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A rational god: rationality and religion in an Old Babylonian temple's business management

Thibaud Nicolas

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Muziris 2

Μουζιρίς



Modern Economics and the Ancient World

Were the Ancients Rational Actors?

Selected Papers from the Online Conference,
29–31 July 2021

Edited by Sven Günther

Zaphon

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Historische Papyrologie, Epigraphik und
verwandte Gebiete der antiken Kulturen

Historical papyrology, epigraphy and
neighbouring fields in ancient cultures

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Modern Economics
and the Ancient World

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Modern Economics and the Ancient World: Were the Ancients Rational Actors?
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= Muziris 2

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A Rational God?

Rationality and Religion in the Ebabbar of Sippar, an Old Babylonian Temple

Thibaud Nicolas

Abstract: Could a god act as a rational economic actor? In this paper, we shall try to answer this seemingly odd question. In Ancient Mesopotamia, gods and goddesses were acting as individuals: that is the reason why this paper will try to explain how Šamaš, the Mesopotamian Sungod, was acting in the economic and financial fields. We will focus on the Ebabbar temple, built in Sippar in the first half of the second millennium BCE, in order to answer a simple and yet complex question: how rational could religion-based decisions be? There is evidence that ancient Mesopotamians had their own economic fictions, as we have ours. If they probably did not believe in a rational *homo oeconomicus*, this paper intends to show that the Sungod and his *paredra Aya* were often acting in a logical and rational way as they were lending silver, bargaining, and supplying the needy. This paper will also try to demonstrate that behind this economically active god we can find a social network of priests, notables and other individuals interacting in order to uphold the wealth and power of the Sungod. We will try to understand how rational their choices were. Finally, we will sketch the portrayal of a debt-based economy with its own coherence and rationality.

Keywords: Temples – Maximization – Debt – Charity – Ancient Near East – Sippar – Old Babylonian Period

In modern economies, the word ‘rationality’ usually refers to the neo-classical theory postulating that economic actors are *homines oeconomici*, acting with their own interests and profits in mind in order to maximize them. This approach is especially connected to the neoclassical economic theory which was refunded in the 1970’s, when the monetarists developed a theory based on the concept of rational choices and expectations.¹ Yet, the theoretical framework of rational choices, based on Weber’s theories developed in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1904–1905), sketched a portrayal of economic actors as rational *homines oeconomici* making

1 Muth 1961; Miller 1962; Friedman 1970.

transactions, exchanging, bargaining, interacting with a supply-maximization purpose.²

In neoclassical economic theory, rationality is based upon “axioms such as completeness, reflexivity, transitivity, and continuity. It treats a choice as rational if it is the one most likely to satisfy these preferences”.³ Moses I. Finley has applied that perception to the Ancient World in his 1973-book *The Ancient Economy*, and he developed the idea of a “peasant mentality”.⁴ According to Finley, ancients were completely missing even the concept of amortization, as he wrote: “investment in land in short was never in antiquity a matter of systematic, calculated policy, of what Weber called economic rationality.” Then, they were mainly focusing on economic sufficiency. Nevertheless, according to Finley, even if the preoccupation for self-sufficiency was an important feature of the ancient economy, it was not the only purpose of transactions in the Ancient world and “the stress on taking steps to avoid cash outlays [...] must be explained within a framework of profit making.”⁵ Indeed, Finley’s theory came mostly from Weber’s theorization of the passage from *oikos* to the market economy: rationality is mainly understood to be about profit-making, with the aim to produce wealth and power for the profit-maker. This theory is based upon the idea of a competitive and insightful *homo oeconomicus*.

On the other hand, Karl Polanyi developed a substantivist theory of rationality. According to him, economic choices are embedded in a broader cultural and spiritual context. Rational choices do not take place in a vacuum and, as such, must always be correlated to the environment in which they are made. A religious decision therefore cannot be rational because it will always take place in a religious economy that has not been “disembedded”: a quite paradoxical matter.

Moreover, our theoretical framework is based on modern theories and literature exclusively, for the simple reason that ancient Mesopotamians did not leave behind theoretical or reflexive writings. There is no Babylonian Aristotle, no Assyrian Anonymus Iamblichy, no Sumerian Cato. Yet, this theoretical framework must not prevent us from trying to understand how rational the economic actions driven by Ebabbar, the temple of Šamaš, and its clergymen were. It is difficult to use the term rationality when discussing a set of unconceptualized phenomena built over generations. However, we shall not feel limited by terminology but rather encouraged to question it – however fuzzy rationality may be as a concept. Therefore, we

2 Gates / Steane 2007.

3 Teraji 2018, 137.

4 “They had a ‘peasant-like’ passion for self-sufficiency on their estates, however extravagant they may have been in their urban outlays” (Finley 1973, 109).

5 Ibid., 109–110.

shall use in this paper the following definition of ‘rationality’, binding together Polanyi perspectives and Weberian ideas (and connecting them through their lowest common denominator): “the capacity of making choices in investments and transactions with the aim to develop appropriate means and reach a specific and anticipated purpose”. Using this definition, this paper will assess whether the Sungod Šamaš and its clergy were rational actors.

1. Social, economic, and historical framework

In this article, we will mainly focus on the ancient City of Sippar, in central Mesopotamia, 50 kilometers from Baghdad. This town is widely recorded in ancient literature, not only in Mesopotamian texts but also in Greek chronicles such as Berossos’.⁶ According to scholars, Sippar has two main characteristics: it is considered a twin city and a Sun city.

First, it has been associated by some ancient scholars with the biblical Sepharvāim,⁷ and therefore deemed a twin city in the North with Sippar-amnanum and in the South with Sippar-yahrurum.⁸ Sippar’s second characteristic was its great temple of the Sungod Šamaš, called the Ebabbar, which means “shiny house” in Sumerian, a shrine of great importance throughout all Babylonian History.⁹

This temple was a powerful and wealthy socio-economic organization. As such, it was also the core of major social networks based on debts. Indeed, the Mesopotamian economy during the Old-Babylonian period was mainly relying upon debts¹⁰. If we want to question the rationality behind such a process, we shall also question the usual definition of “economic rationality” based on the concepts of maximization and profit-seeking. Indeed, those debt-networks could be interpreted as part of a maximization’s strategy but to understand clearly what kind of debts were

6 Verbrugge / Wickersham 1996 is an extensive study on Berossos that deals notably with that issue.

7 2 Kings 17:24, 31; 18:34; 19:13; Isa 37:13. For this ancient identification, see Scheil 1895, 203–206. It has been also discussed (in English) in Rassam 1897, 408–409.

8 Charpin 1992; 2005b.

9 We will not discuss the Ebabbar during the first millennium BCE but will rather study its place and role in the Old Babylonian period (during the second millennium BCE). Focusing on this temple and its documentation will help us to draw meaningful conclusions about rational activities in a religious context. About the role of the Ebabbar during the Neo-Babylonian period, see esp. Bongenaar 1997 (with bibliography) or Zawadzki 2013; 2014.

10 For perspectives on ancient Mesopotamian economy and the importance of debts in it, see Renger 1995; Stol 2004; Neumann 2006; Démare-Lafont 2019; Mynářová / Alivernini 2020.

handled by the Ebabbar, we need to introduce a distinction established by French scholars Michel Aglietta and André Orléan between horizontal and vertical debts.¹¹ Horizontal debt binds an individual creditor to an individual debtor, it must be repaid in a specific time limit, and it is solved once repaid. This is the common way to understand the word debt in our contemporary economies. On the other hand, vertical debt is owed by the debtor to a society and its anthropological superstructures such as religious, political, and social organizations. They bind everyone together, and they cannot be fully repaid. In fact, even the organizations owning them were not expecting them to be repaid. It is in the light of this concept that we can study the rationality of the Ebabbar's dependents and members. Yet, to understand whether the Ebabbar's clergy and the god Šamaš were rational actors, we need to explain the economic framework of the Old-Babylonian Sippar.

Sippar was also a merchant-city, settled on the bank of an important channel connecting Tigris and Euphrates. The city was located at the crossroad of fluvial traffic and along a terrestrial commercial road leading from northern to southern Babylonia.¹² During the first half of the second millennium, the city grew and became prosperous due to its commercial activity and the fame of its Šamaš shrine. The Sungod cult was so famous that Babylonian kings took pride in making offerings to the Ebabbar on their year names.¹³ The other important place in Sippar was its *gaġûm*-cloister where learned and rich daughters¹⁴ of Babylonian and Sipparian nobles were nuns. It was so famous that even Babylonian kings could eventually give

11 Aglietta / Orléan 2002.

12 Harris 1975, 257–258; Charpin 1982; de Boer 2013; 2021.

13 In Mesopotamia, the date was given by a 'year name': indeed, each year was named after an important event, like a military victory, a religious or architectural achievement or a king's coronation. And when looking at Hammurabi's year's name, one can easily notice that while Šamaš is celebrated in the names of the years 26 and 43, Marduk is praised and glorified in the years Ha 30, Ha 32, Ha 37, and Ha 38. Yet, the major role of the Sungod in kingship, and notably in Hammurabi's kingship, has been studied by modern scholars (e.g., Tanret 2010 or Charpin 2013). Moreover, there was in Babylon a major temple of Šamaš called the Edikudkamma. David Warburton has also provided some new thoughts on the question (Warburton 2021, 217–220). His main idea is notably that Hammurabi's importance as a king might have been too much overrated compared to Samsi-Addu. Yet, the question to know who was the strongest or the mightiest king of the Old-Babylonian period according to our modern criteria shall not interest us here. Indeed, when it comes to our topic, both Samsi-Addu and Hammurabi showed their devotion to the Sungod and that point emphasizes the fact that Šamaš was the "god of kingship".

14 Cf Lion 2001. On the texts coming from the files of those *naditum*-nuns, see Barberon 2009.

a sister or a daughter to the *gagûm*-cloister.¹⁵

Although gods and kings dominated almost every aspect of Mesopotamians' lives, the importance of free enterprise at the beginning of the second millennium BCE. has been widely discussed.¹⁶ Philippe Clancier, Francis Joannès, Bertrand Lafont, and Aline Tenu summarized it well: "one could have the impression, since the archaic Sumerian period and over the long term, of a linear progression, where we would have gradually passed from an economy dominated by temples (Sumerian city-states) to a palatial economy (Ur III), then to a private economy (Hammurabi): such a view of things would be wrong."¹⁷ According to the authors, it is better "to admit a permanent tension between two distinct socio-economic spheres": on the one hand, individual plots within small communities governed by the socio-economic rules of reciprocity and, on the other hand, large areas with redistribution processes as the socio-economic basis.

The *opinio communis* in Assyriology consists in considering that from the Old-Babylonian period "the disengagement of the State in the direct management of the most important sector of economic activity, that of agricultural production, contributed to the development of the private sphere of the economy"¹⁸. Yet, the idea of traders and entrepreneurs revivifying an Old-Babylonian economy sclerosed by the extreme state interventionism of Ur's supposed third dynasty must be balanced. We shall remember Marc Van de Mieroop's words: "the wish to promote Mesopotamia's free entrepreneurs as the driving force of that economy is, I believe, driven by a desire to see in the past a fulfillment of present dreams."¹⁹

Clergymen also acted as private economic actors, and significant evidence supports the implication of members of Ebabbar's clergy specifically. Michel Tanret has clearly established that the administrators of the Ebabbar were conducting business in their own name, endeavoring to increase their real estate and making profit from it.²⁰ Nevertheless, these texts must be distinguished from the records where Ebabbar officials reported the business conducted on behalf of the temple.

15 De Graef 2016; 2018b; 2019.

16 Moreno García 2016, 15 gives a good bibliography about the increasing recourse to traders and agricultural entrepreneurs in the beginning of 2nd millennium BCE in Egypt.

17 Lafont / Tenu / Joannès / Clancier 2017, 378.

18 *Ibid.*, 379.

19 Van de Mieroop 2005, 122. Indeed, many scholars worked on this "private" business during the Old-Babylonian period (e.g., Charpin 1982; Burggraaff 1995; Tyborowski 2003; Garfinkle 2008; Földi 2014) and they often concluded that they were the main motor of the economy (e.g., Bulgarelli 2011; Silver 1983; 2006; 2007).

20 Tanret 2010.

It is therefore clear that private entrepreneurs played a significant part in the Old-Babylonian economy. However, the temples and the palace remained the biggest households and, as such, crucial economic actors. The Ebabbar, for example, was a colossal landowner and employed many harvesters. For example, in CT 4, 25c, agricultural entrepreneurs called the *iššakkum* received large amounts of barley under the control of temple officials called *šatammum*. They oversaw the hiring of no fewer than 450 agricultural workers who were supposed to break up clods to prepare the fields for cultivation. We can also mention the text de Graef 2018 (AOAT 440), no. 9 which mentions the hiring of 46 agricultural workers under the supervision of an individual who is not named in the text but whose “affiliation” is identifiable thanks to a seal which de Graef reads as follows: “[...]ni / ʾDUMU¹ [...] – (d) UTU / ʾIR É.BABBAR.RA” which means “[...]ni son of [...]–Šamaš, servant of the Ebabbar”.

In fact, the “Ebabbar” is depicted in the texts as an active socio-economic organization. When a text refers to the temple, it refers to a place where operations are conducted or where supplies are stocked. Mentions of “Ebabbar” (é.babbar) or the “House of Šamaš” (é^dutu) refer to the same organization and carry mostly material considerations. It refers to the temple as a geographical area and as a physical place. This temple was, in fact, a household held by a landlord: the god Šamaš. Moreover, texts state that temple officials lent silver, bought slaves, received barley, or traded the temple’s wool, but that they did not keep the benefit from that sale for themselves.²¹

Another solid clue of the temple’s implication in transactions is the presence amongst the contractors or witnesses of the Ebabbar’s gods themselves. For example, in the text CT 6, 40c we can read that the god Šamaš himself gave some silver to someone called Kišušu to redeem a war prisoner. In another text, TCL 1, 68/69, he received in his house a former slave. He is not alone but helped by his *paredra*, Aya. There are many examples of such a situation because it is usual to find in a text the mention of a god or a goddess acting as a lender or a buyer.²² Moreover, we find many mentions of gods or goddesses as witnesses in contracts.²³ So the god was an economic actor in ancient Near East, and his temple, his house, was an economic household. The differences between the households of a king, a god, a rich notable or a commoner were not structural: it was only a distinction based upon width and wealth, not an ontological one. A god and its clergy could act as rationally, or

21 Charpin 1982 and more recently Richardson 2010, 21–24.

22 Cf. Harris 1960; Charpin 2010; 2015.

23 E.g., MHET 2/2, 283; YOS 12, 451; Di 1966; 1848; CT 33, 41. This short list is not exhaustive at all.

irrationally, as any landowner: that is why we shall now examine how the members of the household of Šamaš behaved in the socioeconomic field.

2. A rational behavior?

2.1 Rational real estate strategy

We saw that Šamaš often hired large number of workers. That point reveals that the household of the Sungod, the temple Ebabbar, was a very important one, and as such the Sungod was a major landowner. We can also see it through the massive quantities of harvested barley recorded in the administrative documentation.²⁴ We can assume that the temple owned a great amount of arable land, even if we have only a few textual recordings of “temple-fields”.²⁵ This is due to the specific circumstances of excavations in Sippar.²⁶ Nevertheless, we know that Sippar notables and the owners of important estates were buying preferentially in some specific irrigated districts, and we shall now try to understand if this behavior was based on a will to maximize their agricultural production.

It is impossible to know whether the temple dependents worked some fields through the tenure system and owned other fields personally. On the other hand, we are certain that the *nadītum*-nuns had their own fields since bringing a girl into the cloister was a heritage conservation strategy.²⁷ So when we see private fields and temple fields in close areas (as in the text YOS 13, 12), we can suppose that the temple’s fields certainly adjoined those of its dependents (if they were private fields) and those of the *nadītum*-nuns. They also had to be next to the fields of the great families of Sippar since the fields of the *nadītum*-nuns were those of their families, and these families were the families of the notables of Sippar.²⁸

Another example is found in BDHP 15 where the witnesses are no less than the gods Šamaš and Aya: in this one, a nun rents a field, and the neighboring lands are that of a priest and another field owned by the same nun. Another example is YOS 13, 12 (Ad 15) where many fields are listed and are very often the property of nuns or temple dependents (such as an “*ērīb bītīm*” or a great lamenter). We can therefore see that the fields owned by temple dependents could be grouped together in close areas.²⁹

24 Harris 1975, 209–219.

25 We can notably quote CT 2, 50; 8, 30c; MHET 2/4, 549; Rositani RSO 82 Sup. 1, 116.

26 Indeed, the temple archives for the Old Babylonian period are yet undiscovered.

27 Démare-Lafont 2016, 241–256.

28 De Graef 2018.

29 “1,1.0.1 GĀN 6 SAR A.ŠĀ A.GĀR šu-ut-^fša¹-(d)a-a /ša ša-lu-rum ša É (d)UTU” (ll. 34–35)

The notables of Sippar strived to regroup their possessions despite the difficulties this presented in view of the collapse of the cadaster. Indeed, the tenures were relatively scattered: Katrien de Graef speaks smartly of a “kaleidoscope” of properties to describe the tenures of the soldiers in Sippar-amnanum.³⁰ This mentality may be encountered elsewhere in Mesopotamia, among the merchants of Larsa, for example.³¹

By studying the texts recording the Ebabbar’s agricultural activities, we realize that the irrigated districts where the temple had fields for certain were always the same ones, notably those named Tenunam, Tawir (a) tum, “the edges of the Sippar canal”, Itiqtum, Gizanum, the district of Gula, Mu’ate, Tuhamum, and Šut-ša-Aya. The temple is not always clearly identified as the owner of the field, even if it sometimes is, but a study based upon prosopography or sigillography allows us to state that in those districts, temple dependents were acting not for themselves, but for the temple.

Indeed, specific witnesses lists or metrological features included in certain texts clearly show that the temple was harvesting those fields for its own benefit through its dependents. Moreover, epigraphic documentation from Sippar shows that those districts’ fields were often bought by notables. Indeed, we find buyers such as the chief of merchants, *naditum*-nuns, daughters of Sippar officials, high ranking administrative officials, or Ebabbar’s priests.³² This real estate buying policy is quite rational: the Ebabbar primarily bought fields in productive and prestigious districts, near the private fields of social partners to ensure they would help with harvesting. By doing so, the temple’s social network was upholding its might and socioeconomic rank. We therefore see that the Ebabbar was not only trying to maximize its agricultural production but also to strengthen its social importance.

2.2 Rational trading strategy

Ebabbar’s dependents and clergy were also always trying to obtain barley and silver. Yet, they were also lending or selling it on credit.³³ These two commodities were the

30 De Graef 2018. See also about those tenure fields de Jong Ellis 1977, 61–66 and Fiette 2018, 107–167.

31 Charpin 2003, 311–322.

32 Cf. Harris 1975, 378 (about Tenunam) or, more recently, Stol 1998 and de Graef 2007 (both about the district of Halhalla).

33 E.g., Richardson 2010, 22. The texts mentioned by Richardson show that the temple wanted silver in exchange for its wool. AbB 12, 173 reveals that the temple expected that some taxes be paid in silver. We can also mention the many texts where the Sungod (in

most traded ones in Central Mesopotamia and, as such, had high fiduciary value as fungible assets. These two goods could be traded against other commodities and were particularly sought after. A large part of the power held by Ebabbar came from its easy access to both those commodities. First, as the landowner of multiple fertile fields, it had access to barley. Secondly, as the recipient of important offerings, contributions (like the *igisûm*-contribution), and taxes, the Ebabbar had access to silver.³⁴ The wool sold by the Ebabbar was almost always bought in exchange for silver and the temple loaned silver or barley, with interest paid in silver.³⁵ Many loans to be repaid “with the interest of Šamaš” (probably around 20 %³⁶) are recorded in our corpus. It seems that the Ebabbar pursued, as an economic organism, a policy to gain access to this precious metal.

A quick glance at the Mesopotamian economy reveals the obvious preoccupation of some people for profit. For example, Klaas R. Veenhof clearly demonstrated that Assyrian traders were seeking profit: trade was a source of income, and they would make investment decisions depending on potential revenue they could derive from it. The Ebabbar temple was also participating in business ventures, and its wealth as much as its preponderant role among the social networks of Sippar made the temple an important actor. As early as the end of the 19th century, the French Assyriologist Jules Oppert called Šamaš a “merchant god”.³⁷ Oppenheim and other Assyriologists of the 1940s took up this idea and explained the temple’s commercial power by the fact that it had large land holdings.³⁸ As these estates produced surpluses, they were subject to resale. The producers, within the temple, were remunerated either by a system of rations or, in rarer cases for specialized craftsmen, directly by remuneration. The temple also had slaves. Thanks to this unexpensive workforce and following the law of surplus value on capital, the temples grew in size and economic weight over time. Was it then a rational actor? It is known, nowadays, that trade and rationality are not always correlated and there is no evidence in cuneiform documentation that the trading business of the Ebabbar was purely rational. If the traders buying wool from the Ebabbar had obvious profit-seeking motives (as their letters show), for the Ebabbar that search for profit is not that clear.

fact, the temple) lend silver to people and demands a repayment in silver, for example, in VS 9, 83; VS 29, 183/184 or TCL 1, 113 (about a trade expedition).

34 AbB 12, 173; Di 1954; YOS 13, 374.

35 Charpin 1982; Richardson 2010.

36 Skaist 1994; Pecha 2018, 164–165.

37 Oppert 1897, 469–488.

38 Oppenheim 1944, 54–63.

On the other hand, the Ebabbar kept involved for a long time in a successful business, notably the trading of the temple's wool.³⁹

2.3 Rational book-keeping methods

The Babylonian accounting documents found related to Sippar's Ebabbar are not always rational from today's point of view. Indeed, when we look at it closely, we realize that its main objective was to list the available supplies, much like an inventory, rather than making a prospective calculation. As explained by Michael Kozuh and John P. Nielsen, the Mesopotamian book-keeping practices were "a patchwork of overlapping interests, areas of responsibility, practicalities, and largely unpredictable abstractions of economic and administrative activity".⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the predictive purpose of Babylonian accounting has been quite clearly demonstrated.⁴¹ Kozuh has clearly explained this fact concerning the temples of the late-Babylonian period.⁴² Concerning the Old-Babylonian period, Grégory Chambon was able to show – by studying the archives of Ilu-kan in the town of Mari in northern Mesopotamia – that they sometimes could have a provisional goal, even if it remained quite rare.⁴³ The fact that this practice is not general reveals one thing: the fundamental purpose of the Ebabbar's accounting efforts was to assess the potential wealth of this organism, and not to find a way to increase it. The economic ideal for ancient Babylonian temples was hoarding and redistribution.

To explain that point, we need here to discuss two documents from Sippar's warehouse. In the first one (CT 8, 21b), we can read that "X liters of barley have been withdrawn from the Y liters that are piled up in the warehouse to lend it to PN1". In the second one (CT 8, 10c) we learn that "Z liters of barley have been withdrawn from the Y liters that are available up in the warehouse to lend it to PN2." Those two texts concern the same warehouse: the only difference is that the first (CT 8, 21b) text has been written the eleventh day of the twelfth month on the year Aš 05 and the second text (CT 8, 10c) has been written the twelfth day of the same month on the same year. The warehouse had not been provided with grain between those two withdrawals and yet, the "Y" quantity does not change after the first withdrawal. Was it because Mesopotamians could not record precisely incomes and expenses? A quick glance throughout the massive administrative documentation shows that they were. So, if they keep recording that there are "Y" liters of barley

39 Charpin 1982.

40 Kozuh / Nielsen 2021, 154–155.

41 For the Old-Babylonian period, see notably Chambon 2011; 2018.

42 Kozuh 2014.

43 Chambon 2018.

available it is because in their mind, lent barley will be recovered and is therefore a potentially available liability. It could seem irrational to a modern accountant not to distinguish by any administrative scripture between *materially* and *virtually* available assets. Yet, immaterial is not irrational. On the contrary, it reveals a powerful capacity for abstraction – although quite different from our own.⁴⁴

The Sipparian temple was mainly trying to reach two goals in the conduct of its business: hoarding and ostentation. And one of the better ways to show off its wealth was to redistribute it. On account of that, we can state that the temple was a rational actor, but not the kind of rationality expected from a *homo oeconomicus* or a *deus oeconomicus*.

2.4 A banking temple?

For a tenant of classical theory, this economic behavior could swiftly call banking institutions to mind. The quintessential money handlers, bankers, and their institutions, are supposed to be seeking profit and maximization by analyzing situations rationally and making rational choices. Indeed, making the right choices and following the best advice is a major concern of ancient Babylonians. As Piccin showed in an article about the Mesopotamian “wisdom literature”, planning, monitoring, and making the best choices were crucial aspects of the Babylonian economy.⁴⁵ Yet, still according to Michela Piccin, the best advice came from the gods.⁴⁶ They had to be heard from the divine world and could not come from the human mind.

That is one of the many reasons why gods and goddesses (and their sanctuaries) were often considered by ancient Babylonians as major actors of their socio-economic processes. That might also explain a distortion in our vision of Mesopotamian

44 From that point of view, Mesopotamian non-monetary book-keeping can still be compared to Athenian accounting practices as described by S. Günther: “from a perspective of financial planning and budgetary accounting that the extant accounts are not sufficient to let every Athenian participate in the details of the budget since in- and outgoing assets, open account obligations etc. remain usually unclear. The inventories, usually without mentioning consumables, rather reflect a status quo but do not tell much about the income-expenditure-structure, investments, loans, or commitment authorizations. [...] Yet, this does not mean that they were published only for the sake of representation of the officials involved, the disclosure of correct record-keeping, the religious responsibility in case of accounts from sanctuaries, or the praxis of following examples of predecessors” (Günther 2021, 88–89). See also Davies 1994.

45 As she wrote: “wisdom language is also substantiated in terms of the semantic realm of careful planning and evaluating, with the ability to provide good advice occurring as a result.” (Piccin 2021, 161)

46 Ibid., 162–163.

economy that led early scholars to consider the Ebabbar as a kind of ancient bank.⁴⁷ For example, in 1897, Jules Oppert wrote the following about the Ebabbar: “we can say, without being contradicted, that the house of high banking under the *firma* ‘Sun God’ is the oldest financial institution whose history has left us memory.”⁴⁸ Later, the specialist of Sippar Rivkah Harris wrote in 1955 that “the temples alone had the resources needed to act as a bank, lending money and foodstuffs such as barley, peas and starch”⁴⁹ and reiterated it more precisely in 1960, in an article on temple loans where she states: “the prominence of Šamaš in the role of creditor, and therefore the prominence of his temple in this function is significant. It was the temple of Šamaš which, more than any other temple, served as a kind of bank.”⁵⁰ However, Harris was a meticulous Assyriologist and her quote must be read precisely: she wrote “served as a *kind* of bank” (emphasis added). Indeed, we saw that the Ebabbar was capable of rational choices in its “investments” and the conduct of its business. We will, then, have to understand whether the temple of Šamaš, did – as modern banks do – seek profit, maximization, and growth.

The temple sought commodities such as silver and barley, but for what purpose? We need to understand why the Ebabbar was leading a policy of centralization/certification of silver ending with its redistribution. Was it a method of capturing flows with a view to stabilize the economy and redistribute the wealth within a non-centralized network-based system reticular system? Or was it on the contrary a return-on-investment policy aiming to enrich the temple and maximize its profits? Indeed, some scholars such as Morris Silver came to believe that palaces, temples, and other great organizations were seeking profit. He defended the idea that “palatial enterprise should not automatically be identified with public enterprise in which considerations of profitability are largely set aside. In fact, I have found no evidence, direct or indirect, demonstrating that Near Eastern palaces were not primarily motivated by profit in their production of textiles and other private goods.”⁵¹ It is this idea of profit-seeking and maximization that we must investigate now.

47 See, e.g., Bromberg 1942 (with bibliography).

48 “On peut dire, sans être contredit, que la maison de haute banque sous la *firma* ‘Dieu-Soleil’ est le plus antique établissement financier dont l’histoire nous ait laissé le souvenir” (Oppert 1897, 498).

49 Harris 1955, 38–39.

50 Harris 1960, 128.

51 Silver 2006, 11.

3. A profit-seeking behavior?

3.1 Profit-seeking in the Ancient Near East

Profit-seeking is a known phenomenon in Ancient Mesopotamia, as we explained earlier when we talked about the Assyrian traders during the Old Babylonian period.⁵² That is why Mesopotamians had words to describe such preoccupations. One of the most well-known examples is the vocable *mahīrum* which has been widely discussed and means “market price”. The study of this word has revealed that Old Assyrian traders negotiated the best prices (buying and selling) based on that *mahīru*-price. Their letters also reveal the important preoccupation of lowering the costs and expenses. Even their wives were involved in that business, and we see in their correspondence that they worried about the information spreading and their economic competition with other traders. Their strategies of commercial competition and cooperation have since been largely discussed and studied in other Assyriological papers.⁵³

Another example, closer to Sippar, has been recently studied by Baptiste Fiette in his book about the archives of Šamaš-hazir. He explained how this Babylonian official exercising his charge in the southern Babylonian city of Larsa was trying to increase his personal wealth, notably through a real estate buying strategy.⁵⁴ His wife Zinu helped him and dealt ingeniously with business deals when her husband was away.⁵⁵ The list of examples could be much longer because rational behavior to maximize wealth can be observed in many acts of commoners, but Šamaš was not an ordinary economic actor.

The Ebabbar was, as we said, mainly the house of Šamaš, the Sungod. As such, he was also the god of justice who could see everything. He was then concerned with oaths, oracular consultations, and his temple could act as a justice court, even if the term (as we use it today) is anachronistic. Indeed, there were no justice courts such as ours in Mesopotamia, but meeting-places for magistrates, and the most important of these places in Sippar was the Ebabbar temple.⁵⁶ Moreover, Šamaš was the god of kingship, and we can see him giving the insignia of power to the kings in many iconographic representations such as Hammurabi’s laws stela. He was the one

52 They are also well known because of what Polanyi took from the study of their texts (Polanyi 1944), notably his hypothesis of the absence of market in ancient Mesopotamia, a theory that has been since abandoned but has been widely commented. Cf. Veenhof 1972, followed by Veenhof 1997 and 2013.

53 E.g., Michel 2015, 7–78; Michel 2020; Eidem 2008, 31–42 (all three with bibliography).

54 Fiette 2018, 239–315.

55 *Ibid.*, 317–319.

56 Charpin 2017, 69–76.

commanding rulers to be fair, gentle, and to protect the weak, entrusting the king to do the same thing and to be a human equivalent of himself.⁵⁷

Moreover, the Ebabbar temple was meant to redistribute wealth in the well-known redistributive scheme applicable to *oikos*-economies. For the Old-Babylonian period, this idea has been widely developed by Marten Stol⁵⁸ and Dominique Charpin⁵⁹, notably from a philological point of view. On the other hand, Johannes Renger⁶⁰ has built a more theoretical approach. Their work now allows us to better understand the similarities in the functioning and general organization of what has come to be called “large organizations” or “great domains” held by gods, kings, and a few wealthy men.

That idea partly echoes the following statement by Renger: “What happened to the silver in circulation and not hoarded? It mostly served trade purposes, i.e., the acquisition of strategic goods and prestige objects. But there was practically no capital investment for productive purposes”⁶¹. From this can easily follow a demonstration of the fundamentally redistributive structure of the Mesopotamian economy: one did not buy to invest, within a large organization, but rather for reasons of prestige and social status. However, Silver, one of the main critics of Polanyian theory, rejected this point: according to him, the purchase of real estate and arable land is an investment. He writes:

A basic problem with Renger’s vision of the Mesopotamian economy is its uncritical nature. He takes redistribution by Mesopotamian institutions as a given. That is, Renger never analyses the questions of origin. How did a relative handful of individuals manage to acquire control over so much productive wealth? Who redistributed this wealth to the redistributors? Did the wealth originate in a “primitive accumulation” along the lines imagined by Marx and later implemented by Stalin? Was there a forced collectivization campaign? Command economies are not noted for the

57 Indeed, many papers had already been dedicated to Hammurabi as “king of justice” and his relationship with the Sungod as judge-god (see the good bibliography and historiography in Charpin 2013).

58 Notably in Stol 1982, 127–230; 2004.

59 See, e.g., Charpin 1985, 111–126, but also Charpin 2017 and 2020.

60 Renger 1994.

61 Renger 2005, 55–56. This issue of the hoarding of silver is a constant preoccupation of modern scholars, notably due to the fact that the weighing and hoarding of that precious metal is connected to the birth of coinage (e.g., Van Driel 2002; Thompson 2003; Gitin / Golani 2004; Pecha 2006; Garfinkle 2008; Peyronel 2010; Földi 2014; Jursa 2018). For a more complete bibliography and summary of that issue, cf. Heymans 2021, 55–113.

creation of great societies [...] Indeed, even Lenin had to rely on markets to save his socialist experiment. Did the (alleged) redistributive economies of the fourth and third millennia rise on the ruins of earlier market behavior? Did the market economies of the earlier second millennium rise on the ruins of the redistributive (better regulatory) economy? [...] Similarly, Renger does not explain the rise of “tributary forms of economy” beginning in the second millennium. To develop a new vision of the Mesopotamian economy the economic forces driving such transformations need to be documented and understood. A final problem is that Renger does not attempt to integrate the (alleged) technological stagnation of Mesopotamia into his theory of a redistribution-dominated economy.⁶²

The idea of Silver is that the Babylonian economic system focused on increasing its technological and financial level to endlessly maximize its profit. But was it so?

We know on the contrary that Mesopotamian economy was widely conservative and focused on hoarding. It can notably be observed in Ancient Mesopotamian sapiential literature with the *Debate between Silver and Copper*.⁶³ This text belongs to a literary genre appreciated by Mesopotamians, where virtues, animals, minerals, or anything else are arguing and boasting about their value and importance. In that specific debate, copper is proud about his importance in Mesopotamian craft and daily life, presenting itself as the main metal in term of utility. Nevertheless, silver does not intend to be so easily beaten and claims his supremacy based upon his importance for hoarding as a safety value and his role in the measuring process. It says:

62 Silver 2007, 107–108.

63 We read indeed in this sapiential text: “Silver, you are forgotten in the soil inside the house. A scared mouse in a silent house. Silver, the palace is not your station! An obscure place, a grave, such is your station. Silver, banquets are not your assigned task – fasting is your assigned task. Silver, to make lead shine (?) is not an important achievement. The task of making divine statues is not likely to fall within your capabilities. Why do you keep attacking me like a dog? You snake, get back in the darkest part of the house and lie down in your grave!’ Strong Copper cast his legitimate insults against Silver, and was full of hate against him – insults of a miserable dog, like water from a brackish well. He exerted his powers against him to harass him. And at this, Silver felt thoroughly harassed; it did not befit his dignity” (*Debate between Silver and Copper*, Segment D, 38–51, translation from the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, URL: <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr536.htm>, last accessed: 01.05.2023). On hoarding in ancient Greece and Rome, cf. the paper by Leese in this volume.

wedges are not written by you. The wooden shovels pile up the sheaves – match your measuring devices to the measuring stick!⁶⁴ Just approach the cargo boat that [...] the canal banks, just keep knocking on the great door of the house at night! The stonecutter wrestles with stones and with beads – they are too hard and he has to stop because of you. Work away with your tines at the dirt by the oven instead.⁶⁵

Thus, there is nothing surprising in the appetite of Ebabbar for hoarding. Renger explains that even if precious metals were mostly hoarded, the silver in circulation “served trade purposes, i.e., the acquisition of strategic goods and prestige objects. But there was practically no capital investment for productive purposes.”⁶⁶ Yet, we can assume that this hoarding tendency was also due to Mesopotamians’ limited access to information, which most likely impeded confidence in the future – especially as optimism was not the dominant feature of the Mesopotamian mentality. There was little incentive to invest or spend but rather to hoard.

The limits of knowledge were also those of rational choices, a statement that might drive us to speak of limited rationality in the Mesopotamian economy. This recalls the model upheld by Herbert Simon and Daniel Kahneman of the bounded rationality. This model can be defined as “subjective, relative, procedural, limited and intuitive”:⁶⁷ it could be a good definition of the Mesopotamian economic rationality. Nevertheless, if this definition can fit in an etic approach, we could also adopt an emic perspective and try to understand the role of the Ebabbar in the Babylonian economy from the Mesopotamian point of view.

3.2. *Charity above profit: debts to bind together men and gods*

The Ebabbar, for example, benefitted from an impressive position of economic domination because it was the main socioeconomic organization in the Sippar region. As such, it held important estates and capital and mostly chose not to increase it by loaning with high interests or adopting profit-maximizing strategies but rather to redistribute its wealth.

First, it is known that during the 1st millennium BCE the temple of Šamaš in Sippar cared for widows, orphans, and the poor.⁶⁸ For example, there are traces of

64 About this instrument and its use, cf. Wilcke 1983 and Chambon 2011, 169–170.

65 *Debate between Silver and Copper*, Segment D, 52–59 (translation from the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, URL: <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr536.htm>, last accessed: 01.05.2023). See also Mittermayer 2019.

66 Renger 2005, 55–56.

67 Tran 2018, 54.

68 In the Late-Babylonian period, this fact is well attested. See, e.g., Van Driel 1998.

women welcomed into the temple to weave, and Louise Quillien has clearly shown that in later periods, it was common for the temple to welcome widows and, in exchange, for them to produce textile goods.⁶⁹ In the Old-Babylonian period, we see that most of the temple weavers were probably single women because they are never attached to a man's name, brother, father, or husband and are supplied with rations in the manner of temple dependents or beneficiaries of its charity. All this allows us to conclude that from Old to Neo-Babylonian period, the Ebabbar intended to help widows.

A large part of its socioeconomic role was indeed to help the poor. We know, for example, that the temple redeemed prisoners⁷⁰, welcomed war refugees who fled after the fall of southern Mesopotamian cities, notably refugees from Larsa.⁷¹ The refugees in Sippar also benefitted from Šamaš's judgment in the Ebabbar. We have an example at the very beginning of the reign of Abi-ešuh in the trial BM 16764 studied by Michael Jursa where the chief of the merchants and the "judges of Larsa" release a *nadītum*-nun from a paternal debt.⁷² The temple therefore regularly spent grain or silver to help the needy.

Another striking example are the so-called "charitable-loans". Indeed, in many recorded loans for which the god Šamaš is the creditor, the debt has to be repaid "*ina šalmu û balṭu*" which means "when he will be safe and in good health." Klaas R. Veenhof has demonstrated that those loans did not have a time-limit clause, which is a clear clue of their charitable aspect. Indeed, all the Old-Babylonian loans have usually a time-limit. It is often the "day of the harvesting" because Babylonian economy mainly relied on the agricultural calendar, which is quite a common pattern in ancient civilizations.⁷³

Moreover, in some of them we can read sentences like "do not charge him interest",⁷⁴ which show that those loans were, in fact, gifts from the temple to the

69 Quillien 2018. Ouyang 2022 also proposed that temples of the Ur III period (2112–2004 BCE) gave shelter to the orphans.

70 We see it in CT 6, 40c, and the practice is further documented in the Code of Hammurabi. This process has also been studied in Charpin 2014.

71 This is notably demonstrated by the analysis of prosopography in van Koppen 1999, 77–78.

72 Jursa 1997.

73 Skaist 1994. About the "consumption" loan, see the recent Wilcke 2018. On ancient Greek, early modern European, and Chinese loan practices, cf. the paper by Schefold in this volume.

74 E.g., in the text TCL 1, 188 we can read (ll. 1–3) "10 GÍN KÙ.BABBAR / *hu-bu-ta-tum* / *ší-ib-ta ú-la i-šu.*" That we could translate by "10 shekels of silver *without interests*, there must be no interest-rate took upon him."

needy. Moreover, usury was frowned upon in Babylonian wisdom as shown in sapiential texts such as the “great hymn to Šamaš”⁷⁵ or the “Dialogue of Pessimism”⁷⁶. Yet, the charitable aspect of those loans had sometimes been discussed by some excellent scholars.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the main opinion among Assyriologists, which we are inclined to follow, is to consider that the best explanation for the lack of a repayment-date in those loans is still Veenhof’s.⁷⁸

3.3. A debt-based economy

Thus, a large part of the socioeconomic activity of the Ebabbar was, in the end, to spread its wealth around. Is that behavior, are those choices, rational? If the purpose of the Ebabbar was to maximize its hoard, and reach a high level of return on investment, the temple would act as a modern bank or corporation. From that point of view, it would not be a rational choice to loan silver or barley to people who would not be able to repay it. Yet, even in modern economies, redistribution can be a rational choice. We will not delve into the issue here as it would be off-topic, but the case of the rationality of the welfare state has been subject to many studies.⁷⁹ Thus, we can consider that the Ebabbar was acting rationally while trying to stabilize the socioeconomic structure of ancient Sippar. Yet, we can also consider that this rationality was also obeying a religious and traditional motive: let the god Šamaš play his role of ward of the social balance and cosmic harmony.

75 Foster 2005, 631–633.

76 Ibid. 923–926.

77 Van de Mieroop 1992 criticized this theory. Yet, Antoine Jacquet challenged his reluctance: “For Van de Mieroop (BBVO 12, p. 94–95 and p. 206) the humanitarian/charitable dimension of gods’ loans in Ur isn’t clearly evident and he upholds the idea that loans were necessarily profitable for creditors, real persons as gods. Nevertheless, we cannot argue, with the text UET 5, 160 as only clue, that loan made by Šamaš or Nanna in Ur had no humanitarian/charitable purpose: indeed, in that text (www.archibab.fr/T13007), which is the basis of Van de Mieroop’s argumentation, Nanna-zimu sells his house to Šilli-Addu in order to repay, with the sale’s profit, a debt he owed to the temple of Nanna in the specific frame of the sale on credit of temple’s wool, [...]. Nanna-zimu is not here the debtor but an intermediate trader ordered to sell the wool from the temple of Nanna and then to pay the temple with the sale’s profit (this process is explained in D. Charpin, “Marchands du palais et marchands du temple à la fin de la I^o dynastie de Babylone”, JA 270, 1982, p. 25–65.” (Jacquet 2020, 395, n. 177).

78 And this case is not unique (cf. Charpin 2005).

79 E.g., Mares 2009; Garland 2014 (for a synthesis, notably bibliographical); Petrakis / Kafka / Kostis / Valsamis 2021.

Here we come back to the distinction established by Aglietta and Orléan between vertical and horizontal debts. We saw that the Ebabbar could try to maximize its wealth through credit and created horizontal debts by doing so. Yet, the charitable loans and the offering system of the Ebabbar are typical non-profit and religious-based vertical debts. Indeed, the Šamaš temple aimed to structure the horizontal and vertical debt-network of the whole Sipparian society and to articulate them in a social system of which the temple was the nerve center. In Mesopotamia, everyone was in debt, directly or indirectly: humans owed an existential debt to the gods. Broadly speaking, it was all about debt, which is why we could refer to the Mesopotamian economy not as an *oikos*-economy but as a “debt-economy”. However, these debts could be cancelled (in part) when they became too heavy through a royal edict of *mīšarum*.⁸⁰ Yet, the purpose of the Mesopotamian kings who issued an edict to cancel debts was not one of emancipatory justice. It was not a question, by removing outstanding debts, of making *tabula rasa* in order to build a new ideal future: it was quite the opposite. The purpose of an edict of *mīšarum* was to restore a “prior state”. It was not done to prepare the future, but to return to an idealized past.⁸¹ However, this ability to manage virtual sums, debts, as well as their cancellation or maintenance (because some debts were not affected by the edicts of *mīšarum*), shows a strong capacity for financial abstraction.⁸² This capacity was not used to maximize profits, but to secure the social organization.

4. Conclusion

We saw that there were many situations where the temple was not motivated by profit and maximization. Most of the time, the temple acted to preserve the established order, perceived as fair, in an ideal of fixity and stability. One could take a cynical approach by saying that in this system the Ebabbar had great power and had interest in upholding it, but that might be slightly anachronistic. The Mesopotamian ideal was an ideal of stability and the role of the temples in fulfilling this ideal was imposed on them by the palace and by the religious representations of the believers. Then the purpose of most of their socioeconomic behaviors was not to obtain freedom for everyone but to ensure order and security for all.

From this point of view, even debt and its management might seem irrational from a modern point of view since many debts were not intended to be repaid but

80 On the *mīšarum*, see notably Bottéro 1961; Charpin 1990; Van De Mierop 2002; Tanret 2012; Charpin 2000 (with previous bibliography); Fiette 2013.

81 Cf. Fiette 2013.

82 Charpin 1990; 2000. Cf. the paper on the ancient Israelite jubilee legislation by Højgaard in this volume.

only to exist. As they were vertical debts, their main purpose was to connect people with gods. For horizontal debts, the edicts of *mīšarum* cancelled only debts relating to emergency loans. The deep debt-network that was binding the various inhabitants of Sippar together was therefore not altered.

Yet should we say that the Ebabbar's clergy and the god Šamaš were irrational actors? On the contrary: they were very rational. We saw that the Ebabbar settled appropriate means to reach a specific and anticipated purpose, so, qualifying that behavior as rational is possible depending on the definition we chose for rationality. If we adopt an emic point of view, the man relying on the gods to secure social justice is rational. From the etic point of view, he is a fool. Nevertheless, we also saw that the "house of the Sungod" was really protecting this man needing help. Then, was he so irrational to rely on the god when the temples were effectively helping him? Moreover, if we adopt the neo-classical point of view about what is a rational behavior, based on the idea of maximization of the capital rather than satisfaction of the needs, then the charitable aspect of the socioeconomic behavior of the Ebabbar and Šamaš makes them look like fools.⁸³

Indeed, the way the Ebabbar drove its business was not by focusing on maximizing its wealth, but rather on satisfying its needs. In a way, we find here a logic which recalls the definition of "bounded rationality" established by Simon and Kahneman. We cannot speak of "perfect rationality" concerning ancient actors, especially when it comes to religious businesses. We cannot talk of "perfect information" in the business conduct either⁸⁴ for evident reasons: religious matters are based on faith and, as such, on uncertainty and lack of information – driving us back to the unfinished story of Blaise Pascal's bet. The Ebabbar's behavior as a socioeconomic organization aimed to secure a social model relying upon an ideal of fixity where rational actors did not aim to get *more*, but to get *enough*. That rationality seems very different from ours, but not inferior.

83 Or, as George Tridimas summed it up recently, from another point of view: "From a consumer economics perspective, religion confers utility to individuals in the form of worship, explanations of the origin of things, comfort against suffering, dispensation of sins and promise of salvation. From an institutional analysis perspective, religion is a fundamental determinant of social interactions and economic performance. By sanctioning some values and banning others it affects individual ethics and social norms shaping actions and outcomes." (Tridimas 2021, 1).

84 That we could speak of "perfect rationality" and consider as acceptable the neo-classical theory about rationality for the modern world is not the concern of this article. Yet, for the ancient Mesopotamian economy, this concept is irrelevant.

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