

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA – Military History

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

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?