VILLAGE AND RURAL SETTLEMENT IN THE EARLY NEAR EAST: AN ESSAY DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF ROBERT AND LINDA BRAIDWOOD

YAKIN DOĞU'DA İLK DEVİRLERDE KÖY VE KIRSLAL YERLEŞME: ROBERT VE LINDA BRAIDWOOD'UN ANISINA BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

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background mentioned before, there is a danger always inherent in all discussions of the village. Because of the demonstrably almost straight line of development from village to town and city in the Ancient Near East, the village often is - whether consciously and unconsciously - thought of as a form on the way to the city, as a kind of transitional stage. This is supported by the conceptual fuzziness as all rural settlements are called villages in spite of basic differences. And, trivially, a major problem lies in the systemic reason that there is only little information available when it comes to villages or village-life of the so called historical periods of the Ancient Near East: on the one hand, archaeologists never were attracted to investigate villages when a near-by urban place was available, and on the other hand, there was certainly much less of record-keeping in rural settlements, if any.

In the first place, therefore, a definition seems necessary. There are a number of different forms of village: yet there are especially two kinds standing for the extreme ends of the continuum: on the one side we encounter the independent village as an autonomous organizational unit, which is self-sufficient, and which may be tied into communication and exchange networks, yet, is not determined from outside. Typical examples are those early village communities of Braidwood's.

The second kind is represented by those rural settlements, which are concentrated around a central place. To be sure, also they may display a high grade of self-determination, but they nevertheless are firmly tied into larger organizational contexts which come under the name of settlement systems. Depending on the organizational level of such a system, smaller or larger parts of sovereignty may be ceded to the center, resulting in varying states of heteronomy. In particular, any kind of integration into larger communication or exchange networks would be channeled by the center.

But what do we mean by "village"? Not with standing the fact that like for the city there is no all-embracing definition, and that time and space of the present discussion are limited to the Ancient Near East, "village" may be understood as standing for a self-governed self-sufficient structure which draws its subsistence from agriculture mainly. The actual size as well as the size of its population is determined basically by the extent of the agriculturally usable area which can be cultivated without meeting natural or neighborly borders; a quasi natural border is given by the possibility to reach the far out fields within reasonably bearable time. A leading group or the village elder or elders will decide on matters of communal or mutual interest. Contacts to other communities exist on a partnership basis in cultic, social (feasts) or economic matters. Partnership means an integration in larger or smaller networks without structured hierarchy. Such structures can be seen as fundamentally stable. Neither hierarchies within a village nor other parts of the system have the internal drive to change what at the same time would change the entire structure. Even external attacks like climatic changes or stock epidemics are met by mechanisms long practiced by the community, aiming at conserving the present situation. Division of labor and craft production rests mainly with the individual household, but there is also a certain degree of specialization on village level. In the case of proximity to specific sources of raw material (obsidian, flint, bitumen) the production of exchange goods seems feasible.

This scenario more or less can be taken to describe the situation of the first permanent villages ("primary villages") through the 6th mill. BC. During a phase of 2 to 3 thousand years the Near East is characterized by settlements on the stage of a double mixed economy: depending on the macro- as well as micro-climatic situation the focus can alternate between farming and herding. In addition, however, the possibility remains available to make use of the extensive methods of food gathering in order to com-
pensate for losses in the production of food in particularly grave situations. The latter is guaranteed by the potential control of substantially larger areas than needed for farming.

Two thousand years later, the situation has changed completely as in contrast to the stable structures met before we are confronted with essentially unstable structures as far as size and mutual relations between settlements are concerned. The question arises when and why this process started. As we will see presently, we have no problems dating this change roughly to the 6th/5th mill.; however, there is no ready answer to the second question, unless we seek refuge in using a broad brush for sketching the ensuing course of events. Hints are provided by the developments in the areas bordering Mesopotamia to the east.

Mounting experience in the methods of food production gives more security and increasingly allows to renounce the subsistence strategy sketched above - with two consequences: on the one hand, those areas kept ready for the case of a necessity for return to food gathering could be abandoned while on the other hand settlement was not restricted anymore to areas whose small-scaled environment would offer the wide range of plants and animals needed if the food had to be provided by gathering. Consequently, there are no obstacles anymore on the way to occupying larger plains. Apparently, these plains offered other, unknown attractions, in addition to a presumed greater fertility. Earlier, the occupation of plains had been of little advantage, or even of disadvantage, since because of their homogeneity of fauna and flora and because of larger distances they did not allow an easy re-transfer to methods of food gathering.

This turn to occupying larger ecotopes inaugurated a development which was about to change the basic structure of the village, as we will see presently - to my mind this marks one of the most fundamental turning points in early history. One of the basic ideas governing the following remarks is that the expansion of a settlement - in particular of a predominantly agrarian settlement - meets maximal limits which are defined by the utmost bearable distance to peripheral fields. This does not, however, only delimit the maximal catchment area of a settlement but also the size of its population which can be fed on that area. Since traffic conditions and carrying potential of the land are no absolute units, also the maximal size cannot be defined. Yet, the evidence remains that settlements can not grow unlimited, even if space would be available.

To the extend that these newly developed ecotopes were larger than the maximal catchment area of a village, additional settlements could establish themselves. Since the catchment area of each village could be much smaller than before settlements could move up closer together and start developing closer and more direct relations. At the same time, we observe that in such groups of settlements one tends to be larger than the other ones. In accordance with interpretations of settlement geography and in continuation of what was said before this leads to two conclusions: there is something "more" in those larger settlements than in the small ones. Without being able to call that "more" by specific names we refer to it as "central functions" meaning that these functions provided services which were used not only by the inhabitants of that larger settlement but also by the ones of the other places; as home of these central functions we refer to this larger settlement as "central place". The relations between the settlements of such a settlement system probably involved a certain degree of dependence because the services of the central place had to be "paid for" - in many cases probably by not more than recognition of some kind of supremacy.

The second conclusion concerns a fundamental change on the economic level which, subsequently was followed suit by other changes.
Certainly, the way to renounce the former strategy of survival was on the one hand paved by the increasing security in the methods of food production, but on the other hand probably new and different mechanisms had evolved of mutual security—for instance new storage and/or (re)distribution patterns.

These changes were serious enough, but the most fundamental change was one from a stable to an unstable situation. This instability results from the constant necessity of redefining the relations between center and dependent settlements. It is unclear though whether this was a problem from the beginning of the formation of settlement systems, because of the initial absence of one aspect which subsequently creates most conflicts: the pressure on the rural settlements to produce a surplus in order to provide the center with food. At the beginning of this process, however, centers are still small enough to enable their inhabitants to produce their own food. But this will have changed rapidly with the growth of the centers.

Another source for instability originates from the fact that the initial occupation of larger plains with the consequence of the emergence of simple settlement systems was not the last step of that line of development. Whether temporarily or subsequent, as one would like to imagine having evolutionist ideas in mind, and as suggested by the observations in the Iranian-Mesopotamian area, or not: the occupation of still larger plains enables, or better forces, another round of changes. As explained before, the catchment areas of simple settlements cannot grow beyond a certain limit, which equally applies to simple settlement systems as a unit. The occupation of still larger plains will have the effect that additional simple systems may develop within the same plain. Like on the level of simple settlement systems equally unknown mechanisms help establishing close structured relations among these simple settlement systems resulting in the formation of a common central place, now on a higher level of organization, or a third tier.

This moment probably in most cases marks the step from where on centers are not able anymore to be self-sufficient as far as food resources are concerned; instead they start depending on food supplies from their hinterland. Obviously, at the same time this moment marks the end of the self-determination of the non-central settlements because both the volume of surplus production is dictated externally by the center according to its needs, and the center will use its power to secure that amount and regularity remain stable.

As illustration, the last mentioned situation will be exemplified using the relations between the city of Uruk and the settlement of its hinterland at the time of around 3200 BC. This is the time when without any doubt the city of Uruk covering an area of at least 250 ha and having a population of at least 25,000 inhabitants (more likely around 50.000) is beyond a size when you could expect a place to be self-sufficient; this is furthermore supported by the first written records turning up at this moment, although they are of less assistance than anticipated.

Uruk probably was surrounded by a city wall. The center was marked by two public spaces opposite each other. Although probably mainly cultic in character, at least the eastern one, called Eanna, seems to have been simultaneously the seat of the city government. Among the earliest documents we find a list of the titles of both the ruler and his high officials ("ministers") leaving no doubt about their status as full-time politicians or administrators. About 80% of the early documents record data of a central economic administration. They mirror a redistributive economic system, collecting and storing centrally all kinds of foodstuff as well as raw materials, and distributing those goods to officials and employees. Most certainly these processes were steered by a small group of people—again certainly on a full-time basis. In addition, both the kind of the system and the vol-
volume of goods turned around, especially of barley, indicates that a major part of the population received their basic provisions through the central administration. In all probability it was not only the political and cultic elite which needed to be provided with food produced by others but also a substantial part of the normal population.

As far as we can see from the texts, the central economic administration seems to have been interested solely in, and using the script only for, balancing the incoming and outgoing goods of the central stores to the extend that we find almost no reference to the origins of those goods, whether food supplies or raw materials of all kinds. And yet, we cannot but take it for granted that a major part of the supplies originated in the countryside. This is already shown by a simple argument: if all inhabitants of Uruk would have had to cultivate their own fields, the fields for most of them would be located much beyond the limit where they could be reached within reasonable time. Furthermore, even in the immediate vicinity of the city fields would not have been available for city people because part of the land was occupied already by small settlements.

Since the texts are very communicative there is also no hint to the kind of organization which was necessary for collecting the supplies and transporting them into the city. As settlements in the countryside are not dispersed at random, but themselves are organized in groups depending on local centers, we can speculate that these local centers may have served as temporary staples from where the collected items were brought into the city.

An additional feature is introduced by another aspect of the alignment of the settlements in the Uruk countryside: within the dense coverage with settlements of all sizes a belt void of settlements can be observed to encircle Uruk at a distance of 12 - 15 kilometers. This belt is interpreted as differentiating between an area of direct control and one of indirect control, and it is assumed that control means the ability to make sure that provisions are delivered in time and in sufficient quantity.

Now at the latest, the large discrepancy becomes evident between this kind of rural settlements in the hinterland of cities and the forms of village we had encountered before, although, admittedly, the total dependency just mentioned may have been true only for highly urbanized regions like Babylonia. Otherwise we may be dealing with a wide continuum of different degrees of dependency, some forms of which may again have led to stable structures in cases when no larger plains existed which would have created pressure for the emergence of higher level centers. This may apply to larger areas of Anatolia or in inland Iran where plains were not large enough to sustain high level centers - at a time when the large flood plains of Khuzestan, Mesopotamia and Syria had reached that level already.

This discussion intends to serve as support for a high need and as encouragement to explore the type of rural settlements we just met. As I said in the beginning, there is ample literature about the city, its origins and its development, and there is sufficient work done on the early village. But hardly anyone noticed the gap concerning those rural settlements, which form an integral part of any central place system. We may even conclude that any discussion of the city is incomplete unless it includes the situation of, and the mutual relations with the settlements in the hinterland.

Another thought comes to mind. Focusing our research on the city we normally do not consider the city as such but what we are dealing with are the manifestations of the urban elites. One reason is that most probably it is only these circles providing us with written records, but more profoundly it is resulting from the fact, that almost never had archaeologists anything else in mind than digging in urban centers, and
there, in the central areas. This leads to a grand distortion in our sources since the affairs of the largest part of the population are dismissed totally. Of course, we could be content with remarking that history anyway has been created by the elites, and expectations should not run too high when it comes to contributions to the phenomenon of the city by studying non-elite material. But the problem is more complicated.

Since quite some time we suspect that we are taken in by systemic errors - especially in economic matters - if we rely entirely on written records. Although we are aware that the generally accepted idea of a centrally controlled economic administration governing the affairs of Babylonian cities cannot be the full answer, we will never be able to formulate alternatives using the written sources only. From a more general point of view, it is inconceivable that no "private" sector should have existed the importance of which must have varied from one place and one period to the other. This part of the economy is not visible, however, because a redistributive system is a closed shop which because of systematic reasons does not allow any overlapping between official and private economy. It is not to be expected, therefore, to find even the slightest hint to private transactions within the official written record. In addition, transactions of private nature probably in most cases ranged below the level of volume and complexity which would necessitate the use of writing; we should not expect such information to turn up in independent sources, either.

Without question, we are confronted with a huge information gap which does prevent us from understanding the functioning of a Babylonian urban unit as a whole. Unfortunately, however, this insight does not help very much beyond seeing the problem, because so far no one has been able to even design a research strategy.

Here, the observations summarized above may turn out to be helpful. Because on the one hand by definition the rural settlements are tied to urban centers and to their official (redistributive) economy, but on the other hand we may suspect the private sector to have been stronger and more widespread in the countryside. If so, archaeological investigations in rural settlements may provide us with insights on this private sector, which then may be confronted with the official economy, eventually opening ways of formulating meaningful questions for the urban sector.

Of course it is unlikely that such investigations could change our picture of Babylonia as a thoroughly urban society, but we could gain some realistic features. This certainly applies to the field of economy, but would also contribute to our understanding of the Babylonian society at large. That we turn around in circles with our basic idea of an exclusively centralized economy in early Babylonia is indicated by the antagonism between the enormous dynamics and adaptability of the Babylonian civilization and the allegedly rigid holding on to forms of centralized economy during the early periods.

The "rural settlement" as a constitutive element of settlement systems in the Ancient Near East waits to be discovered as a research topic.

For further reading:

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*The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2300 BC.*, Chicago

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