

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN HISTORY

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SECTION I : MESOPOTAMIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

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?

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?

SECTION III : MESOPOTAMIAN SOCIAL HISTORY

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.?

GENDER RELATIONS

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?

SECTION IV : ECONOMIC HISTORY

ECONOMIC INNOVATIONS

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?

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?)

SECTION IV : CULTURAL HISTORY

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?

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?

RELIGION

Overview The timespan of ancient Mesopotamian religion is awe inspiring, 3500 B.C.E.--400 C.E., and any general statement about it will be subject to exceptions. There are, though, general traits: a pervasive belief in the close relation of the gods, who created mortals, to those mortals; a conviction that mortals must work together with the gods, to preserve harmony in the universe; a fear and anxiety toward the gods, who are critical and punitive toward misbehaving mortals.

The god system By one account there were more than 2000 gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon. By the accounts of such texts as the *Enuma Elish* (1100 B.C.E.), which record the genealogy and population of the gods, there was a fairly fixed narrative of the genealogy of the gods, leading down to the current reign of the supreme deity, Marduk. It all begins with a conflict between a male principle, Apsu (the force of fresh water), and a female principle Tiamat (the force of salt water). These two 'forces' generate the gods, who immediately rebel against their progenitors. Ea put Apsu to sleep, then killed him, and from his corpse built the world. Then Ea fought with mother Tiamat, and from the ruins of their struggle rose the god Marduk, who created mortals, and decreed that they should work with him to carry out the work of the world. Marduk, and his associate gods, promised no heavenly reward for virtuous lives, for everybody went to the same underworld after death; virtue lay in supporting the co-operation of gods and mortals during life.

The presence of the gods Each city had its own god or gods, who were worshipped in one or several central temples. These temples were built on high walled mounds called *ziggurats*, and contained, among other rooms, a holy room in which stood the statue of the city's god or gods. (There were also adjacent rooms, in which the relatives of the god could rest, eat, and stay.) The image of the god was presumed to be real, the living presence of the deity, and as such was bathed, dressed, and fed at regular intervals, by the priests of the temple. Prayers were constantly offered to the god, for the salvation of the city, and care was taken to make life agreeable for the god; for instance, the god Marduk was regularly taken out into a charming spot in the country so that he could have fresh air and a change of scene; as the god passed through the streets, his worshippers chanted praise and prayer. The ziggurat itself was understood as a kind of stairway to the heavens, so that the god could directly access the places of worship devoted to them. In most temples a single deity predominated--one traditionally associated with the region--while a number of other associated deities were being worshipped in the same holy site.

Life in relation to the gods The man or woman on the streets lived in more or less constant fear of the gods; he was, therefore, prey to superstition, and ways of warding off evil; addicted to divinations--for fortune telling, astrology, and rogue seers were all rife in the culture; and prone to hallucinations--if that is what we want to call the regular seeing of the gods as bathed in brilliant light. No corner of life was not infused with the concern for placating the gods, and calling on their aid for help in sickness, debt, and fear.

Reading

Bottero, Jean, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago, 2001.

Schneider, Tammi, *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*, Grand Rapids, 2001.

Discussion questions

How did specific Mesopotamian deities become associated with this or that city? What kind of tradition was behind the association of a city with a particular deity?

What light does the epic of *Gilgamesh* (2500 B.C.E.) shed on Mesopotamian religion? How does it speak to the questions of the search for immortality, or the duality of nature and man--as in the hero's friendship with Enkidu?

Do you think the *genealogy* of the gods, as recorded in the *Enuma Elish*, was present and important in the worship life of the 'man on the street' in Sumer?

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?

LITERATURE

Part I : Introduction

Cultural remnants As with all ancient cultures, the cultural remnants of Ancient Near Eastern culture—to which we are indebted for the birth of writing, not to mention the wheel, the first cities, and vast agricultural know how—are scattered, and are still rising to land surfaces, appearing in archeological digs, or yielding to the growing achievements or linguistics and pottery analysis. The written texts of Ancient Near Eastern Literature—of which we introduce four examples below—were largely consigned to clay tablets, on which writing was inscribed by a sharp pointed stylus. These usually broken tablets have regularly needed to be put together with the other parts of the puzzle of a text, and their meaning often comes down to us as in part educated guess work. We can discern, from the quite well preserved texts we consider below, that major parts of human achievement in letters still await us as we learn more about our archaic Sumerian and Babylonian past.

Our four texts The four texts we present here derive from more or less the same period of Ancient Near Eastern culture, that is from the third millennium B.C.E. to the 18th century B.C.E. (The *Descent of Inanna*, the oldest of these texts, shows marks of third millennium origins, but this text too, like the other three, can be tracked with probability to the 18th century B.C.E. For all that similarity in date, the four texts we consider here are sharply different in genre and general tenor. The *Descent of Inanna* is what we might call a ‘liturgical chant,’ a text to be read or chanted in the course of ritual; *The Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)* is a blend of genesis-tale with theology, a record of the origin of the cosmos; *Gilgamesh* is an epic tale whose protagonist, the prince Gilgamesh—pretty certainly a rendering of a real leader, who had passed away and was revered—takes on the world as an adventure in friendship and as a search for immortality, and whose quest to discover the meaning of life is among human history’s most significant imaginative enterprises; Hammurabi’s *Law Code* is a carefully organized legal text, the crown jewel of the many achievements of this imperial leader, who promoted education on every front, while securing for his people a legal code in which social equality could be realized. It would be safe to say that Hammurabi’s *Law Code*, and the epic of *Gilgamesh*, are impactful elements in world culture, while the *Enuma Elish*, the *Epic of Creation*, belongs with the greatest of the Ancient Mediterranean’s several efforts—the *Torah*, Hesiod’s *Theogony*—to account for the presence and unfolding of the universe.

Discussion Topics

The works of Homer and Virgil are still attractive to the general reader in our culture, and are popular texts in University classes. Is *Gilgamesh*? Look at http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/new_haven_07.02.01_u for a sample of the brilliant efforts currently being made to teach *Gilgamesh* to middle school students. Google *Gilgamesh in the classroom* for a further eye opener. But are there residual problems, with understanding that 3rd millennium epic, which we cannot rapidly do away with? What are they?

Would you, as a citizen of ancient Mesopotamian Uruk, have been happy with Hammurabi's law code? Would it seem to you have promoted law and order in your society? How about individual rights? Could we live with Hammurabi's code today?

The Epic of Creation probably dates, originally, from the first half of the third millennium. Does it present an imaginatively coherent cosmology? What kind of leadership does Marduk exercise among the gods? Can you compare this cosmology to the Genesis tale in the Abrahamic religions? Is there historical 'progress' in this passage from earlier to later account?

Part II : EPICS

The archaic in writing The ancient literature of Mesopotamia is preserved on clay tablets, inscribed in cuneiform characters on clay. Both the cuneiform writing system, the world's first systematic writing, and the mindset of the remaining texts, force us back to archaic levels of the human cultural experience.

Vast time span of Mesopotamian culture From the earliest Sumerian writing to the neo Babylonian writing that marks the ending of ancient Mesopotamian culture, is a period of three millennia, the time span that separates, say, Homer from William Faulkner—a period during which huge shifts of sensibility and even culture, have defined human development. Into a time span that vast we need to place the handful of what we could call literary texts, from ancient Mesopotamia.

The texts Can we detect an underlying unity to the three most substantial literary texts remaining to us from ancient Mesopotamia: *The Descent of Inana* (2000 B.C.E.); *The Epic of Creation* (1800 B.C.E.); the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (1800 B.C.E.)?

The Descent of Inana. There is a narrative curve to this tale, in which the goddess Inana, who was widely worshipped in the ancient Near East, makes a trip to the underworld to visit her evil twin sister, and to rise again, fertility escaping from the darkness of death and winter, and in the course of the seasons to send back a substitute for herself, and to die ritually in her place, every year. Is this a work of imagination? There is a firm and often bloody narrative, yet it reads (or listens) like a piece of religious ritual. Is this a story? Could this have been a best-seller, in ancient Mesopotamia? At the end we are left wondering how well we are able to read other-culture texts like this, the end product of which is clearly to promote the recurring of the fertile cycle of the seasons?

The Epic of Creation *The Epic of Creation*, composed almost a millennium after *Inana*, replicates the traits of the earlier epic-religious conception: vast mythical figures, moving over equally vast and religiously envisioned, landscapes—heaven, hell—and all that for the purpose of retelling and resupporting the cyclical energies of nature. The emergence to supremacy of the greatest among competing gods, Marduk, involves mortal struggles, not least with his violent mother Tiamat, from which emerge a new reign of fruitful power: 'He (Marduk) suckled the teats of goddesses/the nurse who reared him filled him with awesomeness/proud was his form, piercing his stare/mature his emergence; he was powerful from the start.' From the ripeness of the man grew the ripeness of the life of the earth.

Epic of Gilgamesh This great epic, composed around the time of the *Epic of Creation*, openly tells a story, through the hugeness of mythical figures, which rivals Homer's work in empathy for the human condition. The two earlier texts, just surveyed, dealt with the promotion of natural cycles and cosmic strengths, while *Gilgamesh* is all about the passions of the human life, its search for physical satisfaction, then (in vain) for immortality, and finally for resignation. The cycles of nature, which dominate the first two texts—*Inana* and *The Epic of Creation*—are replaced here by the eternal cycle of the ages of a single man, who sets out on the adventure of life, and ends up with resignation before the impossibility of immortality.

Readings

Wooley, Leonard, *A Forgotten Kingdom*, London, 1953.

Chiera, Edward, *They Wrote on Clay, The Babylonian Tablets Speak Today*, New York, 1956.

Discussion questions

Do you detect a literary imagination in the three texts we have mentioned? Does any of those texts tell a transformative story after which you read your own reality in a different light?

Is there any humor in this Mesopotamian literature, or is it beyond us to answer this question? In what mode of response did the Mesopotamian reader process the battles among the gods, in *The Epic of Creation*?

Is it possible to extract a literary history from such a small number of texts as we have above? Is there a consistency in these expressions of Mesopotamian literature, that helps you to feel a single character in the culture?

Liturgical Chant Inanna (3rd millennium B.C.) Sumeria

The Descent of Inanna The *Descent of Inanna* is an ancient Sumerian liturgical text, discovered on shattered clay tablets in Sumer, today's Iraq. The oldest of the tablets date from the early second millennium B.C., but are presumed, from such internal evidence as their line and syntax structures, to derive from oral works created in the 3rd millennium B.C. That would make this Sumerian text older than even the Indian Vedas, which are otherwise the oldest sacred literature, and date mostly from the second millennium B.C.

Mother Goddesses Inanna herself was a mother goddess figure, and as such was venerated widely through the ancient Near East. (The worship of her as cult figure brings to mind ancient cultic worships such as those of Artemis, the ancient Cycladic mother goddess figures, Kwan Yin, The Virgin Mary or Fatima.) Many texts touch on Inanna, yet her most famous—and well preserved—appearance among us is 'documented' in the *Descent of Inanna*, which describes the passage of the goddess into the underworld, which her recently widowed sister rules; Inanna's brutal death there, as she attempts to join her sister; Inanna's rescue by earth-sent forces; her return to earth; her steps toward finding the man and woman who would henceforth share between them the challenge of spending half the year with the forces of hell and darkness, half the year in the sunlight, and whose mutual alteration would assure the continuation of the major cycle of the seasons.

Agriculture The ritual-agriculture themes of this poem abound, and we should probably avoid the word *poem* in describing the material. One might rather say, *liturgical text to be recited*, danced and sung to, and created for the purpose of promoting the agriculture sequence of the seasons, and the reliable richness of the harvest. Sympathetic magical thinking lies heavily on this kind of work, the very narration of which is conceived as a means of promoting the productivity of the land.

Challenges to understanding The modern reader of this text will face fundamental challenges of understanding. Among the challenges of understanding are the abundant use of repetition—what is its function?—and the profusion of such concepts as the *me*, or the curious presence of figures like the *galatur* or *kurgarra*, who collaborate in the operation to rescue Inanna from the underworld. We cannot easily grasp these elements of text construction, from a world whose traditions were shaped five millennia before ours. If we are comfortable with the discomfort, which such an alien discourse can bring us, we can embrace the foreignness of such a work for the violence it exercises against what, in western literary criticism, was for a while thought to be the supreme achievement of poetry, the well turned artifact, the well-wrought urn in the formula of Cleanth Brooks, during the American New Criticism. The literary historian in us may scratch his/her head, when trying to explain Inanna to his class, while the poet in us may revel in the boisterous language and provocative verbalism of this archaic jewel.

Reading *The Descent of Inanna*, translated by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, in *Bedford Anthology of World Literature: The Ancient World, Beginnings-100 C.E.*, pp. 23-39.

Discussion questions

1 Inanna's husband, and the individual chosen to make the annual trip between the Underworld and the sunlit Overworld, is a farmer. What is significant about that occupation, for this ritual figure? What special relation do you see between this ritual text and the fertile agricultural setting of Uruk, and of the rich alluvial plain of the Tigris Euphrates river valley?

2 The annihilation of Inanna, as she attempts to visit her evil sister in the Underworld, assumes what is (to us) grotesque form, when Inanna's corpse is shrunken and hung up on a nail on the wall. 'Inanna was turned into a corpse, a piece of rotting meat, and was hung from a hook on the wall.' How do you explain this treatment of Inanna, which we have to consider abusive? How would the original reader of the text have understood and interpreted the present passage?

3 Inanna herself goes through trials and tribulations in the present text, before she becomes the mother goddess again—after her dreadful trip to the underworld. How does she get out of the underworld? What kind of demons attempt to prevent her escape? Why does she so brutally beat her husband Dumuzi, when she first emerges from the underworld?

Theology Epic of Creation: Enuma Elish (1894-1595 B.C.) Babylonia

Clay tablets This epic creation story is preserved on seven clay tablets and runs to a little over a thousand lines. The first discovery of the tablets was made in the Library of King Ashurbanipal (668-630 B.C.) between 1848-1876, and subsequent finds, throughout ancient Babylonia and from dealers in antiquities, have enabled scholars to restore what they take to be a nearly complete (but often hard to interpret) version of the original. The date of the original is hard to determine, because the complete version we have constructed is based on many earlier tablet examples. It is probable, in any case, that the original dates back to at least 1800 B.C.

The epic narrative The epic opens onto a time when nothing existed except the sweet water ocean and the salt water ocean and the mist rising up between them. These natural forces are personified as Ur-gods. Apsu and Tiamat are the names of the first two gods. This god pair begat a lively brood of Baby Boomer gods—including Enki, the god of magic and the master brain of the Mesopotamian divinities. The lesser gods made such a racket that Apsu decided to kill them, but instead—*he* was the master brain—Enki intervened to kill Apsu—he spared Tiamat—and to set himself and his wife up in a grand mansion. There they gave birth to Marduk, the supreme god to be, and the single hero of this entire epic, the figure whose radiance and splendor will dominate the remainder of the epic. (It will interest those familiar with early Greek cosmogony, as we find it in Hesiod, to compare the Kronos-Rhea, Ouranos-Gaia, Zeus-Hera sequence with the Babylonian: natural forces meld raucously into a humane personscape in the mythic generation of the cosmos. A conduit opens from the Ancient Near East to the Hellenic.)

The Power of Marduk On subsequent tablets we learn that Tiamat, seething at the destruction of her spouse, and spurred on by restless agitators, determines to avenge Apsu's death. Enki is informed of this threat, and goes to war against Tiamat, but in vain, and then, equally vainly, sends his son Anu to try peaceful reconciliation with Tiamat. Again no luck. At this point Marduk appears willing to destroy Tiamat, is acclaimed by the gods in a rowdy festival, and assumes supreme power over heaven. In bloody battle, egged on by his cohorts, Marduk wipes out the forces of Tiamat—the primal order of things—and goes even farther, creating man out of the blood of the most fractious rebel against his authority. At this point the modern reader, eager to see the birth of a kind of *Genesis*/humanism, is startled to see the emphasis of the epic turn back onto Marduk, praising his astounding power. No attempt is made to conceptualize Marduk himself; the tale turns back into the mythical divine.

Origins of the Creation Epic The origin of the text of the *Enuma Elish* is probably at least a millennium older than the date of the tablets we possess, and thus goes back into the founding efforts of the Babylonian State; in this case the effort to consolidate the supremacy of Marduk, as supreme god and ruler—and, conjecturally, as a model for the stability of the ruler of Babylon himself. The text was of course anonymous, but seems to have had a clear social function. The text—which was poetry, and rhythmic—was recited by the high priest before the central statue of Marduk, on the fourth day of the festival of the supreme god, and then again during that festival, for the express purpose of releasing the god from captivity. The chanting of the epic is here apparently intended as a magical aid in

Marduk's deliverance from imprisonment. Though we don't know exactly what this means, we can guess that the purpose was to protect Babylon against its enemies—as Tiamat was subdued by Marduk—and perhaps to ward off the threat of the annual flooding of the Tigris/Euphrates rivers.

The language of the text The language of this text deals in awe with events in the heavens. Belief and hypothesis seem to blend in such language, where human destiny is sketching itself out across a long arc of suppositions. What do we feel eventually about the role of the human, Marduk's offering to his culture? Is the language of this text a quest to isolate or refine the notion of the self? How we answer will depend on whether we are tempted to 'psychoanalyze' a text of such great antiquity and ritual rooting. From one perspective, at least, the *Enuma Elish* can be seen as an inquiry into the bloody throes of our human origins, and a reaffirmation of the power and violence of the elemental setting from which we set forth on life.

Reading

Heidel, Alexander, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*

Origins: Creation Texts from the Ancient Mediterranean, edited and translated by Doria and Lenowitz, pp. 182-236.

Discussion Questions

1 What is the role of the human in this epic by which the human labors to portray its own origins? (After all, one purpose of the creation of the epic seems to have been to protect the human community.) Does the human, as portrayed in this creative text, have the interests of the human at heart?

2 What do you think of the portrayal of the assembly of the gods, in the present text? You will notice that on two occasions the gods are rowdy and noisy. Do they seem to behave like incorrigible teen-agers? If so, how do you explain this? Are they forces of nature, turbulent and needing control? What relation do you see here between nature and culture? Is this universe ruled by values or only by forces?

3 What do you see as the 'motivation' behind a creation story like *Enuma Elish*? Has that motivation to do with what we are calling the language peculiar to the Man/God relationship? Does that language rise from increasingly sharp self-definition of the individual, who—as part of a growingly self-aware society—thereby longs to address the progenitors he finds inside himself, as well as longing to define his ultimate sense of dependence? If these seem to you plausible accounts of creation-tale establishment, how do you explain the rough god-level conflicts that surge brutally through the *Enuma Elish*? Is conflict in heaven the path to characterizing the struggles within the self, to give a compelling account of its path into social consciousness?

Gilgamesh (18th-7th Centuries B.C.) Babylonia

Ashurbanipal If any text of Ancient Near Eastern *imagination* has crossed into the cultural mainstream of the Hebraic/Greco-Roman tradition, it is *Gilgamesh*, an Akkadian/Babylonian epic of 2900 lines, found on eleven clay tablets, dating in its most complete form to the seventh century B.C., and in that form best preserved in the Palace and Temple libraries of the ruler of Assyria, King Ashurbanipal (685-627 B.C.). (The oldest fragments of the text probably go back to the 18th century B.C., and a variety of versions stud the intervening centuries.) Six or seven other versions of the 'text' have been found in Iraq, but the epic itself been known to the world only for the last century and a half. This fact could go far to explaining the partial *but only partial* incorporation of this epic into our literary canon, though a degree of cultural otherness plays a part in the difficulty of our access to this work. Famed though *Gilgamesh* is for its universal human values, and now internationally known and studied, the looming figures, the potent epic forces at work here remind us of another epic created nearer to our time, but equally 'strange,' *Beowulf*. The chief manuscript of *Beowulf* was destroyed in a fire in the early 18th century A. D., and only introduced into our cultural awareness in 1815, thanks to the work of editors and scholars.

Story of Gilgamesh The epic of *Gilgamesh* ‘concerns’ certain exploits of an Assyrian king who flourished around 2700 B.C.; in other words we deal here with an historical figure of the—already at the time of the writing of the epic—distant past, a figure whose exploits are cast onto the screen of mythical thinking, and through whose destiny we rehearse many of the profound rites of the human condition. (This text is more than a quest for selfhood; it is an exploration of the depths of the human condition: the meanings of friendship, the love of adventure, the fear of death and longing for immortality, the exhausting delights of lust.) These rites will make themselves clear to the reader as he/she passes through the reading of this epic.

Gilgamesh as a developing person Through many versions of the text Gilgamesh remains the perceiving center. From the start ‘the hero’ speaks to us from under a cloud—he is guilty of having mistreated the citizens of Uruk, oppressing the men, invoking the *droit du seigneur* with the women. To tame him the mother goddess creates Enkidu, a force of nature, mankind in the primitive state of oneness with nature ‘before the fall.’ This formulation of the nature-culture divide—which reminds us of the imagination of Jean Jacques Rousseau—enriches itself throughout the epic, as Gilgamesh ultimately joins Enkidu in close friendship, in searing adventures, and ultimately in the terrifying experience of his friend’s death. Gilgamesh’s consequent dread of death leads him to seek immortality, in classic encounter with the Ur-Noah, Utanpishtim, who has survived death, but who in the end cannot rescue Gilgamesh from the common fate.

Reconstructing the Text From clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform, and broken repeatedly through the centuries, we inherit a text full of lacunae, which must be reconstructed in places or left for lost, depending on the judgment of the editor. The text with which we are left acquires a certain additional power and archaic depth from the stark brokenness of the tale. The search for selfhood, which drives Gilgamesh, replicates itself in the tenacity with which ‘scholars’ have struggled, for over a century, to reconstruct these eleven tablets, on which some of the boldest human self-analyses are worked through.

Reading

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Translated, with an introduction, by Maureen Kovacs

Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us*

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 1. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*
--*Gilgamesh, Book 1, 791-7*

Discussion Questions

Idea: Different Perspectives - What seem to you the chief differences in perspective, between the Gilgamesh vision of the world and that of Hesiod and Ovid? Is Gilgamesh a mythological poem? What kind of archaic religious perspectives seem to you embedded in this work?

Theme: Friendship - What draws Gilgamesh and Enkidu together? In what ways do their characteristics help them complement each other?

Theme: Journey - What stages does Gilgamesh undergo in his quest for immortality? What obstacles does he encounter? Does he learn anything at a particular stage to help him in his further quest? Which of Gilgamesh’s qualities would make him a hero in the modern world? Do any recent figures exhibit those qualities?

The German/Swiss philosopher/psychologist, Carl Jung, established an influential theory of archetypes, pervasive and repetitive patterns of human psychology, which dominate the deeper strata of our mental life; one of his followers, Maud Bodkin, transferred his basic notions into the study of literature, and of the archetypes to which great works of literature give expression. It is plausible to view the major themes of *Gilgamesh*—the love/friendship relationship, the quest for immortality, the heroic defeat of the monster-giant, the vulnerability to the sexual passion—as examples of such archetypal patterns, by which masterpieces from world literature can reveal certain

interrelationships. What do you think of this idea of Bodkin's, and how explanatory do you find it, for a text like *Gilgamesh*?

In *Gilgamesh* human themes are deeply plumbed—as we imply in the previous question, above. Do you *feel* that *Gilgamesh* is a work embedded in an historical situation, expressing group memory and attitude, or do you *feel* you are dealing with an individual creator's work? Whichever *feeling* you have, can you support it with some hard evidence? If not, why not?

Utanapishtim, Humbaba, Innana, Enkidu: in these 'minor characters' *Gilgamesh* displays what at first sight seems almost a novelist's skill at perception and depiction. Have these 'characters' that concrete universal richness which brings, say, a Shakespearean character (Falstaff? Hamlet?) to unanalyzable life? Or are these figures in archaic epic more nearly abstractions, representing distinctive *roles* in the human condition?

Part III : NON-FICTION

Law Code Hammurabi Law Code (1772 B.C.) (Babylonia)

Hammurabi's laws As a divinely descended ruler Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.) believed his law code to have been handed down to him by a succession of divine order-givers. His laws, inscribed in cuneiform letters on human sized basalt stelae, were found in Persia and consisted of 282 proscriptions—regulations and legislations--which if thought out to their implications could form the basis of a Constitution, but which as presented to their reader were take it or leave it statements about offences 'in connection with property, marriage, divorce, adoption, purchase and sale, loans, dismissal, calumny, corrupt jurisdiction, theft, receiving stolen goods, robbery and kidnapping, plundering, burglary, murder, prices and wages, and much more, each with its respective punishment.' The tenor of the laws is harsh and firm: punishments by death are frequent, and cautionary examples like injudicious rulings from the bench, or false accusations of witchcraft, are punished as severely as murder itself—in each of these cases by death.

196. If a man destroy the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye.

127. If a man point the finger at a priestess or the wife of another and cannot justify it, they shall drag that man before the judges and they shall brand his forehead.

6. If a man steal the property of a god (Temple) or palace, that man shall be put to death; and he who receives from his hand the stolen (property) shall also be put to death.

Kinds of law Hammurabi's laws are in the if/then or casuistic mode, except for the beginning and concluding laws, which are apodeictic, and simply state that 'you must do this or you must not do that.' None of these laws include their own legal foundations; so that, although Hammurabi's laws show potential as the basis of a Babylonian Constitution, they skip the nicety of explaining on what foundations they rest. In that, these laws resemble not only a number of Mesopotamian law-codes more or less contemporary with that of Hammurabi, but resemble in great detail the admonitions of the Mosaic Law Code (*Exodus* 21-23), which is incorporated in Judaeo-Christian theology.

Selfhood and the law What kind of view of selfhood is implicit in the Law Code of Hammurabi? We have spoken of the language as proscriptive. The individual is the target of each law, exemptions and favors are null and void. The self of the individual, who is covered by Hammurabi's Law Code, is subordinate to the laws themselves, is an actor living out the principles encoded in the Laws—and not much else. (Once again, we are not sure what the *authority* of the Laws is: is it a *Diktat* of the ruler, or a distillate of practice, come to the formulation point by the maturing of a society?) Does the individual have a formative role in the making of these laws?

Reading

<http://www.commonlaw.com/Hammurabi.html>

The above website provides an easy access to Hammurabi's text.

Gordon, Cyrus, *Hammurabi's Code: Quaint or Forward Looking?*

Maine, Henry Sumner, *Ancient Law; its connection to the History of Early Society.*

Meek, Theophile, 'The Code of Hammurabi,' pp. 155-178 in Pritchard/Fleming, *The Ancient Near East..*

Discussion Questions

1 The Mosaic Code, which pervades the Christian and Judaic traditions, is in some respects closely kin to Hammurabi's code, which is itself widely interrelated to other Near Eastern Law Codes: the Code of {Ur-Nammu} (ca. 2050 BC); the Laws of Eshnunna {ca. 1930 BC}; and the codex of Lipit-Ishtar of Isin {ca. 1870 BC}. Are *we* inheritors of the Code of Hammurabi? Explain.

2 We have discussed the kind of descriptive and apodeictic languages that Hammurabi uses. Does the author of this law code find his/its way toward a view of the self? Is the quest of this language to find and thus establish the right-thinking self, who is the implicit understander of the propositions being enunciated here? Is there an implied self, of the reader of this law code?

3 Erudite studies have proposed a close historical connection between Hammurabi's law code and the Mosaic law. Does this seem to you a plausible connection? Do the Christian Ten Commandments have their roots in a broad tradition of Ancient Near Eastern law codes?