

# ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Social Structure

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

**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.?