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Babylonian entrepreneurs

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CHAPTER 69

Babylonian Entrepreneurs

Caroline Waerzeggers

Introduction

The Persian conquest of Mesopotamia in 539 BCE was a decisive moment in the history of southern Mesopotamia. Native Babylonian kingship came to an end and a long period of foreign domination began. The transition from Babylonian to Persian rule happened smoothly, however, with little impact on the lives of either the rich or the poor. Thousands of cuneiform records attest to continuities in royal ideology (Kuhrt 1983, 1992, 2007a,b), high office and institutional management (Bongenaar 1997; Jursa 2007; Kleber 2008; Waerzeggers 2010a), art (Ehrenberg 1999, 2007), archival practice and daily life (e.g. Wunsch 1993, 2000a; Jursa 1999, 2005a; Baker 2004). Change set in more perceptively, however, under the fourth king, Darius the Great, who introduced measures to improve control over the Babylonian satrapy after it rebelled twice in the beginning of his reign (522–521 BCE; Joannès 1997: p. 282). In recent years, the reign of Xerxes, who crushed two more rebellions in Babylonia and, in doing so, caused a caesura in the cuneiform record, has been described in terms of discontinuity (Kessler 2004; Waerzeggers 2004; Oelsner 2007; Baker 2008), but whether any damage was caused to Babylonian cities, their inhabitants, and their economy in the aftermath of the revolts is a fiercely debated topic (George 2010; Kuhrt 2010; Kuntner and Heinsch 2013; Henkelman et al. 2011). The question of continuity/change in fifth

century BCE Babylonia is a topic that requires up-to-date research (see, for now, van Driel 1987 and Kuhrt 1987).

One group in Babylonian society whose fortunes can be studied quite effectively in the cuneiform record of the Persian period are the so-called “entrepreneurs.” Michael Jursa recently analyzed the private sector of the Babylonian economy in Weberian terms as consisting of two, essentially opposite, business profiles: “rentiers” and “entrepreneurs” (Jursa 2004, 2010: especially pp. 282–294, 764–768). Individuals in the former group mostly earned their income from inherited property and risk-free entitlements, whereas those in the latter group competed for state contracts and in local and international markets as traders, producers, retailers, and wholesalers. Activities that may be connected with the entrepreneurial profile include, among others, agricultural contracting, business partnerships (known under the Babylonian term *harrānu*), domestic and interregional trade, and tax farming. Rentiers typically displayed a more conservative business portfolio and a tendency to replicate existing social structures through inheritance and marriage practice, whereas entrepreneurs achieved greater social mobility and diversity. Yet, despite differences of economic mentality, it would be wrong to claim that strict social barriers existed between the two groups. Entrepreneurial and rentier-type families did intermarry and a certain measure of permeability characterizes the boundaries suggested by this model on both sides.

Sources

The cuneiform sources that are at our disposal to study the fortunes of Babylonian entrepreneurs consist of business contracts, property deeds (e.g. donations, sales), memoranda, lists and administrative notes written in the course of their activities, as well as family records (e.g. testaments, marriage contracts) recorded at important junctures of their private lives. The archives of several entrepreneurial families from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE have come down to us, mostly discovered during uncontrolled or insufficiently recorded digs in Iraq at the end of the nineteenth century (Jursa 2005a). These sources are valuable, but a quick overview will reveal their patchiness and uneven distribution, in terms of both geographical and chronological scope. This is due to a number of factors, including archival practice, the widespread use of Aramaic among traders, the happenstance of archeological discovery, the incomplete record of publication, and the general structure of the Neo-Babylonian text corpus, which declines sharply in the second year of Xerxes after the Babylonian revolts (484 BCE; Waerzeggers 2004).

Overview

The “long sixth century BCE” (Jursa 2010: p. 5), of which the reigns of the first Persian kings constitute the second half, is one of the best-documented epochs in Mesopotamian history. The Persian conquest of 539 BCE by no means constitutes a break in the archival material and scholars who study the social and economic history of Babylonia in this period see little sense in separating the so-called Chaldean or Neo-Babylonian period (626–539 BCE) from the Early Persian period (539–484 BCE). Even high officials like the *šākin-māti* initially remained in place, and outside the political arena continuity was certainly the norm. Only one private archive comes to an end around the time when Cyrus conquers Babylonia (Dullupu), as opposed to over 40 archives that remain unaffected by the events (Jursa 2005a). This is indicative of deep-rooted continuities easing the period of transition (Jursa 2007). In keeping with this general trend, we find no clear evidence of setbacks among the entrepreneurial families of Babylonia at the time of the Persian conquest. On the contrary, a number of them consolidated and ameliorated their positions in the new context. This is illustrated, among others, by the Egibi archive. With some 1700 tablets, this is the largest Neo-Babylonian private archive to date. It spans five generations from the early sixth century BCE to the second year of Xerxes. The archive is not yet fully published but considerable progress has been made in the last 20 years (see *Further reading* below). Of humble origins, the Egibi family rose to prominence in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (Wunsch 2000a, 2007). They initially made their fortune in the commodity trade – shipping food staples from the fields around Babylon to its inner-city markets, temples, and palaces – but their activities soon branched off in all directions that were open to entrepreneurs in the sixth century BCE, including the food industry, tax farming, and agricultural management (Wunsch 2000b: pp. 97–98, 2007: pp. 236–238). Banking was not part of the family’s activities, despite the popular notion of the Egibis as a “banking house” in older literature (Wunsch 2002: pp. 247–249; Jursa 2010: p. 245). The fact that the Egibis were able to forge and maintain close ties with the highest political circles, in the Babylonian as well as the Persian era, bears witness not only to fundamental continuities between the two political periods, but also to the Egibis’ business accumen and the elasticity of their social network, which was built on opportune marriages with competing families like the Nūr-Sîns (Wunsch 1993, 1995).

Many more archives of Babylonian entrepreneurs show similar forms of adaptability to the new political order. Marduk-šumu-ibni, the son of Ṭābia of the Sîn-ilī family, is a case in point (Wunsch 1988; Jursa 2005a: pp. 69–71). He was a contemporary of the Egibis, but his archive unfortunately shows little or no connection to their world; it is therefore difficult to create a coherent

picture of the social landscape of Babylon's business world on the basis of this evidence. In Larsa in southern Babylonia, the sons of Itti-Šamaš-balāṭu also continued their various strands of business under Persian rule. Their archive is particularly interesting for documenting the integration of entrepreneurial and rentier-type families in Babylonian society (Jursa 2010: pp. 290, 295). This dynamic had nothing to do with the advent of the Persian Empire; but, as it manifested itself in various Babylonian cities around this time, it should be mentioned here. One of the more promising corpora with a bearing on the issue of change and continuity in the business realm at the time of the Persian conquest comes from Sippar (Jursa 2005a: pp. 120–132), not because of its size or density (it is actually quite modest compared to some of the others), but because of its diversity of perspective, being composed of many interlocking archives and dossiers that together document a broad section of the local business community (Bongenaar 2000). This evidence can be combined with the local temple archive (Ebabbar) to reconstruct business networks and interactions between private entrepreneurs and institutions (Bongenaar 2000), for instance in the area of tithe farming (Jursa 1998). The Eanna archive from Uruk offers similar opportunities (Jursa 2010), but in this case, the evidence cannot be combined with independent private material; the few entrepreneurial archives from this town end before the advent of the Persian Empire (Jursa 2005a: pp. 141, 143–146). The Eanna archive is, however, particularly informative on foreign trade (Joannès 1999: pp. 184–189; Jursa 2010: pp. 76–77, 93); for this purpose, the temple relied on independent merchants as intermediaries. Entrepreneurial activities in other Babylonian cities – such as in Kish, Cutha, and Nippur – are only scarcely documented for the early Persian period (Jursa 2005a: pp. 105, 149, 2005b).

After the revolts against Xerxes (484 BCE), the number of surviving cuneiform texts drops. The Murašû archive is the most important source on Babylonian entrepreneurship in the mature Achaemenid Empire (Stolper 1985a,b, 2001; Jursa 2010: p. 199). This family engaged in agricultural contracting and short-term credit operations with owners of state-assigned land in the region around Nippur in the second half of the fifth century BCE. Their clients consisted, on the one hand, of smallholders of bow fiefs and other service land, and, on the other hand, of high imperial officials who owned estates in the vicinity. The late fifth century BCE Kasr archive from Babylon belongs to one such high-level estate owner, governor Bēlšunu (Pedersén 2005: pp. 144–184; Stolper 1990, 1995, 1999, 2004). The archive, which is largely unpublished, allows a glimpse of the commercial activities that were carried out on and around such estates by personnel and local entrepreneurs (Stolper 1995; Jursa 2010). The Tatannu archive provides similar perspectives (Jursa 2005a: pp. 94–97), as does, on a smaller scale, the dossier of Bēl-ana-mērehti from Kish (Jursa 2010: p. 204). Finally, mention should be made of the

Abu-ul-ide archive, which documents a commercial activity that has recently been described as a form of “banking” (Jursa 2010: p. 245).

Limitations

One limitation of our sources is immediately apparent in this brief overview. Only Babylonian families settled in (certain of) the big cities of northern and central Babylonia are documented, but their activities account for only a small fraction of the total bulk of trade carried out in the alluvial plain of Euphrates and Tigris at the time. For instance, non-Babylonian merchants operated in substantial numbers along the riverine routes of Mesopotamia (Oppenheim 1967; Joannès 1999: p. 188; Jursa 2004), both as traveling traders and as members of trading diasporas settled at important junctures. These communities only appear to us in the cuneiform record of Babylonian entrepreneurs, who were at once their colleagues and competitors. The positive contribution of such minorities to the activities of Babylonian businessmen and the Babylonian economy in general remains to be studied. Collaboration could take many guises, as seen for instance in the archive of Marduk-rēmanni who invested in a business partnership with a Syrian merchant settled in Sippar and who regularly relied on members of this community to act as witnesses to his business records. The presence of Syrian merchants in Babylon and the settlement of Syrian and Judean exilic communities in the hinterland of Nippur, may all have contributed to the creation of a commercial network, of which only the most basic outlines are known today. An investigation of the social dimension of entrepreneurial activity would be a welcome addition to the recent work done on its legal and economic aspects.

Babylonian Entrepreneurs in the Empire

How did the Persian Empire affect the activities of Babylonian entrepreneurs? The conquest of 539 BCE did not cause upheaval, as we have seen, but the imperial context nonetheless created opportunities and challenges that affected local business patterns. For instance, following the establishment of Persian rule, a widening of geographical horizons is documented in several of the archives listed above, including the temple archives of Ebabbar and Eanna where Across-the-River is regularly mentioned as the place where trade goods are to be procured (MacGinnis 2004; Jursa 2010: p. 76–77). Fundamental changes in the nature of Babylonian entrepreneurship have also been observed. The Egibi archive, thanks to its generous time span covering most of the sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, shows that this family adapted its business portfolio in reaction to and in keeping with changes in Darius’ tax policy (Jursa

2010: p. 288 n. 1732). The interplay between new imperial processes and existing internal dynamics and their impact on the economic and social parameters of Babylonian enterprise are not yet fully understood. Given the extraordinary richness of the cuneiform text corpus dating to the “long sixth century,” this is a topic that merits further research. Here, I will concentrate on two possible approaches to the subject.

Interactions

Interactions between Babylonian entrepreneurs and the Persian court or high-ranking imperial officials are not very well documented, but it is clear that some Babylonians enjoyed relatively easy access to high levels of state. A good case study of Persian-Babylonian interactions and their development is offered by the archive of the Egibi family. Itti-Marduk-balāṭu, the man who headed this family at the time of the Persian conquest, made at least nine excursions to Iran during the first 15 years of Persian rule in Babylonia (Joannès 2005). On these occasions he visited several royal cities, including Ecbatana, the former capital of the Median state. The purpose of these visits is debated. Some scholars interpret them in terms of commercial ventures to recently opened markets in the east (Zadok 1976; Dandamaev 1986; Zawadzki 1994). Others rather emphasize the political dimension of these trips and characterize them as royal summons or court visits (e.g. Olmstead 1948: p. 58; Jursa 2004: p. 130, 2010: p. 225 n. 1309; Joannès 2005; Tolini 2011). Court visits became a fixed ingredient of Babylonian-Persian relations in the reign of Darius the Great (see below), but such routines had not yet been established at the time when Itti-Marduk-balāṭu went on his first Iranian voyage in 537 BCE. The uncertainty, and even anxiety, that surrounded this trip is evidenced by the testament that he drew up in preparation (Wunsch 1995).

Soon after his troubled accession, Darius I started work on a new palace in the former Elamite capital of Susa, gathering labor and resources from across the Empire, including Babylonia (see most recently Briant 2010). Cuneiform records document the Babylonian contribution from c. 516 BCE onwards (Waerzeggers 2010b). Entrepreneurs participated in this project in various capacities, as tax payers, for instance, but also as tax collectors, shipping agents, and contractors. They also featured among the Babylonian delegations that regularly made their appearance in Susa to greet and sustain the royal court during its seasonal stays at the new palace. These gatherings created an opportunity for Babylonian entrepreneurs to meet courtiers and presumably to interact with members of the royal household, but they also turned Susa into an important center of Babylonian activity outside Babylonia. Some cuneiform tablets in the Babylonian language have been

found on the site (Joannès 1990), but most information about Babylonian interests in Elam is to be gleaned from archives discovered in southern Iraq (Waerzeggers 2010b).

Within Babylonia itself, important points of contact between local entrepreneurs and high office-holders were the landed estates of Persian notables. Members of the royal family, army officials, satraps and governors received such estates in gift from the Great King (Stolper 1985a: pp. 52–69; Briant 2002: pp. 461–463). Holdings assigned in this way often lay widely scattered throughout the Empire, as illustrated by the case of Arshama, a fifth century BCE satrap of Egypt who owned estates in the area of Nippur and in Egypt (Briant 2006). Absent landowners like Arshama relied on private personnel (bailiffs, slaves) and local entrepreneurs to manage these estates. Several archives of Babylonian care-takers and contractors are preserved (Jursa 2010: pp. 197–198); the Murašûs of Nippur and the Egibis of Babylon are foremost among them (Stolper 1985a: pp. 52–69; Wunsch 2000b: p. 107; Abraham 2004: pp. 127–130). Their texts reveal the embedded nature of these estates in local social and economic structures. Although the high-ranking landowner rather appears as a remote figure in these texts, the personnel that lived on the estate interacted frequently, and sometimes very closely, with local entrepreneurs. The archive of a late sixth century BCE entrepreneur from Sippar sheds light on the creation and maintenance of such ties between the estate personnel of an imperial official and a local Babylonian businessman. Such collaboration created professional and social opportunities for locals, as can be seen in the transfer of an erstwhile employee of the Murašû family into the service of satrap Arshama (Stolper 1985a: p. 65).

A Microhistorical Approach

At the time when Cyrus conquered southern Mesopotamia, this region experienced an extended period of economic growth (Jursa 2010). Measuring the impact of new imperial processes against such long-term internal developments is difficult. One possible approach to this complex subject is to reduce the unit of observation and study the entanglement of these dynamics in a controlled and well-documented setting. This approach was first developed by early modern Italian microhistorians in the 1970s and 1980s, and since then it has been successfully applied in many areas of history (see Trivellato 2011 for an appraisal). Even the most extraordinary event does not happen outside the framework of fundamental patterns and microhistorians believe that by reconstructing the context of any particular manifestation (for instance, a single life, a particular town, an unusual event) those parameters may be revealed with clarity, if only partially. A microhistorical approach seems to be particularly promising for the historian of Achaemenid Babylonia, who works with a

corpus that is at the same time very rich and very patchy. Certain parts of the corpus provide the level of detail required for a qualitative study of this nature, while the corpus as a whole is not dense enough to approach the question of interplay between complex dynamics like economic growth, social change and imperial politics in a purely quantitative manner. As an example, let us consider Marduk-nāṣir-apli, the head of the Egibi family in the reign of Darius the Great (Abraham 2004). The life of this man offers suitable material for micro-historical analysis: with over 400 preserved texts, his generation is the best documented of the Egibi family. His active life spans the entire reign of Darius the Great and offers an excellent opportunity to study the impact of this king's reforms on one of Babylon's most prolific, or indeed best-known, "business houses." As he belongs to the fourth documented generation of his family, his activities can be compared with those of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather who were active in the period from Nabopolassar to Cambyses. In this way, continuity and change can be tracked in a "controlled" setting, i.e. within a single family. Studies by Kathleen Abraham (2004) and Cornelia Wunsch (2000b, 2010) reveal significant developments in the family's portfolio in the reign of Darius that cannot be attributed to a better documentary basis alone. Tax farming contracts become a major source of income and the number of tax loans extended by the family increases. In keeping with this development, the figure of the provincial governor (*šākin-ṭēmi*) becomes more prominent as his office was in charge of awarding such tax collecting contracts. Marduk-nāṣir-apli's father began to be involved with this person toward the end of Cambyses' reign (Wunsch 2000b: p. 105 n. 28) and it seems possible that his son profited from this association during his own long career.

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- Stolper, M.W. (1985a). *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašû Archive, the Murašû Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*. Istanbul: Uitgaven van het Nederlands historisch-archeologisch instituut te Istanbul. Still the most important study of Babylonian entrepreneurship in the mature Persian Empire, based on the *Murašû* archive from Nippur.
- Wunsch, C. (2010). Neo-Babylonian entrepreneurs. In D.S. Landes, J. Mokyr, and W.J. Baumol (eds.), *The Invention of Enterprise: The History of Entrepreneurship from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 40–61. An excellent introduction to the topic.