

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?