

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Political History

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Contents

Part I : Government

Part II : Military

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?