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### Analyzing Debt:

#### Finding Hierarchy within the Archeological Record

Throughout David Graeber's *Debt*, there is emphasized the notion of mutual reciprocity as it relates to indebtedness. Debt can exist as a driving force for social cohesion, or as a justification for violence. What is really the deciding factor, is how the individuals perceive each other in any given social interaction. Whether they're equal, lesser, kings, slaves, serfs, peons. The relationship between the creditor and debtor, can change, and be rearrange in accordance with these social relationships. A superior may demand more from a subject, and may even frame the demand in the context of a debt to paid. Debts between unequal parties, may even become institutionalized. As Graeber points out theories of state making, have actually even been formulated around the principle of violence, as is the case of the raider theory developed by Ibn Khaldun.<sup>1</sup> This stands out in contrast to the forms of debt that Graeber describes, that go on between equals, within say neolithic societies. The absence of a social structure, commonly referred to as hierarchy is the defining characteristic in which debt can become a justification for violence. The presence of hierarchical forms of social organization in human history are prevalent, as are commonly understood to be one of the necessities to living within an advanced agriculturally based societies, which started to transform during the Neolithic period in human history. How often was hierarchy present in the archeological record?

1. Graeber, pg. 109.
2. Ibid, pg. 217.
3. Charpin, pg. 8
4. Ibid
5. Edwards, pg. 121

Debt was used to establish social hierarchy within the Mesopotamian civilization, often considered to be one of the earliest human civilizations, emerging between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, which was a heart of agricultural production. As well as a city state in which the practice of credit arrangements. What Graeber notes, what was also common as a period of debt cancellation, as a way of establishing social order. Or as a way removing the threat of insurrection and popular resistance, as cancellation of debts was often a significant factor.<sup>2</sup> Mesopotamia was certainly organized in a hierarchical fashion, as was common in neolithic state projects. A specialized class of scribes, whose work was the recording of legalities, often having to do with debt and credit arrangements were often separated from the lower social classes.<sup>3</sup> Those that had the ability to participate in the legalities of the society, the literate class, weren't the peasants (the farmers and tradesmen,) but rather a class of nobles, merchants, kings, the rulers of the society.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the population of ancient city states, those that cultivated the surplus of grains, weren't literate.<sup>5</sup> What's characteristic here is the presence of specialization of labor, stratification of peoples in social classes, and the usage of a written language recorded on clay tablets, which really distinguishes Mesopotamia as an ancient civilization, and city state. The origin of money as Graeber would suggest in the need to fund a standing army is in line with at least the presence of militarism in all of the Babylonian and Sumerian City states, in which a great deal of evidence survives in the archeological record.<sup>5</sup> The usage of the standing armies to control and dominate populations of peasantry, and as well to participate in warfare. In babylonia it would seem that slaves were often used to produce maintain and produce systems of irrigation necessary to maintaining functioning agricultural practices.<sup>6</sup> The social organization found within the Sumerian and Babylonian city states was also centered around a temple, which taxation would be used to pay for it's dependents (priest, families, staff) and their often lofty expenditures, this was usually collected through fees and taxation on citizens, which could, and as paid with a variety of different goods.<sup>7</sup>

7. Edwards, pg. 128.

8. Graeber, pg. 184.

As Graeber has noted debts may also have been paid in the form human slaves to the temple. This was largely due to the nature of the early city state in which the poor peasantry, or conversely tribal peoples would migrate in and out of city complexes, in accordance with their needs. Often indebt, the patriarchally driven families would be forced to sell their daughters into prostitution, as a means of honoring a payment on loans.<sup>8</sup> Often the course of development during the neolithic was the increased presence of hierarchy in forms of social organization.

7. Edwards, pg. 128.

8. Graeber, pg. 184.

## Citations

1. Charpin, Dominique, and Jane Marie Todd. *Writing, Law, And Kingship In Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
2. Edwards, I E. S. *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Print.
3. Graeber, David. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011. Print.

7. Edwards, pg. 128.

8. Graeber, pg. 184.