

Rent-privatisation: back to Babylon

WHEN DID people first begin to privatize the rent of land? And how did real estate markets develop as land became alienable? These questions were discussed by leading archaeologists and philologists in St. Petersburg in May. "Urbanization and Land Use in the Ancient Near East" was the theme of a conference sponsored by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation of New York and hosted by Russia's Oriental Institute.

Assyriologists have long known that an extensive system of absentee land ownership had come into being by the first millennium BC, and that debt problems were a major lever forcing alienation of the land. The strains created by the forfeiture of lands and their appropriation by wealthy outsiders were dealt with in the Biblical laws. What has been lacking is a historical understanding of how kinship-based landed communities came to stratify themselves along lines which the ancients themselves saw reflected primarily in landholding patterns.

Dr. Michael Hudson examined the public character of early urban sites and the forces that led to alienation of land. The central question concerned the point at which the sale of real estate could be said to become a "market" phenomenon.

The experts provided a wealth of information about land transactions extending from the third to the first millennia BC. However, most objected to identifying this as a market-driven activity. Contracts inscribed on clay tablets have begun to divulge the process of land transfers as foreclosures for unpaid debts or - what became increasingly important - in exchange for precious metals. Certainly by the neo-Babylonian period the price of land had increased, as did economic dependency on the part of small landholders and landless cultivators. But what really

were the buyers paying for? And what happened to the cultivators who were dispossessed? The transfers and loss of self-sufficiency at first seem to have been temporary, but in time became permanent.

The scholars from Russia, America, Germany and Italy were not able to form a view at the end of their three days of discussions, but a wealth of data was produced to elaborate the real estate dynamics that were driving communities in the earliest civilizations in Mesopotamia. For example, in neo-Babylonian times (around the 7th century BC), an adult hired labourer had to work for 20 years to buy a hectare of land. By this time, according to Prof. Mohammed Dandamayev, land prices "depended on quality, location and other factors of which we often can only guess." Many land transactions were made among relatives, and many consisted of very small parcels. And many occurred at "below-market prices" in the form of debt foreclosure for unpaid taxes or emergency consumer loans. Other lands were sold to the palace or to royal officials. Traditionally, such transfers have been viewed as special cases rather than as an emerging land market in the modern sense of the term.

By the 6th century BC, Babylonian land was being accumulated by the Egibi family. Its land-sale contracts provide a rich source of information on what had become a real estate market. The evidence was analyzed by Dr. Cornelia Wunsch of the University of Heidelberg. An awareness of site valuation is reflected in the fact that the most valuable plots adjoined the canal. It even appears that land was bought on credit. But a thousand years before, land transactions retained non-commercial characteristics.

(Dr. Wunsch also presented an account of her research to the

International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade at its conference in Brighton [England] in August.)

THE SOCIAL and moral qualities associated with land - and the idea of "righteousness" as "straight order" assuring everyone certain basic needs, including access to self-support on the land - were being inexorably eroded even in the third millennium. It is necessary to go back to the sixth millennium to observe self-sufficient communities linked by ties of kinship, sharing access to the land. The surplus crops generated by their labour were stored in the community's storage rooms, typically overseen by temple officials.

The practice of sealing such store-houses was followed by written tablets developed toward the end of the fourth millennium, when a tenfold increase in the size of settlement areas is attested. But did this necessarily mean the evolution of a differentiated social system based on hierarchy and the exploitation of those at the bottom of the system?

"The balance of power was a jousting match between the sacred [the temple], the secular [the palace], and the independent households that dotted the landscape," explained Carl Lamberg-Karlovsky of the Peabody Museum, Harvard.

Before departing from St Petersburg, a number of participants announced their intention to re-examine the cuneiform records to see whether market-type relationships can indeed be attested before writing the final versions of their papers. These papers are to be edited by Dr. Hudson and Prof. Baruch Levine of New York University, with the aid of a grant from the Henry George School of New York. They will be published next year by the Peabody Museum.