

Child Slavery in Ancient Mesopotamia in the 3000 and 1000 BCE

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Abstract: This paper aims to study the evidence for child slaves and child slavery in different ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia including Sumer, Old Babylon, and Uruk, dating back to the 3rd and 1st millennia BCE. It investigates the causes for the enslavement of children, the conditions of slavery and the laws enacted to regulate the process in the various ancient kingdoms and offers comparative examples of children in slavery throughout the civilizations under consideration. This is achieved through the investigation of the archaeological evidence as well as the testimonies of ancient authors. It also seeks to provide a framework for a future discussion that would lead to a better understanding of the role of infants and children and how they were influenced by the norms prevailing in the culture of the world they belonged to.

Keywords: Babylon, Child, Mesopotamia, Slavery, Slaves, Sumer, Uruk.

1. Introduction

Child slavery is defined as the enforced exploitation of a child for someone else's gain, meaning the child will have no way to leave the situation or person exploiting them. Slavery, in innumerable permutations, is recognizable to historians of any period of human history. Yet scarcely any other social group is less accessible in historical sources than the enslaved. The biases of written records account for many impediments to developing an understanding of slavery, along with significant differences in sociocultural, legal, and economic systems across time and place. The problems of understanding slavery as a historical phenomenon also result from the various theoretical traditions, scholarly approaches, and discursive strategies employed in different fields and sub-fields.

Despite the controversy surrounding it, it is confirmed that slavery of children has been practiced throughout the history of mankind with its legal, social, and ethical implications. Hence, recent studies started giving this topic a more in-depth analysis with an effort to understand its elements and causes. Poverty, continuous warfare, famine, and disease were speculated as the main causes of abandonment and slavery of infants and children in Mesopotamia. Individual child slave sale documents from Mesopotamia, as well as the biblical laws concerning slavery, tell us that slavery was a part of the ancient life in several cultures that grew in that area, but there are

Important nuances that need further research. Hence this study investigates the phenomenon of child slavery to reconstruct its existence in that era in the Mesopotamian communities.

2. Sources of Slaves

At this period slaves could be acquired or could enter the state of slavery by four principal routes: (1) purchase or other means of transfer between individuals or institutions; (2) being born into slavery; (3) through debt bondage; and (4) being captured as a prisoner-of-war. These routes to enslavement correspond quite closely to the sources of servile laborers that Tenney (2011a: 122–129) identified for Kassite-period Nippur. Slaves could be bought, either from another slave-owner or from a merchant. The merchants typically specialized in supplying slaves from abroad, especially Anatolia (Radner 1997: 227–230), and merchants in general tended to be associated with the palace. We also have cases of people selling members of their own family; (Radner 1997: 230–232) this is presumably an indicator of economic hardship, although background information on the circumstances is typically absent. Transfer of slaves within the family is also attested, for example, through inheritance or dowry. When known officials feature as the buyer of slaves, it raises the question of whether they are acting in a private or an official capacity (or indeed whether such a distinction is meaningful).

3. Slave of the Debt and Fincial Penalties

The commoditization of children in early Mesopotamia is seen in the ways that children (and other dependents) were used as collateral for access to credit; seized because of defaulted loans; seized because of the failure of family members to meet certain requirements placed upon them as part of administrative responsibilities; seized because of crimes family members committed; and sold outright. The early Mesopotamian children were used to secure loans and seized because of defaults is well attested. It is clear that from the Early Dynastic period, children were separated from families because of debt. Enmetena claims to have offered remission of debts in Lagaš, reuniting children with their mothers (Edzard, 1997).

An Ur III text points to how such arrangements were

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sometimes made. The Ur III text from Girsu, written during the 47th regnal year of Šulgi, ZA 53: 83, 22, includes the threat that the heir of the debtor was to be taken into slavery in the event that the debt was not repaid on time. These threats were realized, as other texts mention children being seized because of debts, or even a deficit caused by a failure to meet performance expectations.

However, not every child slave was a chattel. In cases of debt-slavery, a child could serve in another household to pay off a family debt and then return to their own family. Texts show there were children of slaves, semi-free workers, prisoners of war, and deportees from far-off lands, children of debtors, children dedicated to temples, as well as orphans and foundlings. Public institutions fed them, dressed them and provided them with shelter. Although mostly legally free, these individuals fully depended economically on their master-households. As the result, their social mobility was severely restricted. Moreover, it appears that they started working at the age of five to seven. This is probably the earliest evidence for child labor. Their living conditions resulted sometimes in flight. Documents also record high numbers of deceased children, implying high mortality rates. Though the status of a child growing up in early Mesopotamia often reflected the status of her/his parents, but this position was not fixed there were several potential life events by which children who were not born into slavery could experience downward social mobility. These potential life trajectories for children, which can only be sketched here, form the broader context in which the lives of the children of slaves may be understood.

4. Slaves in Ancient Sumer

The earliest cuneiform texts attest the presence of children in communal institutions. This account of personnel originates from the city of Uruk and dates to about 3000 BCE. It categorizes individuals according to their age classes and lists “adult”, “developed child”, “babies of 1” and “elderly”. It is comical that one of the babies bears the name “Big Man”. It is remarkable also that we know the names and ages of people who lived more than 5000 years ago. There are Late Uruk documents that employ the same terms to count people, who were likely simple workers or even slaves, and their children. Several documents indicate that slaves, male and female alike, were adopted by childless couples as well as by nadštu-women. The adoption was used as a method to emancipate the slaves. The primary motivation for the adoption of slaves was to assure the support and maintenance of the adoptive parents in old age, and after death, their burial according to religious tradition. The adopted slave had limited and conditional freedom depending on the fulfillment of his/her obligations toward the adopter. After the death of the parent(s), the adopted son or daughter would have complete freedom and no relative of the parent could have any claim on the manumitted slave. However there was a major difference between the adopted slave and adopted freeborn. While an adopted freeborn son had the right of inheritance, an adopted and emancipated slave commonly would not inherit property from the estate of the parents. His freedom from slavery was the main reward that he would

receive. However, this was not a general rule; there are a few documents that indicate adopted slaves were considered as heirs and did inherit property. This is confirmed by an Assyrian adoption document from the reign of ÒamÓi-Adad I (1800 B.C.) reported by Veenhof (2000: 49-83). Sometimes the relationship between the master and the slave, especially between nadštu and their slave-girls, was very close and combined affection, trust and full respect. Frequently this relationship resulted in the adoption of the slave. He adopted slave of a nadštu had certain privileges. For example, the adopted slave-girl could be married and nadštu would receive terjatu for her, similar to the customary amount given for a freeborn bride.

The manumission and adoption of a slave at Sippar was performed by the Óangf (temple administrator). A later adoption contract from Sippar is described as:

In the ninth year of Cyrus, the lady Hibtâ, mistress of Bazuzu announced to the Óangf of Sippar her intention of acknowledging this slave as her son on condition that he provided her within the terms of a tablet with accommodation, food, unguents, and clothing. The Óangf himself determined the quantities of daily food, spices, fabrics, and other dues, the sum of which constituted the obligations imposed on the adopted child (Malul: 1990: 97-126).

5. Slaves in Old Babylonian

In the Old Babylonian period, children could also form an integral part of debt negotiations, since the creditor benefited from the work performed by the distraint or guaranty while waiting for repayment. Such arrangements are contemplated in the “Code of Hammurabi” § 117.

Children and other family members were also seized because of crimes committed by family members. Where family members are taken into slavery because of murder. Other texts indicate that other children were sold outright as well.

Numerous slave sales from early Mesopotamia involved the sale of a slave woman and her children, demonstrating that the offspring of a slave was normally viewed as property that could be bought and sold. Just as the offspring of cattle belonged to the owner, so also when a female slave reproduced, the offspring was considered the property of the slave woman’s owner. The issue, however, becomes more complicated when people of differing statuses had a child together. This can be seen in “legal” discussions dealing with matters related to marriage across status and their offspring. While the sources do not always make it clear who fathered the child of a slave woman, Ur III court cases in which slaves contested their status indicate that, in many instances, the owner fathered the child.

The “Code of Ur-Namma” treats the issue of marriages between slaves and marriages that occurred across social status and the related issues with two different paragraphs. These paragraphs seek to ensure that the female slave belonged to her master, and her status was not bound to that of her husband’s. In other words, the transfer of authority that occurred when a girl left the household of her parents and joined another household did not take place when a slave woman married another slave. Instead, she remained the property of her owner.

More specifically, if the husband became a freedman, the slave woman's status did not change. While the first part seems straightforward, the summary statement of the "Code of Ur-Namma" §5 is more open to interpretation. It is possible that §5 deals with the owner's right to have one offspring supplied from the marriage of his slave to a freed woman. In which case, the summary statement served to restrict the rights of the owner to just one offspring and no others from the marriage. This seems to be the way Roth has understood this paragraph. However, the paragraph likely deals with the practice of supplying a child from the marriage to replace the male slave. The child could be taken to share in the inheritance of the master and any attempts to turn the child into a slave had to be approved by the king. Irrespective of how one views these two paragraphs, the complexity of marriage across boundaries of status gave rise to some complex social issues, since matters of rights and ownership had to be addressed (Sharlach, 2017: 3-30).

When it comes to determining the status of the children of slaves outside of the law collections, the most frequent information from early Mesopotamia is found in the exchanges that involved the sale of children together with other family members. The information provided in these documents became most nuanced during the late Old Babylonian period, as slave sales began to document the origin of slaves. From the reign of Abi-ešuh onwards, slaves were derived from two categories of origin: 1. House-born slaves; 2. slaves of foreign origin (Van Koppen 2004: 12). This has led to the theory that, around the reign of Samsu-iluna or his successor Abi-ešuh, measures were implemented to prevent the sale of native Babylonians, meaning that, toward the end of the Old Babylonian period, the offspring of slaves became the only group of people born in Babylonia who could be sold permanently into slavery.

6. Children of Slaves in Law

The early Mesopotamian laws deal with issues related to ownership, attempts to remove children from slavery, and the status of children when a master has a child with a slave. These "laws," together with slave sales and the edicts of release, provide what is likely reliable evidence of a widespread practice related to slavery. While it may be assumed that the owners of slave women had sexual rights to their slaves, a practice well known in other periods, these laws give a clear indication that such sexual encounters were expected between a master and his slaves. This aspect of early Mesopotamian slavery highlights the vulnerability of these female slaves and the likely scenario that many entered into non-consensual sexual relationships with their masters. Although it is possible to view these alleged opportunities for freedom in a positive light, there is also in such measures implicit leverage for coercing the cooperation of slave girls with their masters.

If the "Code of Hammurabi" §§170-171 are taken into consideration, the master could use the possibility of having a child with his slave and the potential freedom and opportunity to share in his estate, as in §170, to secure full cooperation from his slave girl. However, the master could renege and not recognize the child during his lifetime. In such cases where the

child is not recognized by the master/father, §171 applies, offering freedom to the slave and her child upon the death of the master, but without a share of the inheritance.

While there would not have been a single way in which these relationships were carried out, the vulnerability of the female slave is highlighted in the legal complexity surrounding slave women and their children, especially when the master fathered the child. The peril facing female slaves can also be seen in the comparative leniency for seducing a slave girl versus the consequences for the same act with a woman of different status in the "Code of Ur-Namma," with the former resulting in a penalty of five shekels, and the latter resulting in a death sentence for the culprit. While these laws may not be taken as normative, they indicate the sexual vulnerability of female slaves in early Mesopotamia.

The children born to slaves in early Mesopotamia were another commodity that could be bought and sold. The sales of these children indicate that mothers could be purchased together with their children or separated from them by purchase, suggesting that such outcomes were based on the whim of the master. As for the children themselves, irrespective of their place of birth, they were left with fewer opportunities to secure freedom than the native population during the Old Babylonian period, and by the end of this period, the children of slaves and foreigners were the two remaining sources of slaves as reflected in the documents relating to sales. Whereas the native population could move in and out of forms of slavery because of debt or other factors, the house-born slave was excluded from such edicts, which required the release of the native population. So while we may say that growing up in early Mesopotamia could be very difficult, growing up as the child of a slave was even worse.

7. Conclusion

While change and development occurred in relation to various forms of slavery throughout early Mesopotamia, several texts indicate that many of the common social problems facing children growing up in early Mesopotamia continued in one form or another throughout the period. This does not mean that children were necessarily undervalued, or that people generally did not care for them. However, it reveals that children were susceptible to a number of attested fates that could result in either temporary or permanent downward movement into forms of bonded labor or slavery. Rather than charging the people in early Mesopotamia with failing to care for their children, a more satisfying way to approach these downward movements is in the broader context of the complex interface of choices and environment as well as the social, economic, and political complexity surrounding these phenomena. But the limited nature of our sources often prevents us from seeing this greater complexity, since that story is not the primary reason for writing the preserved texts.

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