scale is now different, and quite other reasons are responsible ... What is certain is that alongside the ‘non-markets’ beloved of Polanyi, there always have been exchanges exclusively for money, however little. In rather minimal form perhaps, markets nevertheless existed in very ancient times within a single village or group of villages — the market being a sort of itinerant village, as the fair was a sort of traveling town. But the decisive step in this long history was taken when the *town* appropriated these hitherto modest little markets. It absorbed them and inflated them to its own dimensions, in return having to accept the demands they made on it. The important development was surely the launching on to economic circuits of the towns *as heavy units*. The *urban* market may have been invented by the Phoenicians. Certainly the Greek city-states of about the same period all had a market on the *agora*, the central square; they also invented or at any rate propagated money, which clearly furthered the career of the market, if it was the *sine qua non* of its existence.”<sup>66</sup>

64 This point has been demonstrated very convincingly by Ch. Dyckhoff, *Das Haushaltsbuch des Balmunamḫe* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Universität München, 1999), on the example of the famous businessman and royal official Balmunamḫe.

65 *The Livelihood of Man* (New York, 1977).

66 *Civilization and Capitalism: 15th - 18th Century*, Vol. 2: *The Wheels of Commerce* (New York, 1982), 227-28. First published in France under the title *Les jeux de l'échange* (Paris, 1979).

When we look at the Ur III economy, and the ancient Mesopotamian economy more broadly, there is some evidence of the fluctuation of prices, but no indication that they ever fluctuated in unison over a larger geographical area. There was some retail activity, but this activity was miniscule in comparison with the state-run exchanges. Also very significantly, there was a complete absence of what could be described as a labor market. These facts make it most unlikely that the label “market economy,” at least in its orthodox sense of self-regulating economy, could in any way be applicable to what existed in the Ur III period. At the same time, one must acknowledge the presence in the Ur III economy of various market-like reflexes or behaviors.

Because of this, I submit — again following Braudel — that we should think of the market economy “as being built up step by step.”<sup>67</sup> And I would argue that the task facing the historian of ancient economies is to try to trace the precise course of that development: from the proto-manifestations of market forces, through the various intermediate stages (such as the urban market), down to the self-regulating or free market. In this undertaking one needs to concentrate on those features that are characteristic and unique to each historical situation, in order to capture its specificity. In my view, this is the only heuristically valid approach, if one is authentically interested in learning about history past.

Of course, one might alternatively ignore the peculiar and unique and focus instead on the similarities and commonalties. The latter approach could possibly lead to a superficial conclusion that all of the societies of the Ancient Near East had free market economies. Such a conclusion, however, would not only be a gross simplification but would also make no contribution to furthering our understanding of the history of economic behavior. As I strongly believe, that is the goal we should be after.

67 *Ibid.*, 228.