Monumental Negligence: the Difference between Working and Alienated Labor

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Nothing is more obvious and at the same time hidden than the link between monumentality and labor. Bertolt Brecht's oft-cited poem is right on the mark when it comes to monumentality in the ancient Near East:

> "Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
> In the books you will read the names of kings.
> Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
> And Babylon, many times demolished,
> Who raised it up so many times?"
> (Brecht 2012: 13)

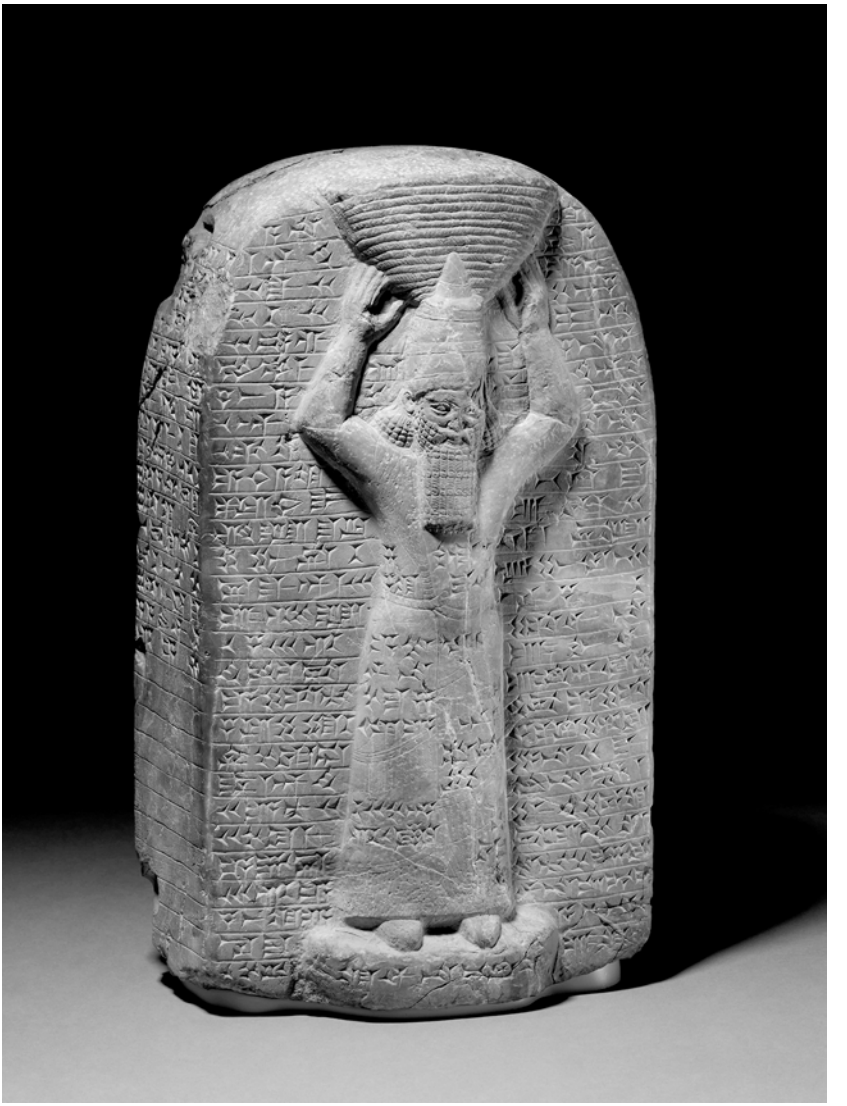
It seems that we have never really tried to answer these "questions from a worker who reads".

An outward answer to Brecht's worker consists in taking the sources literally: yes, Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar built the walls of Babylon. Didn't ancient Western Asian kings depict themselves as laborers with baskets of mud on their heads (Figure 1)? Why should we assume *a priori* that they were lying? Let us take the sources seriously unless proven otherwise.

Uncounted and uncountable citations of historians and archaeologists are at our disposal to show that, indeed, this is the current opinion. I abstain from direct citations, as it would be unjust to single out specific scholars for their literal interpretation of such pictorial and textual sources. A five-minute search turned up fine sentences such as: "Assurnasirpal II baute seinen großartigen Königspalast auf der Zitadelle", "Nebuchadnezzar set out to rebuild Babylon", "the Apadana complex was completed by Xerxes" and others. At least outwardly, both ancient depictions and modern scholarly texts converge on an implicit belief in the heroic deeds of the ancient rulers and a concurrent silencing of laborers.

The reader may object that it is obvious that the language of history serves as a shorthand for 'King X was responsible for the planning and realization of

Figure 1: Stela depicting Assurbanipal rebuilding the temple of ESAGILA in Babylon, excavated by Hormuzd Rassam in 1871 in Babylon (© Trustees of the British Museum)



building Y', that the metaphorical use of image and text is obvious.[1] However, the mechanism behind such reductive imagery is ideology *par excellence*, as it depicts

1 We encounter the same effect in another main activity node, namely the leading of wars. Here we find exactly the same metaphorical use of 'ruler X led a war against ruler Y'. This can be traced into

the particular as the general. More importantly, I submit that this careless language has had a long-lasting deleterious effect on the whole historiography of ancient Western Asia: forgetting not just labor, but more specifically, laborers.

It is therefore appropriate for any discussion of monumentality to not just reflect on the issue of the 'size' of buildings, and thus the perception of them as monumental, but also on the *production of size*. Beyond the ruler-builder, we do indeed find investigations of the relationship between labor and monumentality. However, such research remains one-sided, as the main interest is geared towards the amount of work that goes into a single monument, calculated mainly in terms of person hours. Calculations of this kind have been made for European megaliths (Müller 1990; Bartelt 2007), the pyramids of ancient Egypt (Arnold 1997; Stadelmann 1997: 217–228; Müller-Römer 2011), ancient Mesopotamian monumental projects (Schmid 1995; Sauvage 1998; Wäfler 2003; discussed in Sievertsen 2014), in a different way for the Mississippian mound of Cahokia (Schilling 2012), and on a comparative scale (Brunke et al. 2016). Some of these works are based on a whole school of archaeological thought that has its origin in Elliott Abrams' 'architectural energetics' (Abrams 1994; Abrams/Bolland 1999) where labor is reduced to energy plus organization. Maude Devolder (2017), while using the approach herself, provides a substantial and well-argued critique that, however, leaves one element out: labor from the perspective of laborers themselves. This glaring lacuna is detectable in most other accounts of the relation between monumentality and labor that I know of, even those that critique research in this realm (e. g. Richardson 2015). This tells us a lot about archaeology's position in relation to the powers that be, whether ancient or modern. The discourse amounts to a laborious attempt at objectivity in questions of large-scale, mostly governmental projects, which has led to serious distortions in the reconstruction of ancient political economic mechanisms. Worse, it constructs a top-down view of history where the actual contributions of most people – and even more their aspirations – are left out and silenced. These are the narratives Walter Benjamin (1992) so much derided in his last and desperate reflections on history.

Why should the calculation of work hours be biased? If there is such a bias, what are its mechanisms of misrepresentation? And how can it be avoided? I have argued in other contexts that the historical questions we ask are driven by an eagerness to know, but a knowledge that is not objective (Bernbeck 2009). Knowledge is always constructed from a specific perspective; it is never 'neutral'. Feminist histories are a good case of showing that the supposedly 'objective' androcentric historical narratives exclude one half of humanity (Wylie 2011). Decolonial histories reveal similar problems in the realm of modern international history

the history of more recent times where one may sometimes get the impression that World War II was a conflict between individuals such as Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt.

(Trouillot 1995). The main issue is a paradox: the attempt to avoid perspectivism actually leads straight into it. A direct parallel between the historian/archaeologist's view and that of anyone in the past was supposed to be avoided by taking an omniscient position, a 'bird's eye' (or 'god's eye') view. To continue the metaphor, such a view is not and cannot be taken by anyone 'on the ground'. However, such a view from above is already an approximation of positions in past societies. The view from 'above' asks questions akin to those of past rulers, scribes, and others with management functions. Why not develop questions that focus on other standpoints, following the advice of Georg Lukács (1971) or Sandra Harding (1993)?

To relate this historiographical problem back to the case of labor in ancient times: calculations of the amount of labor that went into the construction of a ziggurat, a temple, a pyramid, or palace need to be assessed for how they impinge on their own objective, which I presume to be the history of the region in question. History itself as a discourse about past times can be written from many positions, even if there is a tendency among historians to claim that an ideal position is an omniscient and presumedly objective one. The historian's reflections about the question "How much labor was needed?" merge easily into the past scribe's question of "How many laborers are needed?" Both questions entail a move, that of an abstraction of concrete practical work and the consideration of work as a commodity independent of the individual laborer's experience of it.

What is alienated labor?

In my further discussion, I take my inspiration from some of Marx's writings. In his well-known late works such as *Das Kapital*, he distinguishes 'abstract labor' from 'concrete labor'. Concrete labor is the making of something, a creative, skilful energy that is needed in the crafting of directly usable objects, in Marx's terminology a 'use value' or *Gebrauchswert*. In both the first volume of *Das Kapital* (Marx 1979) as well as *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Marx 1974), Marx binds abstract labor firmly to the production of exchange value, and an exchange value that has no real purpose other than increasing profits. In this specific sense, abstract labor did not exist in ancient Mesopotamia and related cultures as it is tied to capitalist forms of economy. However, in other writings, at a time when he was still trying to derive the development of capitalism from earlier historical forms of political economy, Marx used a third term, alienated labor. Some scholars have rightly pointed out that the distinction between alienated and abstract labor is crucial; however, most of them deride alienated labor as a notion connected to Marx' early, and therefore idealistic, writings.

My sense is that it is exactly the interest in different historical forms of labor that led Marx to describe 'alienated labor' as a widespread condition for working

people in pre-capitalist societies. He attached four characteristics to alienated labor (Marx 1966: 77–87). First, workers do not work for goals they set for themselves, but rather fulfill the labor demands of others. Second, as a consequence, laboring is not tied to a perspective of usefulness for those who carry it out. The workers' praxis appears to them an externality, uncoupled from their own interests. "It is activity as suffering, strength as weakness" (Marx 1966: 80). They will therefore stop working immediately whenever there is an opportunity to do so. Third, workers as human beings are alienated from their own constitutive, specifically human foundation. Marx compares structures of insects and animals such as bees and beavers with those of human beings, and argues that humans can set themselves generalized productive goals independently of their own physical-biological reproduction. The basis for this is the specifically human relation between labor and consciousness (Balibar 1995: 27–28). Human beings are potentially free to labor or not to do so. However, this fundamental freedom is lost in alienated labor. Finally, laborers are not just alienated from their product, their work, and themselves under such conditions, but also from other workers.

Alienated labor is easily transformed into abstract labor, an entity in a chain that is driven by capitalist profit only (but see Elbe 2014). For workers and an emerging working class, alienated and abstract labor may not differ much subjectively. For those who command labor, the main place where alienated and abstract labor differ from each other is in the generalized objectivation of labor *as well as its products*. Abstract labor is to be distinguished from alienated labor because it is, according to Marx, interested neither in the products and their use value after sale, nor in the quality and amount of labor that go into their production. These issues are of relevance only because they shape the possibilities of making an abstract profit via the appropriation of means of production and a surplus that can be derived from all dependent labor, in order to increase the capital that is behind the whole process. And both kinds of labor must be distinguished from a primordial productive praxis that was 'living labor' (Marx 1983: 592–594), free from private property and the possibilities for an expropriation of means of production. Both alienated and abstract labor imply that bodily (and in our times at least, intellectual) activity can be distinguished from the particular person who performs it, in order to be exchanged against something else, whether for payment or for specific goods. It furthermore means – something we are automatically accustomed to today – that it is possible to conceive of quantities of labor independently of the specific work processes performed and of particular tasks that must be carried out independently of the person who conducts them.[2] Briefly, both alienated and abstract labor can be quantified and packaged into discrete

2 In our days, the representatives of workers, the 'unions', and their counterparts, the 'employers', converge on this understanding of human production.

blocks that are parceled out to laborers. Furthermore, it is assumed that there are people who will carry out these tasks for the sake of their own survival, whether they are interested in the product of this specific labor or not.

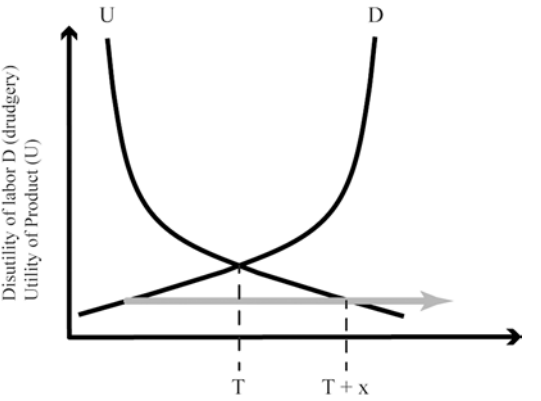
So far, these reflections include subjectivist perspectives, the point of view of potential laborers. However, in the later writings of Marx himself and especially in the exegesis of his followers, we find an insistence that such subjective and therefore individualizing concerns are bourgeois and inappropriate for a political economic analysis. The dispute between the late 19th century *Grenznutzenschule* (marginal utility theory) around Carl Menger and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk (e. g. Böhm-Bawerk 1974) on the one hand and early Marxists such as Nikolai Bucharin on the other is important for my further argumentation. Böhm-Bawerk strongly criticized Marx's theory of labor value from the perspective of the diminishing utility of products in an economic landscape driven by supply-demand mechanisms. In return, Marxists such as Rudolf Hilferding, Bucharin and later Paul Sweezy attacked that narrow and individualizing perspective on political economy and the specific form of labor in the genesis of product value (Hilferding 1904: 11).

> Die Arbeitswerttheorie von A. Smith […] ist eine *subjektivistische Arbeitswerttheorie*. Umgekehrt ist die Werttheorie von Marx ein objektives, d. i. gesellschaftliches Preisgesetz, seine Theorie ist demnach eine *objektivistische Arbeitswerttheorie* […] (Bucharin 1926: 37, emphasis in the original)

I think that the marginalists around Menger and Böhm-Bawerk and the Marxists missed a further issue in their dispute, one that insists on a different aspect of the value of labor beyond consumption. It is interesting that the subjectivist dimension of the laborers themselves and especially their influence on performance 'on the job' were unimportant issues for both the Vienna *Grenznutzenschule* and Marxist theoreticians.[3] They both assumed that laborers would carry out labor as an assigned task in the way conceptualized by capitalists, 'employers', the state. Steadiness of labor across time and space, independent of the quality and kind of labor and of the people who carry it out, is the precondition for all the further economic modeling of these staunchly antagonistic schools. This is also an unspoken assumption that often links us as historians/archaeologists with the organizers and/or theoreticians of labor past and present, whether Roman, Mesopotamian, or others.

3 This dimension certainly occupies an important place in present-day theoretical considerations of labor, especially in post-operaist thinking (e. g. Virno 2004).

Figure 2: Product utility curve U and drudgery (disutility) curve D; grey arrow: assumption of continuous labor effort, disregarding labor disutility



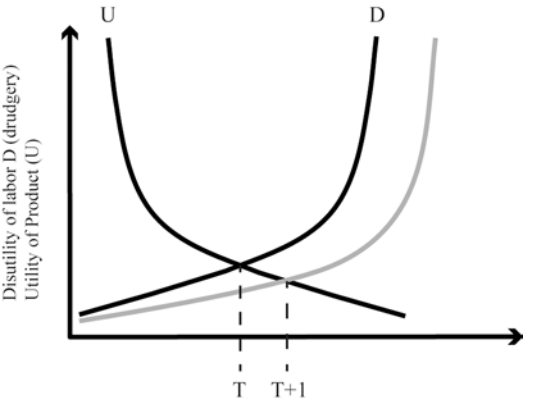
The steadiness of labor performance is entirely unrealistic, as clearly demonstrated by Soviet economist Alexander Chayanov who investigated the logic of non-market peasant production. In economic terms, peasant households can be defined as units producing to an overwhelming extent what they consume; furthermore, the internal distribution of goods amongst individual members is characterized by unconditional reciprocity (Tschajanow 1987). Such households do not conceive of labor as a linear function where the more they work the more they produce up to a point of diminishing product utility T+x, but rather as a function of drudgery (or 'disutility of labor') as exponentially related to the product of labor (Figure 2). Simply put, the first hour of work in a day is easy and therefore the product of such an hour has a relatively high value compared to input. The willingness to labor, compared to the value of the product, decreases as the day goes on. And this is also true for longer-term stretches of labor such as a month-long harvest. Thus, the assumed linear relationship of labor to the value of a product from the laborer's point of view does not hold, because workers see their work and its product in the eyes of concrete, living labor. The consequence is that after a specific point of laboring T (Figure 2), a discrepancy between linear labor requirements and drudgery is reached, marking a point at which physical exhaustion is experienced as outweighing the gains of that effort. According to Chayanov, kinship-based households stop producing at that threshold (see also Durrenberger 1984; Tannenbaum 1984).

Between this state of working in a kin-based and largely self-subsistent household and the abstract labor of capitalist production, we find the third type of labor: Marx' alienated labor. Under conditions of institutions such as the early temple households, palaces, or other large-scale institutions in ancient Mesopotamia,

workers toil not for themselves but for those who decide what kinds of products they have to produce. The four conditions of alienated labor listed above all apply to such a situation. Since the drudgery curve as a subjective perspective of laborers still obtains, those who organize the labor will have to be careful not to reach a crisis point where major conflicts ensue because of too large a discrepancy between drudgery and the gains obtained through submission to large-scale productive units. Public households of early states had to develop specific mechanisms if they wanted to maximize gains from production. In the ancient world we find several different solutions to this problem of transcending what I call the 'utility-drudgery threshold' (hereafter UDT). I outline these mechanisms here briefly in the abstract before discussing a specific case.

(1) Willingness to continue to work can be increased vastly through what Michael Dietler and Ingrid Herbich (2001) call 'labor feasts', the promise of drink and food after the completion of a laborious collective task. This method of mobilizing labor is very widespread in ethnographically documented agrarian societies, mainly those where production occurs in kin-based households. The many circumstances under which such labor feasts happen have recently caught attention, especially in Western Asian archaeology (cf. contributions in Pollock 2015).

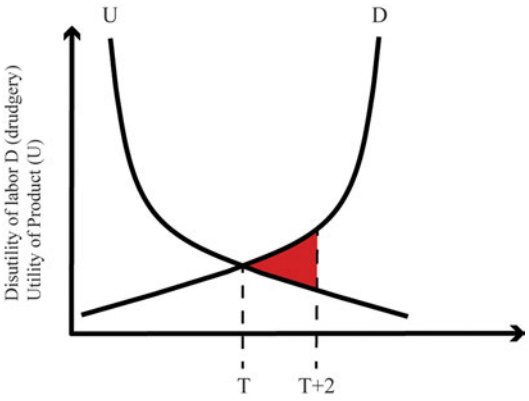
Figure 3: Decreasing disutility of labor through the promise of feasting (T + 1)



In terms of the disutility-utility relation, labor feasts effectively lower the rate at which feelings of drudgery grow with the duration of labor because of a reasonable expectation of an enjoyable reward in the form of a social and commensal event that often includes the consumption of alcohol (Dietler 2006). Consequently, the drudgery curve is lowered and the critical point of exhaustion (UDT) shifts from T to T + 1 (Figure 3).

(2) The second solution to increase output in the face of the adversity of laborers to drudgery is sheer repression. In my view, many of the manifestations of violence in early states need to be seen in states' (or other institutions') efforts to enforce continued production through threats to physical integrity. This happened in situations where any personal gains beyond payment, such as competition for better status positions, were simply not to be expected. Such mechanisms for increasing the labor output from a subjectively bearable point T to T+2 (Figure 4) work only punctually and increase tensions to the point of evasion, emigration, or even violent disruption. In the long term, these are not sustainable conditions.

Figure 4: Possibilities of producing temporarily beyond the equilibrium point of labor disutility (drudgery) and product utility (T+2)



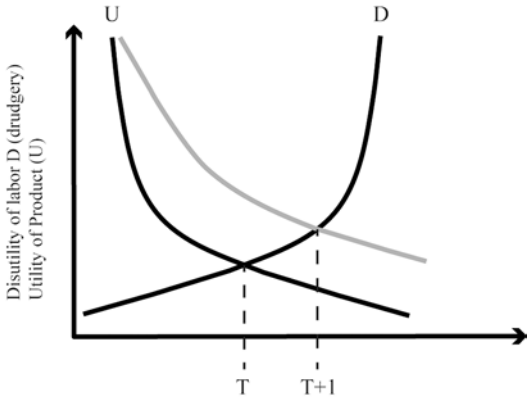
(3) Repression is not the only means to force people to labor more than they would, could they choose. Another means consists of the mobilization of various mechanisms in what Louis Althusser called 'ideological state apparatuses' (1971; cf. also Charim 2009). Particularly effective are those that work through a mix of spectacle, awe, and fear of future retaliation, such as institutionalized religions; the development of social relations that include punishment for debt are another powerful means in this realm. Again, such mechanisms do not lead to any change in the utility of product/disutility of labor curves but uphold its original intersection point. The attraction of spectacles and belief in ideological schemes that suggest a duty to produce beyond the interests of one's own closely-knit social group often end up in a vague sense of obligation coupled with widespread cynical attitudes towards the powerful. Relatively stable political-economic conditions may ensue, but they are no more than a thin veneer under which resentment runs deep (Scott 1990; 2017). Working to rule

while full of contempt and scorn about the work situation is a serious issue we have difficulties grasping historically (but see Lüdtke 1993) and even more archaeologically.

(4) There are several other, more benign possibilities to deal with the discrepancy between alienated labor and drudgery. One is to divide the labor process into smaller temporal stretches, stopping at the point where drudgery is so high that grumbling and complaints become dangerous. Timothy Pauketat (2000) has shown that the huge 'Monks Mound' at the Mississippian site of Cahokia was built incrementally, not in one extended labor process. To mention a different example, the completion of Cologne Cathedral took 632 years (Back/Höltken 2008). Stretching the time it takes to complete a monument may not always be intentional, but the long breaks of building inactivity are often at least partly due to the reaching of the UDT. To pick up the Brechtian question cited at the beginning of this paper, it is important not only to ask who built the monuments, but also 'How long did it take them?'

(5) A fifth possibility is that the labor force is organized into alternately working groups. The realization of this possibility requires an extremely large labor force and produces potentially very large numbers of non-working people who must be fed in addition to those who are working. In this case, the utility of the labor curve could be significantly changed since the decrease of each single unit produced is much lower than in the cases described above (Figure 5). However, how this plays out at the level of laborers is another, less predictable issue.

Figure 5: The effects of an increase in the work force on the utility of labor-curve



(6) Finally, a solution to this problem consists in the development of new means of production that lower the drudgery curve, often considerably, so that the point of stopping because of physical or psychological exhaustion is signifi-

cantly postponed. This solution is based on technological innovation with the goal of lowering the drudgery curve (similar to Figure 3). Current studies of ancient innovations show attempts at technological change in many facets of life (Flohr 2016; Burmeister/Bernbeck 2017), but also reveal a striking lack of interest in improving labor conditions. While we find some instances in ancient times where such a strategy was followed, for example in the invention of windmills in eastern Iran (e. g. Mishmastnehi/Bernbeck 2015), this mechanism came into full force only with modernity and the invention of the steam machine. From that time on, working people came increasingly under pressure to increase their labor efficiency to keep up with the new technological devices. Thus working people were regularly losing out on work opportunities, meaning that they were no longer threatened by the drudgery of work because they faced the greater danger of losing their subsistence base altogether. Mimicking machines, this forgotten side of a basic mechanism of capitalist production has led humanity to try desperately to adapt to the machinery it has created, an effect Günter Anders (1956) calls a 'Promethean slope' (cf. also Rosa 2013).

Obviously, one of the questions for concrete historical cases is whether this problem of a clash between alienated and concrete labor arose, and if so, which of the possible roads was taken to solve it. It is obviously highly unlikely that in any specific case one single mechanism was mobilized at the expense of all others. Realistically, we have to assume the employment of a mix of these and other possibilities wherever political-economic conditions led to the emergence of abstract labor.

Alienated labor in Ancient Mesopotamia

A systematic search for how archaeological texts deal with the issue of ancient alienated labor and its organization is beyond the scope of this paper but would contribute an important chapter to the intellectual history of archaeology. Even well-known Marxist archaeologists such as Gordon Childe were of the opinion that enslavement was a great step forward in human history as it allowed the erection of monumental buildings (Childe 1941: 134). Such crude assessments have become less frequent or at least less explicit. Mostly, accounts concerned with economic issues assume laborers to just have been there. Apparently, they could be easily duped into toiling for the rulers and elites of the past. Two main arguments prevail in the literature. One is the idea that ideological means simply sufficed to convince people that adhering to a status of submission was in their own best interests. A second uses the vocabulary of 'mobilizing' labor, suggesting a constant effort at attracting people to work for a larger system and measuring the success of such endeavors in terms of the 'prestige' of a ruler or an elite (see below).

The most important source concerning alienated labor in the past consists of documents of payment for work. Where textual evidence is available, it is possible to calculate labor payments and their changes over time. In ancient Mesopotamia, they were mostly calculated in person-days, as rations handed out to workers (but see Steinkeller 2015: 27). Here, I will refer to a very early period where texts are only partly readable, but where we are in the comfortable position of disposing of a massive amount of archaeological remains for labor payment. This is the mid-4th to early 3rd millennium, when so-called beveled rim bowls have been found at many sites in extremely large numbers (Figure 6). Hans Nissen (1970) has suggested, based on a parallel between a proto-cuneiform pictorial sign for 'eating' and similarities to a head eating/drinking out of a bowl, that the sign designates beveled rim bowls as containers for the distribution of food. A long list of alternative interpretations is available, none of which is able to include so many of the most basic characteristics of this strange mass artifact (for a useful history of interpretations cf. Potts 2009; cf. also Goulder 2010; Sanjurjo-Sánchez et al. 2016). So far, attempts at specifying their function via the analysis of food remains have not been very successful (but see Sanjurjo-Sánchez et al. 2018).

Figure 6: Beveled rim bowls (Photo by bpk/Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum/Olaf M. Teßmer)

Without going into great detail here, these bowls are distributed over a huge geographical expanse, reaching from western Pakistan to southeastern Turkey. Remarkable is the very high density at which they occur at many sites, as well as the fact that they were often thrown away while still complete and useable. This underscores their role as a cheap means of labor compensation in early historical periods in Western Asia.

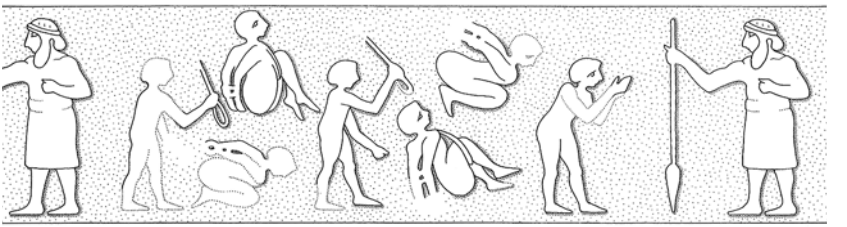
I consider the time during which the bowls were used as a period when structures of political economy did not change fundamentally. Thus, I shall take the liberty to pull different facets of an overarching political economy from various places and sub-periods together under the presumption of a coherent system that existed for some time. The bowls themselves are an early manifestation of alienated labor, of dependency and institutions that had an interest in keeping this system running (Nissen et al. 1993). Consequently, it is important to identify potential measures that may have served to negotiate reaching the UDT in one or several of the ways outlined above. Before going into more detail, I might add that this paper will not try to differentiate the kinds of labor carried out by different genders, a lacuna to be filled by taking into account the problems of the gender/labor nexus in the period in question (cf. Pollock/Bernbeck 2000; Asher-Greve 2008).

I include a number of indicators that do not necessarily co-occur everywhere or along the whole duration of the existence of these bowls. In the late 4th millennium BCE there are so far no traces of unhierarchized labor feasts as described by Dietler and as postulated for a precursor of the bevelled rim bowls, the 'Coba Bowls' in late 5th millennium northern Mespotamia (Kennedy 2015). In the 4th millennium, different, hierarchized kinds of feasting certainly played an important role and are documented for Arslantepe's public buildings as well as the TW sector at Tell Brak (Emberling/McDonald 2003; Helwing 2003; Frangipane 2012).

Who were the laborers? In several papers, Robert Englund (1998; 2009) has shown that textual evidence from this period depicts laborers on a par with working animals. It is important to integrate this insight into any labor history, as the various possibilities of manipulating the utility-drudgery threshold are based on this mind set among the elite. It is therefore perhaps not astonishing to find the first depictions of brutal violence in these times of the earliest states, i. e. in the Late Uruk and Jamdat Nasr periods. Such scenes, particularly sealings from the excavations in Uruk itself, have sometimes been connected to inter-polity wars.[4] Traditional art historical interpretations leave open the question of the kind of violence and cast the representations as 'prisoner' or 'torture scenes' (Figure 7; Englund 1998; Boehmer 1999).

4 There is indeed potential evidence for collective violence from the northern Mesopotamian site of Hamoukar (Reichel 2011) and extensive evidence for violence resulting in mass graves at Tell Brak/Majnuna, also located in northeastern Syria. At least for Tell Brak/Majnuna, the analyses point to violence on a local level (McMahon et al. 2007: 163).

Figure 7: 'Prisoner scene' depicting brutal violence against unknown adversaries by a power holder and his adherents (from Boehmer 1999, Tafel 17, Nr. 4 I-L)



The actual seals with the beating of bound and shackled naked people have not been found, only their impressions on clay sealings. However, the importance of this imagery is obvious. Boehmer's analysis leads him to recognize 27 different seals that were used for the Late Uruk corpus he analyzed from the Eanna precinct at Uruk. Among these he identified six different types of scenes, from offering bearers to temple scenes, a hero and animals, various kinds of animals, and a mysterious 'oil jug and fraying cloth'. The scene with the largest number of different seals was the prisoner imagery, with seven out of the 27 seals used for the production of the sealings recovered (Boehmer 1999).

It was exactly the seals with these depictions that were used particularly frequently, and such sealings need to be understood in their full effect. They are first of all a 'witness for a contact', namely between the seal and the object on which it was impressed, and thus for a present absence: the person or institution who owned the seal (Didi-Huberman 2008). Breaking the seal was either an act of power or one of deceit, and the violent imagery refers to the potential consequences of actions against the rules. The 'prisoner' seals can be read as an early rendering of the pretension to monopolize the use of violence. Second, sealings were the only way to reliably multiply imagery in ancient times: they were a kind of ancient Instagram device. Since seals were part of a dispositive of control, we can infer that the frequency and ubiquity of a seal image were driven by a political will to impart a message, in the case of the prison/war scenes that of fear. I read the documentation of the late 4th to early 3rd millennium sealings from Uruk itself as a threat of violence, a sign that violence was part of the repertoire used to enforce labor, should it not be performed according to requirements. This is underscored by the finds of small limestone figurines of bound and shackled persons in Uruk (Feller 2013: fig. 24.5). As mentioned above, such acts could not turn into continuous practices in a political-economic system but likely remained the dramatic climax of mounting tensions that frequent depiction integrated firmly into collective memory.

Public feasts were another element that replaced the above-mentioned labor feasts. The famous 'Warka Vase' has been subject to numerous interpretations, the most thoroughgoing of recent times by Zainab Bahrani (2002). In the uppermost

register, it depicts a scene that can be amended to have been the meeting between a woman, the goddess Inanna or her priestess, and a broken away figure that can be reconstructed as the 'En' or ruler who appears on seals and other imagery. Between the two is a tribute bringer, behind the 'En' an attendant, while the Inanna/priestess figure is accompanied by cult materials such as statues of adorants, but also two further vases of the kind on which the whole scene is depicted. Bahrani discusses the complex message of this constellation of figures, first in terms of the old and worn question of who the woman is, later arguing that her *performance* as goddess in the meeting with the ruler matters, not whether she *is* a goddess or a priestess.

The complex cosmology of the vase has been commented on sufficiently. I will focus instead on the naked tribute bringers of the second register. They are all men who carry huge baskets or vessels overflowing with products, enacting through ritual "an order that may not be fully itself without such celebration. In joyfully reaffirming order and legitimacy, rulers and elites use wealth to counter fragility, especially in celebrations and ceremonies that involve much of the wider society" (Yoffee 2005: 40). Such a reading renders the common understanding of the message of this vase, of religious systems, elaborate temples, palaces, and other material manifestations of ancient states: they have the function of producing the awe that makes people stay part of a system where they are the losers. But were these ideological means really powerful enough to increase the willingness of laborers to toil for others at the expense of their own interests? The instability of ancient political systems tells a different story, and political instability may well have been to the advantage of those at the lower end of the social ladder (Scott 2017). Small-scale and mostly failed uprisings, it should be remembered, have not been a focus of archaeology, whether in Western Asia or elsewhere. But direct resistance is not the only possibility to deal with unbearable labor conditions. Evasion is another, perhaps more often chosen, option and consisted mainly of 'voting with the feet', leaving the realm of the sedentary cities and villages to take up a mobile way of life (Nissen 1980; see also Sallaberger 2007).

As mentioned, another potential way for the elites to deal with the problem of the utility-drudgery threshold is the increase of the labor force so that one part of the workers can dispense with working for some time. Such a situation is extremely difficult to trace, whether through textual or archaeological evidence. And in addition, this attempt at finding a solution to avoid reaching the utility-drudgery threshold (UDT) could lead to an ancillary problem of unrest among the non-working parts of a dependent population. Gregory Johnson (1987) has proposed that major building projects can be traced back to measures aimed at preventing such secondary social problems by starting public work efforts that were not directly connected to subsistence labor. The construction of large monuments could have been part of such make-work projects. He coined the term 'piling behavior' for these mechanisms and linked them to the massive buildings observable in Meso-

america, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Monumentality, if one follows that argument, would be a secondary effect of other large-scale public projects that were situated in the subsistence realm, such as harvesting and the construction and upkeep of canals (Richardson 2015).

It is indeed remarkable that the time when we witness the first massive appearance of alienated labor produces a highly unusual effort at erecting a variety of monumental buildings whose shapes were hitherto completely unknown. The vast ensemble of the Eanna complex in the city of Uruk still does not reveal to us the specific functions of most of these buildings (Eichmann 2007; Butterlin 2015), not to speak of functional relations between these structures. Because of their multiplicity and the close sequence of various structures with quite different plans, they almost give the impression of having been constructed for the sake of constructing. Remarkably, many of the types of buildings in the Eanna precinct, such as the 'Pfeilerhalle' or the 'Steingebäude', remain unique in Mesopotamian history. Thus, the suspicion voiced by Johnson that such monuments in all their complexity were the result of keeping a vastly increased labor force occupied is not an outlandish speculation. One caveat must be added: recent analyses about the building process itself show that the variety of skills needed for transport, preparation, and construction of such buildings was considerable – this was not simply a scheme to occupy masses of unskilled laborers (Hageneuer/Levenson 2018), even though plenty of them were likely drawn into such projects.

The initial need for the upkeep of major irrigation works would have led to the demand for a significant labor force and the structural problem of reaching the utility-drudgery threshold. Attracting people from the surroundings, that is, rural-urban migration (Pollock 1999), would have enabled a labor organization that was based on alternating work gangs. In turn, this might have produced the need for 'make-work' jobs, the materialization of which is seen in the inscrutable monuments of Eanna in Uruk. However, such a solution had a paradox effect, since a positive feedback cycle set in that led to even greater demand for labor and in the long run to an untenable situation. Paradoxically, the political solution to a problem aggravated it, as the erection of monuments increased drudgery instead of diminishing it. Linking such conditions to David Graeber's (2018) catchy expression of patently useless jobs in the digital age, we can claim that toiling to erect massive public buildings was not only the first case of 'bullshit jobs' in history, but that such jobs emerged almost simultaneously with alienated labor itself.

A final solution for the utility-drudgery threshold could be the introduction of technologies that could decrease drudgery during work, a transfer of bodily spent energy to machines. Susan Pollock (2017) has recently shown that innovations in the realm of labor in the Uruk period were meant to speed up work processes, such as pottery making on a fast wheel. However, those innovations that would alleviate drudgery are few and far between. One of them likely was the

domestication of equids, which probably occurred in northwestern Africa sometime in the 5th to 4th millennia BCE (Rossel et al. 2008). Their earliest appearance in imagery, however, depicts them as draught animals for the wagons of the elite, not as animals destined for the lowering of human drudgery. Strangely, another machine-like device, the newly introduced potter's wheel, was employed for the production of all kinds of vessel shapes, but *not* for the mass-produced beveled rim bowls, which continued to be shaped by hand through pressing them in molds. Only at the very end of the era considered here, in the Jemdet Nasr period, do we find mass-produced wheel-turned vessels. Technological innovations apparently served aesthetic, ideological, and specific functional purposes, but the lowering of the utility-drudgery threshold was not among them.

Conclusion

Labor is a precondition for ancient monumentality. However, calculations of the amount of labor that went into a particular building need to take into account subjective aspects of labor, and particularly those on the part of the laborers themselves. Requirements for massive construction efforts cannot be assumed to simply meet approval from laborers because workers see their toil in relation to their own living conditions. While this would seem to be self-evident, archaeological literature shows that this statement merits repeating. A host of different mechanisms were used in ancient societies to force and cajole people into carrying out unappealingly dull, laborious, backbreaking tasks or to lure them into finding the rewards attractive. In the event, new temporalities – scheduling mechanisms for work – may have been invented, and the solutions to the issue likely produced their own set of unintended consequences. Only rarely can we identify technological solutions that would have alleviated drudgery, and if so, they tend to be secondary applications of an innovation in another sphere of life. We need to consider more closely the perspective of those who dug foundation trenches, who plucked sheep wool, who made bricks, who wove cloth, and who carried baskets of clay on their heads. Then we might better understand who raised up Babylon so many times after it was demolished.

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