

CHAPTER FIVE

*Population Control:  
Bondage and War*

In the multitude of people is the king's honor, but in the want of people is the destruction of the prince.

—Proverbs 14:28

If the multitudes scatter and cannot be retained, the city state will become a mound of ruins.

—Early Chinese Manual of Governance

It is true, I admit, that [the Siamese kingdom] is of greater extent than mine, but you must admit that the king of Golconda rules over men, while the king of Siam rules over forests and mosquitoes.

—King of Golconda to a Siamese visitor, circa 1680

In a large house with many servants, the doors may be left open; in a small house with few servants, the doors must be shut.

—Siamese saying

THE excess of epigraphs above is meant to signal the degree to which concern over the acquisition and control of population was at the very center of early statecraft. Control over a fertile

POPULATION CONTROL

and well-watered patch of alluvium meant nothing unless it was made productive by a population of cultivators who would work it. To see the early states as “population machines” is not far off the mark, so long as we appreciate that the “machine” was in bad repair and often broke down, and not only because of failures in statecraft. The state remained as focused on the number and productivity of its “domesticated” subjects as a shepherd might husband his flock or a farmer tend his crops.

The imperative of collecting people, settling them close to the core of power, holding them there, and having them produce a surplus in excess of their own needs animates much of early statecraft.<sup>1</sup> Where there was no preexisting settled population that could serve as the nucleus of state formation, a population had to be assembled for the purpose. This was the guiding principle of Spanish colonialism in the New World, the Philippines, and elsewhere. The *reducciones* or concentrated settlements (often forced) of native peoples around a center from which Spanish power radiated were seen as part of a civilizing project, but they also served the nontrivial purpose of serving and feeding the conquistadores. Christian mission stations—of whatever denomination—among dispersed populations begin in the same fashion, assembling a productive population around the station, from which conversion efforts radiated.

The means by which a population is assembled and then made to produce a surplus is less important in this context than the fact that it does produce a surplus available to non-producing elites. Such a surplus does not exist until the embryonic state creates it. Better put, until the state extracts and appropriates this surplus, any dormant additional produc-

tivity that might exist is “consumed” in leisure and cultural elaboration. Before the creation of more centralized political structures like the state, what Marshall Sahlins has described as the domestic mode of production prevailed.<sup>2</sup> Access to resources—land, pasture, hunting—was open to all by virtue of membership in a group, whether tribe, band, lineage, or family, that controlled those resources. Short of being cast out, an individual could not be denied direct and independent access to whatever means of subsistence the group in question disposed of. And in the absence of either compulsion or the chance of capitalist accumulation, there was no incentive to produce beyond the locally prevailing standards of subsistence and comfort. Beyond sufficiency in this respect, that is, there was no reason to increase the drudgery of agricultural production. The logic of this variant of peasant economy was worked out in convincing empirical detail by A. V. Chayanov, who, among other things, showed that when a family had more working members than nonworking dependents, it reduced its overall work effort once sufficiency was assured.<sup>3</sup>

The important point for our purpose is that a peasantry—assuming that it has enough to meet its basic needs—will not automatically produce a surplus that elites might appropriate, but must be compelled to produce it. Under the demographic conditions of early state formation, when the means of traditional production were still plentiful and not monopolized, only through one form or another of unfree, coerced labor—corvée labor, forced delivery of grain or other products, debt bondage, serfdom, communal bondage and tribute, and various forms of slavery—was a surplus brought into being. Each of the earliest states deployed its own unique mix of coerced

labor, as we shall see, but it required a delicate balance between maximizing the state surplus on the one hand and the risk of provoking the mass flight of subjects on the other, especially where there was an open frontier. Only much later, when the world was, as it were, fully occupied and the means of production privately owned or controlled by state elites, could the control of the means of production (land) alone suffice, without institutions of bondage, to call forth a surplus. So long as there are other subsistence options, as Ester Boserup noted in her classic work, “it is impossible to prevent the members of the lower class from finding other means of subsistence unless they are made personally unfree. When population becomes so dense that land can be controlled it becomes unnecessary to keep the lower classes in bondage; it is sufficient to deprive the working class of the right to be independent cultivators”—foragers, hunter-gatherers, swiddeners, pastoralists.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the earliest states, making the lower classes reliably unfree meant holding them in the grain core and preventing them from fleeing to avoid drudgery and/or bondage itself.<sup>5</sup> Do what it might to discourage and punish flight—and the earliest legal codes are filled with such injunctions—the archaic state lacked the means to prevent a certain degree of leakage under normal circumstances. In hard times occasioned by, say, a crop failure, unusually heavy taxes, or war, this leakage might quickly become a hemorrhage. Short of stemming the flow, most archaic states sought to replace their losses by various means, including wars to capture slaves, purchases of slaves from slave takers, and forced resettlement of whole communities near the grain core.

The total population of a grain state, assuming it con-



trolled sufficient fertile land, was a reliable, if not infallible, indication of its relative wealth and military prowess. Aside from an advantageous position on trade routes and waterways or particularly clever rulers, agricultural techniques as well as the technology of warfare were both relatively static and depended largely on manpower. The state with the most people was generally richest and usually prevailed militarily over smaller rivals. One indication of this fundamental fact was that the prize of war was more often captives than territory, which meant that the losers' lives, particularly those of women and children, were spared. Many centuries later Thucydides acknowledges the logic of manpower by praising the Spartan general Brasidas for negotiating peaceful surrenders, thereby increasing the Spartan tax and manpower base at no cost in Spartan lives.<sup>6</sup>

Warfare in the Mesopotamian alluvium beginning in the late Uruk Period (3,500–3,100 BCE) and for the next two millennia was likewise not about the conquest of territory but rather about the assembling of populations at the state's grain core. Thanks to the original and meticulous work of Seth Richardson, we know that the vast majority of the wars in the alluvium were not those between the larger and well-known urban polities but, rather, the petty wars by each of those polities to conquer the smaller independent communities in its own hinterland to augment its laboring population and hence its power.<sup>7</sup> Polities aimed to assemble "unpacified," "scattered" people and to "herd non-state clients into state orders by both force and persuasion." This process, Richardson notes, is a continuing imperative inasmuch as states are simultaneously losing "their own constituent populations

from and to non-state units." Though the state might presume to a fine-grained administration of its subjects, it was, in fact, in a constant struggle to compensate for the losses from flight and mortality by a largely coercive campaign to corral new subjects from among hitherto "untaxed and unregulated" populations. The Old Babylonian legal codes are preoccupied with escapees and runaways and the effort to return them to their designated work and residence.

## THE STATE AND SLAVERY

Slavery was not invented by the state. Various forms of enslavement, individual and communal, were widely practiced among nonstate peoples. For pre-Columbian Latin America, Fernando Santos-Granados has abundantly documented the many forms of communal servitude practiced, many of which persisted along with colonial servitude after the conquest.<sup>8</sup> Slavery, though generally tempered with assimilation and upward mobility, was common among manpower-hungry Native American peoples. Human bondage was undoubtedly known in the ancient Middle East before the appearance of the first state. As with sedentism and the domestication of grain that also predated state formation, the early state elaborated and scaled up the institution of slavery as an essential means to maximize its productive population and the surplus it could appropriate.

It would be almost impossible to exaggerate the centrality of bondage, in one form or another, in the development of the state until very recently. As Adam Hochschild observed, as late as 1800 roughly three-quarters of the world's population

could be said to be living in bondage.<sup>9</sup> In Southeast Asia all early states were slave states and slaving states; the most valuable cargo of Malay traders in insular Southeast Asia were, until the late nineteenth century, slaves. Old people among the so-called aboriginal people (*orang asli*) of the Malay Peninsula and hill peoples in northern Thailand can recall their parents' and grandparents' stories about much-dreaded slave raids.<sup>10</sup>

Provided that we keep in mind the various forms bondage can take over time, one is tempted to assert: "No slavery, no state." Moses Finley famously asked, "Was Greek Civilization based on Slave Labour?" and answered with a resounding and well-documented yes.<sup>11</sup> Slaves represented a clear majority—perhaps as much as two-thirds—of Athenian society, and the institution was taken completely for granted; the issue of abolition never arose. As Aristotle held, some peoples, owing to a lack of rational faculties, are, by nature, slaves and are best used, as draft animals are, as tools. In Sparta, slaves represented an even larger portion of the population. The difference, to which we shall return later, was that while most slaves in Athens were war captives from non-Greek-speaking peoples, Sparta's slaves were largely "helots," indigenous cultivators conquered in place by Sparta and made to work and produce communally for "free" Spartans. In this model the appropriation of an existing, sedentary grain complex by militarized state builders is far more explicit.

Imperial Rome, a polity on a scale rivaled only by its easternmost contemporary, Han Dynasty China, turned much of the Mediterranean basin into a massive slave emporium. Every Roman military campaign was shadowed by slave merchants and ordinary soldiers who expected to become rich

by selling or ransoming the captives they had taken personally. By one estimate, the Gallic Wars yielded nearly a million new slaves, while, in Augustinian Rome and Italy, slaves represented from one-quarter to one-third of the population. The ubiquity of slaves as a commodity was reflected in the fact that in the classical world a "standardized" slave became a unit of measurement: in Athens at one point—the market fluctuated—a pair of working mules was worth three slaves.

## SLAVERY AND BONDAGE IN MESOPOTAMIA

In the earlier, less documented, and smaller city polities of Mesopotamia the existence of slavery and other forms of bondage is beyond question. Finley assures us, "The pre-Greek world—the world of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Assyrians . . . —was, in a very profound sense, a world without free men, in the sense in which the west has come to understand the concept."<sup>12</sup> What is very much in question, however, is the extent of slavery per se, the forms it took, and how central it was to the functioning of the polity.<sup>13</sup> The general consensus has been that while slavery was undoubtedly present, it was a relatively minor component of the overall economy.<sup>14</sup> On the basis of my reading of the admittedly scarce evidence, I would dispute this consensus. Slavery, while hardly as massively central as in classical Athens, Sparta, or Rome, was crucial for three reasons: it provided the labor for the most important export trade good, textiles; it supplied a disposable proletariat for the most onerous work (for example, canal digging, wall building); and it was both a token of and a reward for elite status. The case for the importance



of slavery in the Mesopotamian polities is, I hope to show, convincing. When other forms of unfree labor, such as debt bondage, forced resettlement, and *corvée* labor, are taken into account, the importance of coerced labor for the maintenance and expansion of the grain-labor module at the core of the state is hard to deny.

Part of the controversy over the centrality of slavery in ancient Sumer is a matter of terminology. Opinions differ in part because there are so many terms that could mean “slave” but could also mean “servant,” “subordinate,” “underling,” or “bondsmen.” Nevertheless, scattered instances of purchase and sale of people—chattel slavery—are well attested, though we do not know how common they were.

The most unambiguous category of slaves was the captured prisoner of war. Given the constant need for labor, most wars were wars of capture, in which success was measured by the number and quality of captives—men, women, and children—taken. Of the many sources of dependent labor identified by I. J. Gelb—household-born slaves, debt slaves, slaves purchased on the market from their abductors, conquered peoples brought back and forcibly settled as a group, and prisoners of war—the last two appear to be the most significant.<sup>15</sup> Both categories represent the booty of war. On one list of 167 prisoners of war there appeared very few Sumerian or Akkadian (that is, indigenous) names; the vast majority had been taken from the mountains and from areas to the east of the Tigris River. One ideogram for “slave” in third-millennium Mesopotamia was the combination of the sign for “mountain” with the sign for “woman,” signifying women taken in

the course of military forays into the hills or perhaps bartered by slave takers in exchange for trade goods. The related ideogram “man” or “woman” joined to “foreign land” is also thought to refer to slaves. If the purpose of war was largely the acquisition of captives, then it makes more sense to see such military expeditions more in the light of slave raids than as conventional warfare.

The only substantial, documented slave institution in Uruk appears to have been the state-supervised workshops producing textiles that engaged as many as nine thousand women. They are described as slaves in most sources but also may have included debtors, the indigent, foundlings, and widows—perhaps like the workhouses of Victorian England. Several historians of the period claim that both women and juveniles taken as prisoners of war, complemented by the wives and children of debtors, formed the core of the textile workforce. Analysts of this large textile “industry” stress how critical it was to the position of elites, who were dependent for their power on a steady flow of metals (copper in particular) and other raw materials from outside the resource-poor alluvium. This state enterprise provided the key trade good that could be exchanged for these necessities. The workshops represented a sequestered “gulag” of captive labor that supported a new strata of religious, civil, and military elites. Nor was it insignificant demographically. Various estimates put the Uruk population at around forty thousand to forty-five thousand in the year 3,000 BCE. Nine thousand textile workers alone would represent at least 20 percent of Uruk’s inhabitants, not counting the other prisoners of war and slaves in other sectors

of the economy. Providing grain rations for these workers and other state-dependent laborers required a formidable apparatus of assessment, collection, and storage.<sup>16</sup>

Other Uruk documents refer frequently to unfree workers and particularly to female slaves of foreign origin. They were, according to Guillermo Algaze, a primary source of workers at the disposal of the Uruk state administration.<sup>17</sup> The scribal summaries of laboring groups (both foreign and native) employ the identical age and sex categories as those used to describe “state-controlled herds of domestic animals.” “It would appear, therefore, that in the minds of the Uruk scribes and in the eyes of the institutions that employed them, such laborers were conceptualized as ‘domesticated’ humans, wholly equivalent to domestic animals in status.”<sup>18</sup>

What else can we say about the organization, work, and treatment of prisoners and slaves? An exceptional and quite detailed picture—despite fragmentary sources—is afforded by a close examination of 469 slaves and prisoners of war brought to Uruk and held in a “house of prisoners” during the reign of Rim-Anum (c. 1,805 BCE).<sup>19</sup> “It is most likely that houses of prisoners existed elsewhere in Mesopotamia and in other areas of the ancient Middle East.”<sup>20</sup> The “house” functioned as something of a labor-supply bureau. The captives represented a wide spectrum of skills and experience and were disbursed to individuals, temples, and military officers as boatmen, gardeners, harvest workers, herdsmen, cooks, entertainers, animal tenders, weavers, potters, craftspeople, brewers, road menders, grinders of grain, and so on. The house—not apparently a workhouse itself—received flour in

return for the labor it provided. Care was taken to farm out small labor crews and to relocate them frequently to minimize the danger of revolt or escape.

Other evidence about slaves and prisoners of war indicates that they were not well treated. Many are shown in neck fetters or being physically subdued. “On cylinder seals we meet frequent variants of a scene in which the ruler supervises his men as they beat shackled prisoners with clubs.”<sup>21</sup> There are many reports of captives being deliberately blinded, but it is impossible to know how common the practice was. Perhaps the strongest evidence of brutal treatment is the general conclusion by scholars that the servile population did not reproduce itself. In lists of prisoners, it is striking how many are listed as dead—whether from the forced march back or from overwork and malnutrition is not clear.<sup>22</sup> Why valuable manpower would be so carelessly destroyed is, I believe, less likely to be owing to a cultural contempt for war captives than to the fact that new prisoners of war were plentiful and relatively easy to acquire.

The strongest circumstantial evidence for slaves and captive prisoners comes, as one might expect, from later periods after Ur III, when cuneiform texts are more abundant. Whether one can make a case for reading such evidence back to Ur III or find it applicable to our understanding of the Uruk period (c. 3,000 BCE) is highly questionable. In these later periods, much of the apparatus of slave “management” is evident. There are bounty hunters whose specialty it is to locate and return runaway slaves. The escapees are subdivided into “recent” escapees, those long-gone, “deceased” escapees,





Figure 12. Prisoners in neck fetters. Photo courtesy of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad, Dr. Ahmed Kamel

and “returned” escapees, though it seems as if few of the run-away slaves were ever recaptured.<sup>23</sup> Throughout these sources there are accounts of populations fleeing a city for causes as varied as hunger, oppression, epidemics, and warfare. Many captive prisoners of war are undoubtedly among them, though it is unknown whether they fled back to their place of origin, or to another town, which would surely have welcomed them, or to pastoralism. In any event, absconding was a preoccupation of alluvium politics; the later well-known code of Hammurabi fairly bristles with punishments for aiding or abetting the escape of slaves.

A curious confirmation of the conditions of slave and enslaved debtors in Ur III comes from reading a utopian hymn “against the grain.” Prior to the construction of a major temple

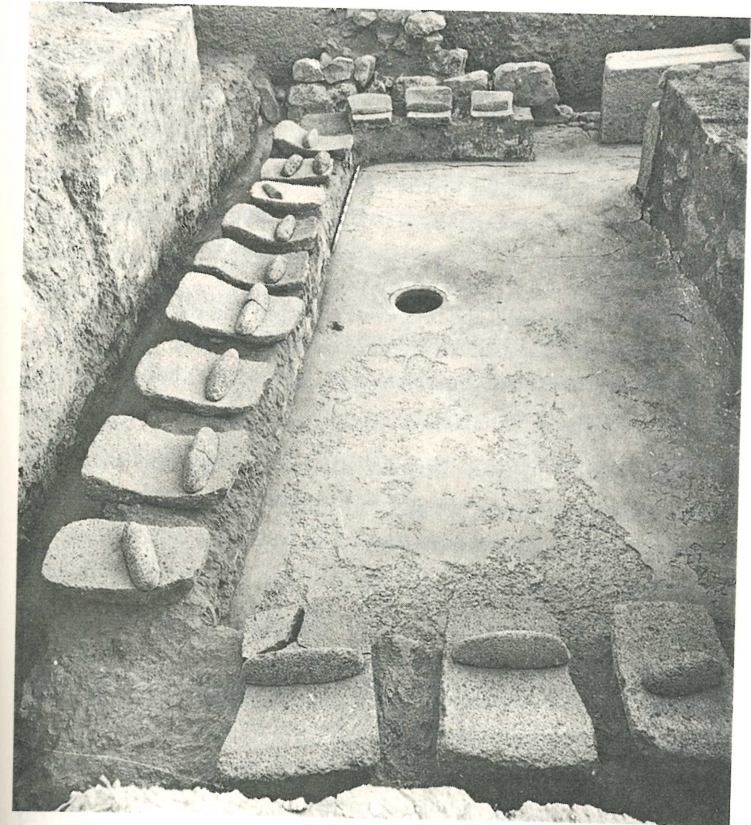


Figure 13. The grinding room in early-second millennium palace at Ebla. Reprinted from Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*



(Eninnu) there was a ritual suspension of “ordinary” social relations in favor of a radical egalitarian moment. A poetic text describes what does *not* happen in this ritual of exception:

The slave woman was an equal of her mistress  
 The slave walked at his master’s side  
 The orphan was not delivered to the rich one  
 The widow was not delivered to the powerful one  
 The creditor did not enter one’s house  
 He [the ruler] undid the tongue of the whip and the goad  
 The master did not strike the slave on the head  
 The mistress did not slap the face of the slave women  
 He canceled the debts<sup>24</sup>

The depiction of a utopian space, by negating the ordinary woes of the poor, weak, and enslaved, provides a handy portrait of quotidian conditions.

## EGYPT AND CHINA

Whether slavery existed at all in ancient Egypt—at least in the Old Kingdom (2,686–2,181 BCE)—is hotly debated. I am in no position to settle the matter, which, in any case, depends on what one considers “slavery” and what period of ancient Egypt we are describing.<sup>25</sup> The issue may be, as one recent commentator describes it, a distinction without a difference, inasmuch as *corvée* and work quotas for subjects were so onerous. An admonition to become a scribe captures the burdens of subjects: “Be a scribe. It saves you from toil and protects you from all manner of work. It spares you from bearing hoe and mattock, so that you do not carry a basket. It sunders you from plying the oar and spares you torment, as you are not under many lords and numerous masters.”<sup>26</sup>

Wars of capture on the Mesopotamian model were conducted during the Fourth Dynasty (2,613–2,494 BCE), and “foreign” prisoners of war were branded and forcibly resettled on royal “plantations” or within other temple and state institutions where the labor quotas were demanding. From what I can gather, though the scale of early slavery is uncertain, it seems clear that during the Middle Kingdom period (2,155–1,650 BCE) something very close to chattel slavery existed on a large scale. Captives were brought back from military campaigns and both owned and sold by slave merchants. “The demand for shackles was so great that the temples regularly placed orders for their manufacture.”<sup>27</sup> Slaves seem to have been passed on by inheritance inasmuch as inventories of inherited property listed livestock and people. Debt bondage was also common. Later, under the New Kingdom (sixteenth to eleventh century BCE), the large-scale military campaigns in the Levant and against the so-called sea peoples generated thousands of captives, many of whom were taken back to Egypt and resettled en masse as cultivators or as laborers in often fatal quarries and mines. Some of these captives were probably among the royal tomb builders who staged one of the first recorded strikes against palace officials who had failed to deliver their rations. “We are in extreme destitution . . . lacking in every staple. . . . Truly we are already dying, we are no longer alive” wrote a scribe on their behalf.<sup>28</sup> Other conquered groups were required to produce annual tribute in metal, glass, and, it seems, slaves as well. What is in doubt for the Old and Middle Kingdoms is not, I think, the existence of something very like slavery, but rather its overall importance to Egyptian statecraft.



What we know of the brief Qin Dynasty and the early Han following it reinforce the impression that the earliest states are population machines seeking to maximize their manpower base by all possible means.<sup>29</sup> Slavery was just one of those means. The Qin lived up fully to its reputation as an early effort at total and systematic rule. It had markets for slaves in the same way as it had markets for horses and cattle. In areas outside dynastic control, bandits seized whomever they could and sold them at slave markets or ransomed them. The capital of both dynasties was filled with war captives seized by the state, by generals, and by individual soldiers. As with most early warfare, military campaigns were mixed with "privateering," in which the most valuable loot comprised the number of captives who could be sold. It seems that much of the cultivation under the Qin was carried out by captive slaves, debt slaves, and "criminals" condemned to penal servitude.<sup>30</sup>

The major technique for assembling as many subjects as possible, however, was the forced resettlement of the entire population—but especially women and children—of conquered territories. The captives' ritual center was destroyed, and a replica rebuilt at Xinyang, the Qin capital, signifying a new symbolic center. As was also typical for early statecraft in Asia and elsewhere, the prowess and charisma of a leader was indexed by his capacity to assemble multitudes around his court.

#### SLAVERY AS "HUMAN RESOURCES" STRATEGY

Finally, war helped to a great discovery—that men as well as animals can be domesticated. Instead of killing a defeated enemy, he might be enslaved; in return for his life he might

be made to work. This discovery has been compared in importance to that of the taming of animals. . . . By early historic times slavery was a foundation of ancient industry and a potent instrument in the accumulation of capital.  
—V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself*

Adopting for the moment the purely strategic view of a quartermaster in charge of manpower needs can help clarify why slavery, in the form of war captives that it usually took, had several advantages over other forms of surplus appropriations. The most obvious advantage is that the conquerors take for the most part captives of working age, raised at the expense of another society, and get to exploit their most productive years. In a good many cases the conquerors went out of their way to seize captives with particular skills that might be useful—boat builders, weavers, metal workers, armorers, gold- and silversmiths, not to mention artists, dancers, and musicians. Slave taking in this sense represented a kind of raiding and looting of manpower and skills that the slaving state did not have to develop on its own.<sup>31</sup>

Insofar as the captives are seized from scattered locations and backgrounds and are separated from their families, as was usually the case, they are socially demobilized or atomized and therefore easier to control and absorb. If the war captives came from societies that were perceived in most respects as alien to the captors, they were not seen as entitled to the same social consideration. Having, unlike local subjects, few if any local social ties, they were scarcely able to muster any collective opposition. The principle of socially detached servants—Janissaries, eunuchs, court Jews—has long been seen

as a technique for rulers to surround themselves with skilled but politically neutralized staff. At a certain point, however, if the slave population is large, is concentrated, and has ethnic ties, this desired atomization no longer holds. The many slave rebellions in Greece and Rome are symptomatic, although Mesopotamia and Egypt (at least until the New Kingdom) appeared not to have slavery on this scale.

Women and children were particularly prized as slaves. Women were often taken into local households as wives, concubines, or servants, and children were likely to be quickly assimilated, though at an inferior status. Within a generation or two they and their progeny were likely to have been incorporated into the local society—perhaps with a new layer of recently captured slaves beneath them in the social order. If manpower-hungry polities like, say, Native American societies or Malay society historically are any indication, it is common to find pervasive slavery together with rapid cultural assimilation and social mobility. It was not uncommon, for example, for a male captive of the Malays to take a local wife and, in time, organize slave-taking expeditions of his own. Providing that slaves were constantly being acquired, such societies would remain slave societies, but, viewed over several generations, earlier captives would have become nearly indistinguishable from their captors.

Women captives were at least as important for their reproductive services as for their labor. Given the problems of infant and maternal mortality in the early state and the need of both the patriarchal family and the state for agrarian labor, women captives were a demographic dividend. Their reproduction may have played a major role in alleviating the other-

wise unhealthy effects of concentration and the *domus*. Here I cannot resist the obvious parallel with the domestication of livestock, which requires taking control over their reproduction. The domesticated flock of sheep has many ewes and few rams, as that maximizes its reproductive potential. In the same sense, women slaves of reproductive age were prized in large part as breeders because of their contribution to the early state's manpower machine.

The continuous absorption of slaves at the bottom of the social order can also be seen to play a major role in the process of social stratification—a hallmark of the early state. As earlier captives and their progeny were incorporated into the society, the lower ranks were constantly replenished by new captives, further solidifying the line between “free” subjects and those in bondage, despite its permeability over time. One imagines, as well, that most of the slaves not put to hard labor were monopolized by the political elites of the early states. If the elite households of Greece or Rome are any indication, a large part of their claim to distinction was the impressive array of servants, cooks, artisans, dancers, musicians, and courtesans on display. It would be difficult to imagine the first elaborate social stratification in the earliest states without war-captive slaves at the bottom and elite embellishment, dependent on those slaves, at the top.

There were, of course, many male slaves outside the households. In the Greco-Roman world, captive enemy combatants—particularly if they had offered stiff resistance—might be executed, but many more were ransomed or brought back as war booty. A state that depends on a population of scarce producers is unlikely to squander the essential prize of early



warfare. Though we know precious little about the disposition of male war captives in Mesopotamia, in the Greco-Roman territories they were deployed as a kind of disposable proletariat in the most brutal and dangerous work: silver and copper mining, stone quarrying, timber felling, and pulling oars in galleys. The numbers involved were enormous, but because they worked at the sites of the resources, they were a far less visible presence—and far less a threat to public order—than if they had been near the court center.<sup>32</sup> It would be no exaggeration at all to think of such work as an early gulag, featuring gang labor and high rates of mortality. Two aspects of this sector of slave labor deserve emphasis. First, mining, quarrying, and felling timber were absolutely central to the military and monumental needs of the state elites. These needs in the smaller Mesopotamian city-states were more modest but no less vital. Second, the luxury of having a disposable and replaceable proletariat is that it spared one's own subjects from the most degrading drudgery and thus forestalled the insurrectionary pressures that such labor well might provoke, while satisfying important military and monumental ambitions. In addition to quarrying, mining, and logging, which only desperate or highly paid men will undertake voluntarily, we might include carting, shepherding, brick making, canal digging and dredging, potting, charcoal making, and pulling oars on boats or ships. It is possible that the earliest Mesopotamian states traded for many of these commodities, thereby outsourcing the drudgery and labor control to others. Nevertheless, much of the materiality of state making depends centrally on such work, and it matters whether those doing it are

slaves or subjects. As Bertolt Brecht, in his poem "Questions from a Worker Who Reads," asked:

Who built the Thebes of the seven Gates?  
 In the books you will read the names of kings.  
 Did the kings haul up the lumps of rocks?  
 And Babylon many times demolished,  
 Who raised it up so many times?

## BOOTY CAPITALISM AND STATE BUILDING

A sure sign of the manpower obsession of the early states, whether in the Fertile Crescent, Greece, or Southeast Asia, is how rarely their chronicles boast of having taken territory. One looks in vain for anything resembling the twentieth-century German call for *lebensraum*. Instead, the triumphal account of a successful campaign, after praising the valor of the generals and troops, is likely to aim at impressing the reader with the amount and value of the loot. Egypt's victory over Levantine kings at Kadesh (1,274 BCE) is not just a paean to the pharaoh's bravery but a record of the plunder, and in particular of the livestock and prisoners—so many horses, so many sheep, so many cattle, so many people.<sup>33</sup> The human prisoners are, here as elsewhere, often distinguished for their skills and crafts, and one imagines that something of an inventory was made of the talent the conquerors had acquired. The conquerors were on the lookout for generic manpower and, simultaneously, for the craftsmen and entertainers who would enhance the luster of the conquerors' courts. The towns and villages of the defeated peoples were generally destroyed so that there was nothing to go back to. In theory, the plunder



belonged to the ruler, but in practice the loot was divided up, with the generals and individual soldiers taking their own live-stock and prisoners to keep, ransom, or sell. Thucydides, in his history of the Peloponnesian Wars, has several accounts of such conquests and adds that most of the wars were fought when the grain was ripe, so that it too could be seized as plunder and fodder.<sup>34</sup>

Max Weber's concept of "booty capitalism" seems applicable to a great many such wars, whether conducted against competing states or against nonstate peoples on its periphery. "Booty capitalism" simply means, in the case of war, a military campaign the purpose of which is profit. In one form, a group of warlords might hatch a plan to invade another small realm, with both eyes fixed on the loot in, say, gold, silver, livestock, and prisoners to be seized. It was a "joint-stock company," the business of which was plunder. Depending on the soldiers, horses, and arms that each of the conspirators contributes to the enterprise, the prospective proceeds might be divided proportionally to each participant's investment. The enterprise is, of course, fraught, inasmuch as the plotters (unless they are merely financial backers) potentially risk their lives. To be sure, such wars may have other strategic aims, like the control of a trade route or the crushing of a rival, but for the early states, the taking of loot, particularly human captives, was not a mere by-product of war but a key objective.<sup>35</sup> Slaving wars were systematically conducted by many of the earliest states in the Mediterranean as a part of their manpower needs. In many cases—in early Southeast Asia and in imperial Rome—war was seen as a route to wealth and comfort. Everyone from the commanders down to the individual soldier ex-

pected to be rewarded with his share of the plunder. To the degree that men of military age were engaged in slaving expeditions, as they were in imperial Rome, it posed a problem for the labor force in grain and livestock production at home. In time, the huge influx of slaves allowed landowners—and peasant soldiers—to replace much of the agrarian labor force with slaves who were not themselves subject to conscription.

Despite the relative absence of hard evidence on the extent of slavery in Mesopotamia and early Egypt, one is tempted to speculate that the slave sector erected over the grain module in the early states was, even if of modest size, an essential component in the creation of a powerful state. The pulses of captive slaves alleviated many of the manpower needs of an otherwise demographically challenged state. Perhaps most crucial was the fact that slaves, a few skilled workers excepted, were concentrated in the most degrading and dangerous labor, often away from the domus, which was central to the material and symbolic sinews of its power. If such states had had to extract such labor exclusively from their own core subjects, they would have run a high risk of provoking flight or rebellion—or both.

#### THE PARTICULARITY OF MESOPOTAMIAN SLAVERY AND BONDAGE

Historians and archaeologists are fond of saying, as we have noted, that "the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." The evidence of slavery and bondage we have examined is hardly absent, but it is sparse enough to have convinced a number of scholars that slavery and bondage were insig-



nificant. In what follows, I hope to suggest the reasons why slavery should seem less obtrusive and central in the Mesopotamian evidence than in Greece or Rome. Those reasons have to do with the modest size and geographical reach of the Mesopotamian polities, the origins of their slave population, the possible “subcontracting” of unfree labor, the importance of *corvée* labor from the subject population, and the potential role of communal forms of bondage. In the course of examining the scholarship on labor in Mesopotamia, I find that in the case of at least some monumental building projects, the labor required of the subject (not slave) population may have been less than often supposed, and that it may even have been accompanied by ritual feasting on the completion of the monument.<sup>36</sup>

Three obvious reasons why Third Millennium Mesopotamia might seem less of a slave-holding society than Athens or Rome are the smaller populations of the earlier polities, the comparably scarce documentation they left behind, and their relatively small geographic reach. Athens and Rome were formidable naval powers that imported slaves from throughout the known world, drawing virtually all their slave populations far and wide from non-Greek and non-Latin speaking societies. This social and cultural fact provided much of the foundation for the standard association of state peoples with civilization on the one hand and nonstate peoples with barbarism on the other. Mesopotamian city-states, by contrast, took their captives from much closer to home. For that reason, the captives were more likely to have been more culturally aligned with their captors. On this assumption, they might have, if allowed, more quickly assimilated to the culture and mores

of their masters and mistresses. In the case of young women and children, often the most prized captives, intermarriage or concubinage may well have served to obscure their social origins within a couple of generations.

The origins of prisoners of war is a further complicating factor. Most of the literature on slavery in Mesopotamia concerns prisoners of war who spoke neither Akkadian nor Sumerian. Yet it is evident that intercity warfare in the alluvium was common. If, in fact, a significant portion of the captives came from intercity warfare for one another’s subjects, and from hitherto independent local communities, then, given their shared culture, it is plausible that the captives would have become ordinary subjects of their captor’s city-state without much further ado—perhaps without even being formally enslaved. The greater the cultural and linguistic differences between slaves and their masters, the easier it is to draw and enforce the social and juridical separation that makes for the sharp demarcation typical of slave societies.

In Athens in the fifth century BCE, for example, there was a substantial class, more than 10 percent of the population, of *metics*, usually translated as “resident aliens.” They were free to live and trade in Athens and had the obligations of citizenship (taxes and conscription, for example) without its privileges. Among them were a substantial number of ex-slaves. One must surely wonder whether the Mesopotamian city-states met a substantial portion of their insatiable labor needs by absorbing captives or refugees from culturally similar populations. In this case such captives or refugees would probably appear not as slaves but as a special category of “subject” and perhaps would be, in time, wholly assimilated.



Just as most Western consumers never directly experience the conditions under which the material foundations of their lives are reproduced, so for the Greeks at Athens, that roughly half of the slave population working in the quarries, mines, forests, and galleys was largely invisible. On a far more modest scale the early Mesopotamian states had need of a male labor force to quarry stone, mine copper for armaments, and provide timber for construction, firewood, and charcoal. As these activities would have been carried out at a substantial distance from the floodplain, it would have been relatively invisible to subjects at the center, though not to state elites. The phenomenon known as “the Uruk Expansion”—the discovery of Uruk cultural artifacts in the hinterlands and in the Zagros Mountains—represents, it seems, a foray to create or guard trade routes for vital goods not available in the alluvium.<sup>37</sup> Though it is certain that slaves were seized in this expansion area, it is unclear whether Uruk directly used slaves and war captives in this primary extraction or whether it exacted tribute in these materials from subjugated communities—or, for that matter, traded grain, cloth, and luxury goods for them. In any case, such coerced labor would have taken place at arm’s length from Uruk—subcontracted perhaps to trading partners—and might therefore leave few if any cuneiform traces.

Finally, there are two forms of communal bondage that were widely practiced in many early states and that bear more than a family resemblance to slavery but are unlikely to appear in the textual record as what we think of as slavery. The first of these might be called mass deportation coupled with communal forced settlement. Our best descriptions of the practice come from the neo-Assyrian Empire (911–609 BCE), where it

was employed on a massive scale. Although the neo-Assyrian Empire falls much later than our main temporal focus, some scholars claim that such forms of bondage were used much earlier in Mesopotamia, Egypt’s Middle Kingdom, and the Hittite Empire.<sup>38</sup>

Mass deportation and forced settlement was, in the neo-Assyrian Empire, systematically applied to conquered areas. The entire population and livestock of the conquered land were marched from the territory at the periphery of the kingdom to a location closer to the core, where they were forcibly resettled, the people usually as cultivators. Although, as in other slaving wars, some captives were “privately” appropriated and others formed into labor gangs, what was distinctive about deportation and forced settlement was that the bulk of the captive community was kept intact and moved to a site where its production could be more easily monitored and appropriated. Here, the manpower and grain-centralizing machine is at work but at a wholesale level, taking entire agrarian communities as modules and placing them at the service of the state. Even allowing for the exaggerations of the scribes, the scale of the population transfers was unprecedented. More than 200,000 Babylonians, for example, were moved to the core of the neo-Assyrian Empire, and the total deportations appear staggering.<sup>39</sup> There were specialists in deportations. Officials conducted elaborate inventories of the captured populations—their possessions, their skills, their livestock—and were charged with provisioning them en route to their new location with a minimum of losses. In some cases, it seems that the captives were resettled on land abandoned earlier by other subjects, implying that forced mass resettlement may



have been part of an effort to compensate for mass exoduses or epidemics. Many of the captives were referred to as "sakinutu," which means "a captive made to settle the soil."

The neo-Assyrian policy is not historically novel. Though we have no idea whether it was common in Mesopotamia, it has been the practice of conquest regimes throughout history—in Southeast Asia and the New World in particular. For our purpose, however, what is most important is that these resettled populations would not necessarily have appeared in the historical record as slaves at all. Once resettled, especially if they were not markedly different culturally, they might well have become ordinary subjects, scarcely distinguishable over time from other agrarian subjects. Some of the confusion over whether earlier Sumerian terms (for example, *erin*) should be translated as "subject," as "prisoner of war," as "military colonist," or simply as "peasant" may well derive from the various classes of subjects that reflect the origins of their "subjecthood."

A final genre of bondage that is historically common and also might not appear in the historical record as slavery is the model of the Spartan helot. The helots were agricultural communities in Laconia and Messinia dominated by Sparta. How they came to be so dominated is a matter of dispute. Messinia seems to have been conquered in war, but some claim that the helots were either those who chose not to participate in warfare or who were collectively punished for an earlier revolt. They were, in any case, distinguished from slaves. They remained in situ as whole communities, were annually humiliated in Spartan rituals, and like the subjects of all archaic agrarian states were required to deliver grain, oil, and wine

to their masters. Aside from the fact that they had not been forcibly resettled as war deportees, they were in all other respects the enserfed agricultural servants of a thoroughly militarized society.

Here, then, is another archaic formula by which the necessary manpower-and-grain complex was assembled that could serve as the surplus-yielding module of state building. It is conceivable, but quite unknowable, that some of the Mesopotamian city-states originated in the conquest or displacement of an agrarian population in situ by an external military elite. In this context, Nissen cautions us to heavily discount the rhetoric stigmatizing nonstate peoples and urges us to recall the constant interchange between mountains and lowlands. He claims, "Even the massive settlement of the Mesopotamian plain of the middle of the fourth millennium may have been part of this process."

"Tempted by the written record we have . . . internalized the viewpoint of the lowland inhabitants."<sup>40</sup> The fact that the place names Ur, Uruk, and Eridu are not Sumerian in origin hints at the possibility of an incursion—or the seizure of control by the militarized faction of an existing agrarian society. It is also conceivable that the grain core was expanded and replenished by the forced resettlement of war captives from the hinterland and from other cities. In either of these cases, such early societies would not have appeared superficially to be slave societies. And in fact, they would not have been slave societies in quite the Athenian or Roman sense. Yet the central role of bondage and coercion in creating and maintaining the grain-and-manpower nexus of the early agrarian state would be perfectly evident.



A SPECULATIVE NOTE ON DOMESTICATION,  
DRUDGERY, AND SLAVERY

States, we know, did not invent slavery and human bondage; they could be found in innumerable prestate societies. What states surely did invent, however, are large-scale societies based systematically on coerced, captive human labor. Even when the proportion of slaves was far less than in Athens, Sparta, Rome, or the neo-Assyrian Empire, the role of captive labor and slavery was so vital and strategic to the maintenance of state power that it is difficult to imagine these states persisting long without it.

What if we were, as a fruitful conjecture, to take seriously Aristotle's claim that a slave is a tool for work and, as such, to be considered as a domestic animal as an ox might be? After all, Aristotle was serious. What if we were to examine slavery, agrarian war captives, helots, and the like as state projects to domesticate a class of human servitors—by force—much as our Neolithic ancestors had domesticated sheep and cattle? The project, of course, was never quite realized, but to see things from this angle is not entirely far-fetched. Alexis de Tocqueville reached for this analogy when he considered Europe's growing world hegemony: "We should almost say that the European is to the other races what man himself is to the lower animals; he makes them subservient to his use, and when he cannot subdue, he destroys."<sup>41</sup>

If we substitute for "Europeans" "early states," and for "other races" "war captives," we do not greatly distort the project, I think. The captives, individually and collectively,

became an integral part of the state's means of production and reproduction, a part, if you will, along with the livestock and grain fields of the state's own domus.

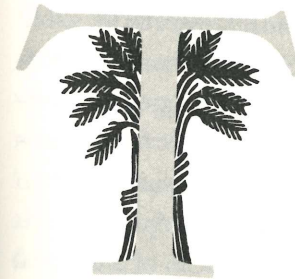
Pushed even farther, I believe the analogy has an illuminating power. Take the question of reproduction. At the very center of domestication is the assertion of human control over the plant's or animal's reproduction, which entails confinement and a concern for selective breeding and rates of reproduction. In wars for captives, the strong preference for women of reproductive age reflects an interest at least as much in their reproductive services as in their labor. It would be instructive, but alas impossible, to know, in the light of the epidemiological challenges of early state centers, the importance of slave women's reproduction to the demographic stability and growth of the state. The domestication of non-slave women in the early grain state may also be seen in the same light. A combination of property in land, the patriarchal family, the division of labor within the domus, and the state's overriding interest in maximizing its population has the effect of domesticating women's reproduction in general.

The domesticated plough animal or beast of burden lifts much of the drudgery from man's back. Much the same could obviously be said for slaves. Over and above the drudgery of plough agriculture, the military, ceremonial, and urban needs of the new state centers required forms of labor in terms of both kind and scale that had no precedent. Quarrying, mining, galley oaring, road building, logging, canal digging, and other menial tasks may have been, even in more contemporary times, the sort of work performed by convicts, indentured laborers, or a desperate proletariat. It's the sort of work



away from the domus that “free” men—including peasants—shun. Yet such dangerous and heavy work was necessary to the very survival of the earliest states. If one’s own agrarian population could not be made to do this work without risking desertion or rebellion, then a captive, domesticated, alien population must be made to do it. That population could be acquired only by slavery—the long-standing, ultimately unsuccessful, and last attempt to realize Aristotle’s vision of the human tool.

*Fragility of the Early State:  
Collapse as Disassembly*



THE more one reads about the earliest states, the greater one’s astonishment at the feats of statecraft and improvisation that brought them into being in the first place. Their vulnerability and fragility were so manifest that it is their rare appearance and even rarer persistence that requires explanation. The image conjured by early state building is that of the four- or five-tiered human pyramid attempted by schoolchildren. It usually collapses before it is completed. When, against the odds, it is built to the apex, the audience holds its breath as it sways and trembles, anticipating its inevitable collapse. If the tumblers are lucky, the last one, representing its peak, has a fleeting moment to pose in triumph for the spectators. To pursue the metaphor a bit farther, the individual segments of the pyramid are, taken singly, quite stable; we might call them the elementary units or building blocks. The elaborate struc-