

MESOPOTAMIAN HISTORY

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PART I : OVERVIEW

PART II : MESOPOTAMIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

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Part I : Ancient Mesopotamian Government

Overview Mesopotamian governmental development was gradual, and took place over a vast time period--the early Neolithic in Mesopotamia goes back to 10,000 B.C.E.--and includes the development of the first true cities, sophisticated law codes, and cuneiform writing--during which the coming together of three Empires--Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian-- constituted a broadly and loosely interrelated cultural whole, Mesopotamian Civilization. The demise of this civilization can be attributed alternatively to the power intrusion of the Achaeminid dynasties in Iran, to the Fall of Babylon, or to Alexander's invasions. The component empires, vast, dissolved into cultures voracious, as they had been, to dominate regions of the Fertile Crescent.

The impulse to urbanization and centralized government In its earliest millennia, Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers, was simply a collection of farming villages, periodically flooded and enriched by the Rivers on either side of them. As farming techniques developed, in this settling society, villages grew in wealth and production, and the priestly classes, which controlled the relation of the community to the gods, rapidly grew in power. The priests came into control of the labor market, practices like irrigation further promoted agricultural growth, and with this long developing uptick, a simple agricultural culture found itself surrounded by an increasingly complex society of merchants, laborers, slaves, soldiers, and bureaucrats. The control of this 'modern civilization' was not long from passing into the unifying hands of the King, the *lugal* or 'strong man' of the society, The government was to be in his hands, to make a very long story brief, and without much regard for the variety of Empires and times.

The King as head of government At the head of this government, as it grew, the King inserted himself as the unique spokesperson for the gods, and their representative on earth. The role of intermediary with the gods was the true power of the king, and the source of the government's legitimacy. With the widespread growth of this theocratic conviction, and with the development of a dynastic tradition--father passes kingship on to son and so on, with as few intrusions as possible--a military-inclined theocracy grew up, in which a swarm of pyramidally inter related working groups surrounded the King. The physical building structures of government--offices, bureaus, halls of justice--sprang up throughout the Empires, and though impermanent, made of clay, were fitted out with arches and columns, and must at best have formed a fitting framework for government administration. Within these structures fitted armies of government officials, and military power holders, while below them descended the governed strata--priests, merchants, artisans, and finally workers and slaves.

The government of developed Mesopotamian society By the fourth millennium B.C.E. this active synergy of social presences, under the King, featured first the priests, who remained of great importance to education and writing, then the tax collectors, scribes, merchants, and so on down through the farmers and slaves. The governing

process consisted of the King working with the priests, in charge of formal observances, and with the priestly council, on affairs of city management, tax collection, sanitation. The laws, specific, egalitarian, and highly developed throughout Mesopotamia, tended to come down on the side of the oppressed, and show remarkable sensitivity--in many epochs--to the rights of widows and orphans.

Afterthought A cliché says that the diverse societies that made up ancient Mesopotamia were held together by three things: their script, their modern attitude toward women and the socially oppressed, and by the more than a thousand gods they had in common with one another. The government formed around this set of common values has been called a theocratic socialism, in which the King has all ultimate control, goods and services are closely regulated by the state--the king and the priests--and in which the constant need to be vigilant against enemies, and to honor the gods, promotes a feeling of common interest. We can see many points of comparison between Mesopotamian government, and the contemporary Empires of Egypt and Persia.

Readings

Snell, Daniel, ed., *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, East Malden, 2005.

Leick, G., *Mesopotamia; The Invention of the City*, London, 2010

Discussion questions

Does socialist monarchy sound like a fruitful expression, to characterize at least the high point of ancient Mesopotamian culture?

How do you suppose the priestly control of government, which seems to have predominated in early Mesopotamian societies, found itself taken over by a monarchical dynasty? Were revolutions required, to effect this change?

At its high point, the Mesopotamian state had a standing, and growing, military. Who controlled the army? What was the King's role in deploying the army for war?

Part II : Ancient Mesopotamian Military

Overview The terrain lying between the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys is flat and alluvial, with abundant inundations, which were often crop friendly, as were those of the Nile in Egypt. In the earlier millennia of settled cultivation, the small towns and cities of Mesopotamia found little to fight over, but with time, by the fourth millennium B.C.E., these smaller communities began to morph into walled cities with serious territorial interests. (The flatness of the land made it difficult to defend unwalled communities.) Water control issues, land possessions; such factors lay behind the earliest concerted wars of the region; the first recorded war dates from 3200 B.C.E., although true wars were uncommon in the Fertile Crescent before 2500 B.C.E. We are, for example, familiar with the military exploits of the great general Gilgamesh (ca. 2600 B.C.E.), who was praised for his military exploits against the formidable Humbaba.

The Sumerians Creative in almost every field of culture, the Sumerians built a strong army, and a powerful defense system. They did not maintain a standing army, but citizens were expected to defend the 'state' by owning and training with their own armor. A draft was called up when needed, and furthermore the Sumerians began the fruitful project of taking enemy prisoners into their own army, where they became permanent fighters. To their ever enlarging army they made available a number of innovations in military weaponry: bronze helmets and axes, armored cloaks, new forms of

phalanx fighting, and above all four wheeled chariots which, though clumsy looking to us, greatly enhanced the effectiveness of assault.

Lagash and Umma Reliefs from the city of Lagash, after its victory (2525 B.C.E.) over its rival Umma, give us some insight into the shape of a battle between two city-states. The states were 18 miles apart, and went out to fight in set formations, at a set time--as was customary in pre-modern warfare. The citizens came out armed, on both sides, and the fighting began with the archers, who on both sides commanded a range of 300 feet. After those first attacks, spears and axes took over, close up phalanx action, the upshots of which were likely to be decided by the size of the army on either side. A victory triumph, led by the King of Lagash on a large chariot pulled by four onagers, topped off the consequential achievement.

Akkadians Sargon (24th-23rd centuries B.C.E.) was the preeminent Assyrian power figure, who fought thirty-four wars in the course of his fifty year reign. Under Sargon, the Akkadians assembled the first standing army, 5,400 men strong, and in fact far larger, for each foreign nation captured was obliged to contribute a generous number of soldiers to be added to the Assyrian forces. The mass of this army, fitted out as it was with the powerful Assyrian weapon of the composite bow, which could drive arrows through leather shields, was daunting. The Assyrians were known for their cruelty on the battlefield, coming down on the foe, as Lord Byron wrote, 'like a wolf on the fold,' and driving their captives before them, naked and humiliated.

Readings

Postgate, J. Nicholas, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History*, London, 1992.

Keegan, John, *A History of Warfare*, New York, 1994.

Discussion questions

Please discuss the difference between Egypt, the gift of the Nile, and the Fertile Crescent, as areas to defend in warfare. Why, as was the case, did the ancient Egyptians get drawn into far fewer wars than the ancient Mesopotamians?

To what extent were Mesopotamian wars fought against international foes? What, on the whole, were the chief causes of Mesopotamian wars? Were they fought for commercial reasons or for extension of land possessions?

The greatest leader of the Babylonians was the law-giver Hammurabi. (1810-1750 B.C.E.). In addition to giving laws, he was an active conqueror, directing many battles. How did his mindset, as that of a wise lawgiver and forward thinking ruler, reflect in the nature of his military efforts?

PART III : MESOPOTAMIAN SOCIAL HISTORY

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Part I : Social Structure

Part II : Gender Relations

Part I : Mesopotamian Social Structure

Overview For a long period of time, 4500-1750 B.C.E., Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Babylonian, Akkadian) cultures remained fairly stable. This stability reflects on the level of social class. Much time was devoted to fighting and land expansion--the Assyrian Empire under Sargon was particularly aggressive--and the hierarchical structure of society was recognizably the same for more than two millennia. While there was limited mobility within the social structure, it was not frozen against entrepreneurs who struck it rich, or slaves who developed special skills on which they built reputation, but it was not in the nature of the system to allow such people to 'climb socially.'

The high class

The King (rarely, the Queen) The King, occupying a typically inherited position, was the final word in law-making, foreign policy, and military campaigning. However the King, who was viewed as a direct spokesperson for the will of the gods, shared some of his highest powers with the priestly class, which specialized in interpreting and placating the will of the gods. Around the King's court, as around any top administrator, flocked an ardent bevy of counselors and officials, eager for a piece of the action.

Priests The priestly class was charged with temple and cult maintenance, and especially with interpreting the will of the gods, the understanding of which was fundamental for governmental policy. It must be added that the temples, as in the Egyptian culture of the time, were places of education and training in the arts of healing. The doctors and dentists of ancient Mesopotamia were frequently women who worked and lived at the temple.

Merchants and traders As Mesopotamian society grew socially looser, and more open to change, the large class of merchants and traders, the major money-makers of this early capital culture, occupied a central role in generating and maintaining new economic horizons.

Scribes With the 'invention' of writing in 3500 B.C.E., the function of the scribe, highly educated in writing and literary art, rose to the top of Mesopotamian society. The scribe read and interpreted official documents, and was often called into decision making on the highest levels of government.

Others Among others who enjoyed some of the highest positions in society were wealthy landowners, shipwrights--who supplied the growing merchant fleets--private tutors, and astrologers.

The middle class The Middle class was what made the society tick, as it does today. We would need here to consider the whole spectrum of workers--fishermen, farmers, artisans, potters--and all those who supported the daily life of the society, either directly through their labor or through their investments of time or money.

The lower class The lower class was made up of slaves, children, and prisoners, a combination that can make sense only if we consider the issue of rights. None of these groups had rights. Did women have rights? This is a vexed question. Some women rose to great prominence: as doctors, dentists, or spiritual healers; or as authors--the first named author in history--Enheduanna (2285-2230 B.C.E.)--was female, and yet women on the street, the vast majority, had no access to the arts of literacy or education, or to any political voice.

Readings

Oppenheim, A. Leo, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a dead civilization*, Chicago, 1977.

Pollock, Susan, *Ancient Mesopotamia: The Eden that never was*, Cambridge, 1999.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the prominence of women as doctors and dentists in ancient Mesopotamia (as in ancient Egypt)?

At what period did the stable (static) social hierarchy begin to establish itself in Mesopotamia? What forces led to this establishment, and preserved it for millennia?

What kind of training led to the profession of scribe, and why was this role so influential in Mesopotamian society.?

Part II : Mesopotamian Gender Roles

Overview The concept of Mesopotamian culture (5000-2000 B.C.E.) is so broad, that it must at first be addressed in generalities. From Sumerian through Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian cultures--all interlinked through their roots in the land between Tigris and Euphrates--there is a gradual enforcement of patriarchal power in both family and state. What explanation for this development? Could it be that with the growing concentration of wealth, in male hands, the preponderance of male power asserted itself increasingly? Was money the power in this story?

Women and the family Throughout Mesopotamian culture, the father is the family ruler. He takes charge of choosing his daughter's husband to be, having worked out financial arrangements in advance, with the bride's dad. These arrangements involve first of all setting the brideprice, which he himself will pay down for his daughter, and then agreeing on the dowry which his daughter will bring to the marriage. The daughter will from puberty on--for that is when these negotiations begin--be aware that she is a movable piece in a system. She will not have been given the opportunity for schooling, and in extreme cases she may even have found herself sold into slavery or 'sacred prostitution.'

The marriage Immediately after marriage the daughter--we are talking middle class families, artisans, scribes, bakers, bankers--moves into the husband's family, thereby essentially marrying that family. From that time on the married woman's life is likely to transpire in child-raising, cooking, cleaning, and gossip. (*The Laws of Hammurabi*, 1754 B.C.E, effectively describe the parameters of the married woman's life, easily to be divorced, condemned to death if she commits adultery, subject to sale if her husband needs extra cash.) But there are outlets for women, although the availability of these outlets diminishes through the centuries of Mesopotamian culture.

Women's outlets From Sumerian times onward, through to the demise of Mesopotamian cultures (2000 B.C.E.), depending on your perspective, women had rights and roles in their society. The supreme role for the woman, juridically speaking, was to provide legitimate offspring for the integrity of the patriarchal system. Hence the death penalty for women caught in adultery; hence the increasing presence of the *veil*, in later Mesopotamian society, to shield women and men's eyes from danger. From the earliest times, however, Mesopotamian women enjoyed freedom to work outside the family; in Sumerian times, particularly, women were active in the market place and in trading in the precincts of temples, which regularly employed thousands of weavers. Other jobs commonly filled by women were the making and selling of beer and wine, or of perfumes and incense. And on a yet more managerial level--still in Sumer, yes--we find women forming businesses, working together with their husbands in business, working as scribes--always an influential post, and as physicians.

Readings

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, New York, 1992.

Leick, Gwendolyn, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*, London, 1994.

Discussion questions

Mesopotamian epic gives various perspectives onto women and their social roles: what do *Gilgamesh*, the *Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)* and *The Descent of Inana* say about women's power in society?

What role did women's sexuality play in the all important issue of placating the gods? What kinds of erotic self-sacrifice did women carry out in Mesopotamian temples?

By 1500 B.C.E. upper class women, in Mesopotamian society, had begun to 'wear the veil,' as a way of protecting their modesty, and the purity of their offspring. Can you research this issue? Was wearing the veil common in Middle Eastern societies prior to Islam?

PART IV : ECONOMIC HISTORY

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Part I : Economic Innovations

Part II : Trade

Part I : Mesopotamian Innovation

Overview Small scale irrigation was being practiced in Mesopotamia in 6000 B.C.E.; by 5000 B.C.E. Mesopotamians were carrying out major irrigation projects which enabled them to turn 'the land between the two rivers' into a fertile plain, a plain able to support a rapidly growing population, which a millennium later will have risen to 100,000. With this fast start, and with a high instinct for cultural development, it is no surprise that Mesopotamia early introduced important innovations into our cultural bloodstream.

Bronze (and subsequently iron) metallurgy The wheel of culture was only to turn when, during the last millennia B.C.E-the highest development of Bronze Age culture intersected with the early stages of the Iron Age, which was being introduced into Mesopotamia by the Hittites. With each of these stages in development of material culture, the Mesopotamians were enabled to introduce innovations which facilitated their cultural development. By the fourth millennium B. C. E., metallurgists had managed to alloy copper with tin, beefing up the strength of copper, and leading into the invention of bronze. Sporadic experiments in iron metallurgy, meanwhile, were on the horizon by 4000 B.C.E., but the early products were too brittle for heavy use. It was not until the fourteenth century B.C.E. that the Hittites introduced iron technologies, into Mesopotamia, which were to serve as the foundations for weaponry, agricultural equipment, and architectural construction which would open the horizons of a new world. Mesopotamians moved stages of cultural development which were major shapers of the future of the human condition.

Writing Arguably the most decisive of Mesopotamian cultural innovations was writing, an act of great importance to the Mesopotamian people--first and foremost the Sumerians--for its service in book keeping and accounting. (The world historical significance of this innovation dwarfs its early record keeping role). The earliest Mesopotamian writing was based on picture-grams, like Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were a roughly contemporaneous invention, but Sumerians were able, far more rapidly than the Egyptians, to morph this early script into cuneiform--a wide shaped alphabet of some 3300 words, symbols, and phonetic markers, carved into moist clay by a pointed reed called a stylus. Later Mesopotamian Empires, Babylonian, Assyrian, continued to write with cuneiform, which thus became, in addition to a cultural gift, a unifying principle for the cultures 'between the two rivers.'

The wheel By the middle of the 4th millennium B.C.E. the Sumerians had invented useable wheels, first for plows and other work equipment, later in the millennium for chariots. One can discover, any day while gardening with the wheelbarrow, the huge importance of this innovation for transporting bulky items--like the bricks, grain, and ores which were increasingly to serve as the axis of Mesopotamian development.

Readings

Chiera, Edward, *They Wrote on Clay: The Babylonian Tablets Speak Today*, Chicago, 1956.

Kramer, Samuel Noah, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty nine Firsts in Man's Recorded History*, Philadelphia, 1981.

Discussion questions

Can we add the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 3rd millennium B.C.E., to the greatest innovations of the Mesopotamians--in this case of the Akkadians? The work is often called 'the first great work of Literature.' And what about the Laws of Hammurabi? Were they too an innovation?

What stages of proto writing preceded Sumerian cuneiform? What kind of innovative genius was needed, to conceive of the development of the writing process into cuneiform?

Sumerian seems to have been the first written language. Where did it come from? Who spoke it? Was it spoken first, then written?

Part II : Mesopotamian Trade

Overview From the 4th millennium B.C.E. to the Fall of Babylonia (539 B.C.E), the Land between the Two Rivers, Mesopotamia, developed as a cohort of interrelated kingdoms--Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians--exercising control over parts of today's Iraq, Syria, the Anatolian plateau, and eastward into western India. This Mesopotamian world grew rapidly--by 3000 B.C.E. the population of Sumeria is estimated to have been 100,000--driving culture forward by the creation of the world's first cities, first practicable writing system (cuneiform), and by the invention of such indispensable tools for growth as the wheel and the sail--the ground drive of a vital economy.

The Lay of the Land By natural land endowment, the ancient Mesopotamians had few natural resources. Their cities, while great strides forward in community, were made of mud brick, as were the central structures of their cities, the ziggurat step temples. (These architectural building materials would set the shape of subsequent Mesopotamian civic design.) Thanks to irrigation, however, the Mesopotamians were able to cultivate rich crops, and to export (say out of Babylon) large cargos of wool, cloth, textiles, jewelry, basketry, dates, figs, cloth; in exchange, over the centuries, for a changing selection of the following: wine, donkeys, copper and tin. These transactions took place along the rivers from which Mesopotamia took its name, and eventually out into the Mediterranean or Persian Gulf, from which goods of all sorts could make their way to distant countries, or simply into the network of smaller river tributaries, which small boats could navigate.

Overland traffic Trade by land grew constantly throughout the development of Mesopotamian cultures. This kind of trading typically involved long donkey (or camel) trains, covering sometimes vast distances, and counting on rich end results in badly needed bartered goods, which could be displayed and sold in the rapidly developing city markets that sprinkled the landscape between the two rivers. During the early second millennium B.C.E., according to archeological finds, Assyrian traders regularly travelled 1000 miles, from Assur in northern Mesopotamia to Kanesh in Anatolia. 'Surviving correspondence shows that during the forty five years from 1810-1765 B.C.E., merchants transported at least eighty tons of tin, and one hundred thousand textiles from Assur, and returned from Kanesh with no less than ten tons of silver. ' (Bentley, et. al. *Traditions and Encounters*, p. 36). It is no surprise, nor is it without precedent, that the Assyrian trading community applied for, and received permission to set up a permanent trading community at Kanesh, to maximize the preparation of transit goods between Kanesh and Assur.

Readings

Kuhrt, Amelie, *The Ancient Near East, 3000-330 B.C.E.*, London, 1995.

Snell, Daniel, ed., *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, Malden, 2005.

Discussion questions

What is the relation between trade and the development of the early cities of Mesopotamia? Does the growth of the city depend on trade growth? Or vice versa?

The typical Mesopotamian meal, on the common person level, was composed of bread, beer, and onions. Would those three commodities have been producible on a local level, without recourse to foreign trade?

Were there wealthy Mesopotamian business men (and women) behind large trading operations? Was there family ownership of trading businesses? (There was; can you ferret them out?)

PART V : CULTURAL HISTORY

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Part I : Science

Part II : Art

Part III : Religion

Part IV : Philosophy

Part I : Science

Overview Innovation and scientific discovery both marked the unusually creative intellectual spirit of the higher cultures of Mesopotamia. While medical science was a blend of empirical work, including early surgery, with what we might call 'religious psychotherapy,' the work put into mathematics and astronomy was aligned with what would be the main discovery directions of those sciences, straight through to our time.

Medicine Our knowledge of Mesopotamian medicine is limited because we have trouble interpreting, and even reading, the cuneiform tablets on which such medical literature is written. The basic character of this medical practice, which is fully in place by the third millennium B.C.E., and which continues at least two millennia more, is clear: illness is viewed as sin, and healing is the prerogative and responsibility of the doctor. To be more nearly exact, doctors fell into three categories: healing doctors; seers; and exorcists. Only the first of these adopted empirical methods like prescriptions or surgical interventions, while the other two categories, practicing as they did in the temples, took on the challenge of driving away evil spirits, or reciting appropriate prayers. A typical prescription might run like this: 'If a man is sick with a blow on the cheek, pound together fir-turpentine, pine-turpentine, tamarisk, daisy, flour of Inninnu; mix in milk and **beer** in a small copper **pan**; spread on skin, bind on him, and he shall recover.'

Astronomy Mankind's first record of astronomical--it was what we would now call astrological--observations was due to the Sumerians, and though the Babylonians and Assyrians were eventually to prove to be the greatest of early astronomers, the Sumerians, as in much else--writing, the wheel, the sail--were the ones who got the ball rolling. Both the Babylonians and Assyrians--as we see in the Venus Tablets (1582 B.C.E.) of the Babylonian king Ammizaduga--were able to identify 2000-3000 constellations--e.g. Leo, Taurus, Scorpio, Sagittarius--by the knowledge of whose movements and positions it was made possible for farmers to calculate planting times, and for sailors to calculate nautical positions, with useful accuracy. The movements of Venus, from her positioning as a morning star, to those of an evening star, were analyzed with similar productive consequences for agriculture and shipping. Both the Babylonians and Assyrians acquired an accurate ability to predict lunar eclipses.

Mathematics From as amazingly early as 8000 B.C.E. the Mesopotamian culture was inquiring into fundamental concepts of mathematics, and in the course of its long development, through to the interventions of Alexander the Great, the culture continued to advance in conceptions not only of basic functions but of higher algebra and geometry. Work of extensive complexity was inscribed on clay tablets, as well as analytical procedures using assumptions basic to us today--a baseline figure of sixty (rather than our decimal system, 10) on which to calculate the seconds in a minute, minutes in an hour, and the 360 degrees of the circle. Such already sophisticated premises had their origins in a millennia old practice of establishing the relations between symbols (numerical symbols

eventually) and types and quantities of agricultural products; relationships which were in time to be the groundwork for a numeric system and procedures like arithmetic, in which every sort of agricultural calculation was embedded.

Readings

Neugebauer, Otto, *The Exact Sciences in Antiquity*, New York, 1969.

Robson, E., *Mathematics in ancient Iraq: A Social History*, Princeton, 2008.

Discussion questions

To what extent were the needs of agriculture the drivers for the Mesopotamians' great curiosity about scientific thinking?

How closely linked were mathematics and astronomical discoveries in Mesopotamia? Which of the two sciences came first?

Astronomy and astrology were closely related, in the development of Mesopotamian thought. Are they still closely related? Are they both sciences of prediction?

Part II : Ancient Mesopotamian Art

Overview Mesopotamian art, like that of Persia or Egypt, begins four or five millennia B.C.E., and lasts until, say, the Fall of Babylon (539 B.C.E.). Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian art traditions all had their distinctive themes and styles, and yet there is coherence, to the artistic creations of the Fertile Crescent, that results both from their milieu--the kinds of materials available for art--and from their perforce heavy involvement both with the gods and with military affairs. We will sketch a few examples of this multi-millenia achievement.

The ziggurat The ziggurat was a raised rectangular mountain, constructed from baked clay, with sloping, fortress-like walls, which served as a base for the temple, which would serve as the seat of power in a Mesopotamian city. While we have little evidence concerning these clay temple structures, which naturally break down rapidly, we have many ziggurats to contemplate. One of the most 'powerful' is the ziggurat-temple of King Nanna, from Ur in Iraq, (2500--2050 B.C.E.). Like all those massive desert structures of worship, in Egypt and Mesopotamia, this structure heaves up potently out of the flatland, making a strong statement out of itself.

Miscellaneous Sumerian work Apart from such massive remains as ziggurats, we have some figurines and statuettes, often small and short, like that of a standing male figure (2600 B.C.E., thought to represent the god of vegetation). We have a three tiered inlaid band, depicting figures participating in a royal military triumph--as the king's retinue and as prisoners of war. Almost no painting remains, and with it the strong color of other ancient arts--Indian, Egyptian--is swallowed up in the massiveness of the desert.

Akkadian art The art of Akkad is noteworthy, to pick a single example, for a precise, stone stele (2300 B.C.E.) depicting a regal victory and indicating the ruler enlarged and superior, standing near the summit of the carved slab. We deal in much of this ancient sculptural work with hard materials finely carved, and for military occasions directed to display the current ruling monarch in helmeted and cuirassed power. The present slab is, characteristic of such work, six feet six inches tall.

Babylonia We think first of another stele (1760 B.C.E.) which presents the Law Code of Hammurabi. The importance of this text, to the citizen of Babylon, would have lain first of all in the formally carved scene at the top, which shows Shamash, the sun god, the controller of the weather and of plant life, and the representative of order and justice, handing over the laws to the ruler. This seven foot tall basalt stele is as rigid, direct, and intricately carved as possible in such material.

Assyria The Assyrians (9th-7th centuries B.C.E.) excelled both in the creation of stone reliefs and gate guarding myth-figures--guardian monsters placed at royal gateways, and melding man and winged best in a surreal (and fascinating) mixture--and in fascinating, semi-surreal reliefs of military prowess, such as the depiction of Ashurnasirpal II killing lions. This latter relief is both fierce and purely ornamental, as though its purpose was to delight the eye with planes and variations in relief.

Afterthought Mesopotamian art, unlike ancient Egyptian art, offers the eye little in the way of color, or personal expression. Line, action, and hard demanding materials like basalt and stone, set the Mesopotamian tone, as does its general preoccupation both with military prowess and divine favor.

Readings

Frankfort, Henri, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, London, 1970.

Crawford, Harriett E.W., *Sumer and the Sumerians*, Cambridge, 2004.

Discussion questions

What kind of presence does the religious experience exercise in ancient Mesopotamian Art? How can we today best relate to art which depicts the more than a thousand Mesopotamian deities, and does so sternly, in materials fit only for relief and inscriptions?

Cuneiform is initially, like hieroglyphics, a pictorial language, which impresses itself onto soft clay with a reed stylus. Is the cuneiform lettering system itself an expression of artistic sensitivity?

Would it be fair to say that the ancient Mesopotamians had no interest in art for its own sake, but only in art contextualized by war, power, or control?

Part III : RELIGION (under preparation)

Part IV : PHILOSOPHY

Overview In *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Henri Frankfort discusses the thought process of the great early civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, and of Egypt. He argues effectively that the thinking of those cultures, from their origins in the sixth millennium B.C., was mythopoetic, that is, thought in terms of myths, stories of the gods, and of human experience as shaped by the presence of the gods--of whom, for example, there were more than a thousand, just in Mesopotamia. Logical reasoning and empirical observation were relatively underdeveloped, although education was highly valued, and Mesopotamia was renowned for its profusion of teaching academies, which in number exceeded that of temples.

Mythopoetic literature Both the story of Adapa (14th century B.C.E.) and the epic of *Gilgamesh* (2150-1400 B.C.E.) deal with man's destiny on earth, and the 'issue of death.' In both of these poems the central question is 'why is man born only to die? What is the meaning of our life on earth?' The exposition of these tales pits inquiring man against fate or godly deception, though the turn taken by imagination is different in the two works.

The story of Adapa In the story of Adapa the king of that name is tricked by the god Ea, into refusing the offer of immortality. The chief issue here is whether Adapa is an innocent victim or an example of the mortal who is unworthy of more than the fate he gets.

Gilgamesh Gilgamesh is a robust and lusty young king who sets off, with his friend Enkidu, to find the meaning of mortal life, but who is saddened and wisened by his discourse with the ancient sage, Utnapishtim, who convinces him that he has no choice but to accept mortality. Both of these accounts--*Adapa* and *Gilgamesh*-- could be considered 'philosophical,' although they are so by the way they present rather than argue philosophical positions.

(That difference is the mythopoetic dimension of the great Mesopotamian creators.) In the way in which they handle man's fall, they open the discourse about man's 'disobedience,' which forms the center of their sister epic, the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible.

Wisdom literature as philosophy Two texts from Mesopotamian literature embrace the theme of the vanity of human life from the view point of dark pessimism: *The Dialogue of Pessimism* (1000 B.C.E.) and the second millennium B.C.E. *Hymn to the Rightful Sufferer*. In both these cuneiform texts the emphasis is on theodicy--the justification of the ways of god to man--more than on the question of the thwarted human desire for immortality. Obviously, though, all the above literatures are philosophical in the sense that Job or Ecclesiastes are philosophical: ruminating darkly on the human condition.

A central philosophical theme in Mesopotamian thinking Pervasive, throughout Mesopotamian culture--literature, myth, and art--is the implication that the gods, while founders of the universe, are at the same time offering it to human beings as a field for co-operation. That is, men and the gods have the responsibility for 'enriching,' 'completing' the universe, a task in which humanity attempts to contribute by his worship, praise, and prayer toward the gods. Our own contemporary thought--as in the philosophy of Samuel Alexander or Nikos Kazantzakis--has widened that same argument, both through cosmology and through ethics

Readings

Frankfort, Henri, *et. al.*, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Chicago, 1977.

Segal, Robert, *Myth: a very short introduction*, Oxford, 2004.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the connection between Mesopotamian philosophy and that of many books of the Hebrew Old Testament? Can you track the path of this connection, either through geopolitical or intellectual currents?

The dialogue form of certain Mesopotamian philosophical texts, like *The Dialogue of Pessimism*, is significantly different from that of a Platonic dialogue. Please explain how these two kinds of philosophical dialogue differ from each other.

Is religious thought inherently related to philosophical thought? Do they overlap each other? Have the religious texts of the contemporary Abrahamic religions a pronounced philosophical element?