

Mesopotamia: Early Dynastic period, hyperurbanism, and palaces

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- Early Dynastic (I, II, IIIa, IIIb) 2900 BC - 2373 BC (473 years)
 - The name of the period is the “Early Dynastic Period”, in contrast to later, named dynasties
 - It is *not* the “early” part of the “dynastic” period
 - We have lots more evidence for the Early Dynastic than for earlier periods
 - More written evidence, since writing was becoming more widely used
 - The archaeological material is more spectacular, closer to the surface, and there is more of it (because populations and wealth had increased) so it has gotten more attention
 - This does not mean that the Early Dynastic period was the most important for the *origin* of civilization; one could argue that Sumerian civilization had already appeared by this time and was already changing from its earliest form

- the city of Uruk
 - near the beginning of the Early Dynastic (2800 BC), covered 250 ha (617 acres)
 - almost three times the area of the whole SSU campus
 - by the end of the Early Dynastic (~2400 BC), covered 400 hectares
 - 4.5 times the area of the entire SSU campus
 - entirely enclosed by a city wall
 - population probably 50,000 or more
 - this was its peak of size and importance

- One other large city (Umma) and about 6 smaller cities also by this time
 - these cities were in competition, not a united system with the largest at the top
 - the alluvium of Sumer was filled by a series of separate “primate” or simple 3-tiered settlement hierarchies at this point
 - each with one city surrounded by towns (the middle level) and a very few small agricultural hamlets (the bottom level)
 - many of the small hamlets of earlier periods were abandoned
 - most people moved into towns and cities
 - this pattern of near-abandonment of the rural countryside and extreme concentration of people into large settlements is called “hyperurbanism”
 - each of these networks, centered on a single city, would be called a “city-state”
 - in contrast to a “nation-state” that would include multiple cities in a region
 - these would have been political units, with people feeling allegiance to their city
 - the city-states had complex, shifting relationships, with alliances, trade, raids, wars, etc.

- Hyperurbanism
 - The beginning of the Early Dynastic saw the culmination of a long history of changes in the way people were distributed across the landscape
 - Sumer was probably the first region in the world where people experienced city life something like what we know today

- To understand this change, we have to back up and follow the trends from the beginning of the 'Ubaid period
- Early 'Ubaid ('Ubaid: 5600-3900 BC): moderate-sized villages, evenly dispersed
- By Late 'Ubaid ('Ubaid 4): the same kind of villages, plus Eridu, which had increased to 10 ha (ballpark 2000 people, plus or minus a few thousand...), with its central temple
- In the Late Uruk period (3400-3100 BC): instead of staying mostly in fairly uniformly dispersed medium-sized villages, population shifted to a small number of large sites, each surrounded by a halo of rural settlements that were smaller than the earlier towns
 - this was the beginning of the general pattern of cities with a supporting rural hinterland
 - average settlement was only 1-2 ha (ballpark 200-400 people)
 - the city of Uruk was unique in being far larger: 100 ha, maybe 20,000 people at 3000 BC
 - plus a handful of other large towns/small cities, especially Ur, Nippur, Kish, and Eridu
 - smaller than Uruk (or maybe not, according to Nissen), but much bigger than the small hamlets clustering around them
 - they reflected basically the same setup as Uruk, just less exaggerated
 - why did people cluster into towns and surrounding villages like this?
 - maybe for defense?
- Somewhere in the Jemdet Nasr period (3100-2900 BC) and/or the beginning of the Early Dynastic period (2900 - 2373 BC) (say around 3000-2800 BC?)
 - What Adams called "hyperurbanism" developed
 - most people quit living in small hamlets altogether and crowded almost exclusively into cities or the large towns that surrounded them
 - this shift took only around 200 years
 - leading to the near disappearance of small hamlets in the rural countryside
 - people would have had a long walk from the large towns or cities to their fields to work
 - more distant areas of farmland were abandoned altogether
 - Uruk ballooned to 250 ha, maybe 50,000 people
 - Surrounding Uruk:
 - most of the small to medium-sized villages were abandoned
 - the few settlements that remained grew much larger
 - average settlement 6-10 ha
 - ballpark 1200-2000 people, maybe more
 - two or even three "modes" of site sizes
 - the clear differences between the modes (categories of site sizes) suggests that some functions were carried out only at the larger types of sites
 - that is, there are distinct jumps in size between one size category and the next, rather than a smooth gradation of sizes
 - the generally accepted way to explain this is that each "jump" up in size corresponds to a distinct additional function or institution present at the site, which would require numerous people to staff
 - For example, a site either has no temple, or has one and is therefore considerably bigger than sites without one - it can't have half a temple with half a temple's personnel and half the people who support and are supported by them
 - if correct, this model implies a hierarchy of sites something like this:

- smallest sites
 - mostly residential, only farming families live there
- medium sites
 - residential, plus...
 - some administrative functions requiring special buildings, storage facilities, additional people, etc.
- largest site(s)
 - residential, plus...
 - the same administrative functions as a medium site, plus...
 - the temple, palace, army, etc.
 - making it far bigger yet
- the interesting point is that the different categories of settlements would have been different not just in size, but in kind
 - presumably ranked in importance, influence, and administrative role, with the larger ones (with the additional, less common functions) higher in the hierarchy
 - people in smaller towns would have been dependent on the larger ones for the services that were available only there
 - this implies a complex, interdependent, and hierarchical society, with three (or more) levels in its administrative hierarchy
- Same hyperurbanism trends occurred in other areas, around the cities of Kish, Nippur, Akkad, and Susa (Elamite culture, southeast of Sumer)
 - the fact that this pattern happened in many parts of Mesopotamia suggests that it was not just a local oddity at Uruk, but a general part of the process of increasing complexity, maybe important in the formation of city-states
- but there were also exceptions to this pattern
 - near Ur, by this time also a major city, many smaller villages continued to be occupied
 - maybe Ur was more effective at keeping the peace, so people didn't feel unsafe in their small villages?
 - And in the Diyala plain (in the foothills of the central Zagros mountains), the cities never got as big, and the villages continued to be occupied, with no rural depopulation
 - because it was a marginal region?
- why did hyperurbanism happen?
 - due to warfare between cities or fear of it?
 - problems with nomadic people, with whom farmers would have had to trade, but with whom there might have been conflicts?
 - attraction of new economic possibilities in the towns?
 - intentional policies of an emerging urban elite, encouraging or forcing people to move into towns (as Adams suggests)?
 - intended to improve control over population?
- what effect might hyperurbanism have had?
 - increased interaction, communication
 - more complex economy, since fewer would be farmers and more would depend on exchanging their labor for subsistence
 - probably increased competition between people and magnified differences in wealth

- more potential for taxation, labor recruitment, etc.
- the population of the Mesopotamian plain by the Early Dynastic was 500,000 to 1 million people
 - shared the Sumerian culture, but the city-states were not united in a single organization
 - on the contrary, they were walled to defend themselves from the others
 - “hyperurbanism” hints that it was often not safe outside the walls
- Cities and architecture:
 - dense, like modern Near Eastern cities
 - in central, high-status areas, mostly two-story houses around central courtyards
 - some had latrines and drains
 - “blocks” separated by streets and alleys
 - arches of mudbrick over doorways
 - no evidence yet of marketplaces (nor of money or other features of a market economy)
- The temples’ power continued to increase
 - huge walled-in precincts at the core of each city (>3 ha at Khafaje in Diyala valley)
 - the precincts included not only the temple, but also
 - workshops (sculpture in stone and cast copper), at least
 - storage rooms
 - high-status dwellings, presumably for priests or administrators
 - outer wall enclosed a semi-public courtyard, inner wall enclosed the temple precinct itself
 - presumably to keep some of the sacred activities secret or restricted to certain people
 - and to protect the temple workshops and stored wealth
 - by ED II, temples like the one at Khafaje had an open-air pedestal in the plaza at the foot of the temple
 - may mean that too many people were involved in ceremonies to fit inside the temple
 - the temple itself was increasingly big and elaborate
 - tradition of commissioned “votive” statues that probably stood inside the temples, many labeled with the name of the person it represents
 - temple details varied widely from city to city
 - yet some temples in different cities had certain items that were nearly identical (as in the stela from Khafaje that exactly matches one from Ur)
 - suggests a lot of contact between high-level temple experts, if not organization and control that included multiple cities
- Sumerian religion and ideology
 - mostly known from 2nd millennium texts (1000's BC), which are many centuries later than the periods we are looking at
 - but since temple architecture and religious iconography were still about the same, the general outlines of the religion may not have changed too much since the Early Dynastic, Uruk period, or even earlier
 - religious cosmology was a model and legitimization for life here on earth

- the gods established unchanging laws
- there was a hierarchy of gods
 - The pantheon was headed by Anu
 - King of heaven
 - the one who bestows royalty on humans
 - this meant that kingship was a necessary part of the natural (and supernatural) world
 - next were two other main gods:
 - Enlil, god of Earth
 - Enki, god of water and subterranean world.
 - then three subsidiary deities:
 - Utu, god of sun
 - Nanna, god of moon
 - Inanna, goddess of the star Venus
 - also Anu's consort, lady of heaven
 - responsible for lunar calendar, therefore for many omens
 - became the goddess of war and sexual love (!)
 - these and other high ranking gods were lords of temple institutions and cities
 - below them were lower gods for individuals
 - people were at the bottom
 - they belonged to their city's god
 - the gods created people specifically to relieve the gods from the drudgery of work
 - gods appointed human representatives to direct the work: the priests of each temple
 - This is an ideology that served to legitimize the political and economic order
 - as in several of the definitions of civilization
 - question: did the ideology encourage the rise of a hierarchical society, or did an emerging hierarchical society form the ideology?
 - if the latter, was it conscious and intentional, or not?
- Temple ceremonies included seasonal feasts
 - attended by the public
 - biggest one was to ask for the annual spring regeneration of vegetation
 - by honoring the marriage of the city ruler to the goddess Inanna (or her representative)
- In the Early Dynastic period, a new powerful institution appeared: the palace
 - the secular, military, royal residence compound of a king
 - palaces appeared in addition to temples in ED III at Mari, Kish, Eridu, maybe other cities (around 2500 or 2400 BC)
 - architecturally different from temples or other apparently ceremonial architecture
 - lacked the ritual complex with a ziggurat platform, "cella" with a freestanding pedestal and niche or pedestal at one end, the big courtyard, etc.
 - that is, no obviously public ceremonial space
 - although they did have smaller ritual areas, probably for internal or personal use
 - palaces had hundreds of rooms
 - storerooms, apparently for storage of tribute or taxes

- workshops, probably staffed by “attached” specialists
- royal residence
- administrative rooms
- archives of cuneiform documents, as at the temples
 - the archive in the palace at Ebla contained 13,000 tablets
- development of hereditary kingship (texts show kingship was passed down as many as 6 generations)
 - in contrast to temple leadership
 - there must have been people in charge of the temple institutions, but there are no written records that indicate that these positions were hereditary
- kingship seems to have had different origins in different cities
 - based on linguistic evidence
 - some kings were addressed as “lugal” (king), a word suggesting military leader appointed by a ruling council
 - others as “sangu” (accountant) (!), the word used for the top administrator of a temple
 - others by “ensi”, a word apparently related to the term for the human husband of a city’s goddess (that is, a ritual, temple-related office)
 - later, some by “ugula” (foreman)
 - suggests that in different cities, different offices, roles, or institutions gave rise to powerful secular institutions that look the same to us: palaces with “kings”
 - presumably, the process by which this happened varied somewhat in each case
- The famous Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh illustrates how some people of the time thought of kingship
 - actually, a collection of stories, some tightly related, others not, but involving overlapping sets of the same characters
 - the most famous ones describe Gilgamesh’s supernatural deeds, and his failed attempts to become immortal
 - many of the named characters are known from historical inscriptions, and most scholars think that Gilgamesh was a real ruler of Uruk in the Early Dynastic period
 - for understanding the origins of kingship, the most relevant story is one that is translated as one of your readings
 - Gilgamesh, the *ensi* of Uruk in the middle Early Dynastic period, first has to seek the approval of a council of elders, and then override them by convincing an assembly of the city’s able-bodied men, before he can make war against the threatening city of Kish.
 - Later, he does not have to get approval to end the war and let the king of Kish go.
 - In other stories, he does not need consent from these councils, and he builds (or rebuilds) the wall around Uruk, some of which does indeed date to this period.
 - some scholars say that this sequence of consulting councils is just a literary or poetic device, and should not be taken literally
 - even so, this story may record how people perceived the development of kingship
 - or propaganda about it that would have seemed believable to them
 - that is, the institution of kingship in this case supposedly arose as a consensus government granted a notable person special powers during wartime, and he gradually took on permanent power

- maybe... we just don't know
- Functions of the palace
 - military role of the palace
 - stelae commemorate kings who led professional armies with standardized weaponry
 - by contrast, the temple institution does not seem to have had much to do with warfare
 - kings are recorded as building water projects
 - this might have been both a function and a source of power
 - note that the Gilgamesh story we read emphasized an ongoing project of building wells that seemed to be the responsibility of the city as a whole
 - the palace organized long-distance trade
 - merchant agents were employed by the king
 - they got cloth, clothes, barley, oil, flour from royal stores (mostly things that Sumer could produce), and took it abroad to exchange for foreign goods for the palace
 - the temple, and possibly even independent traders, may have carried out long-distance trade, too
 - the other side of this trading was made up of neighboring groups, especially to the east in the Zagros mountains, who themselves were developing cities and complex societies
 - example: Tepe Yaya in southeastern Iran, which made chlorite (a kind of stone) bowls that they traded to Sumer
 - this is not a case of a dominant core area extracting raw materials from an underdeveloped periphery, like England during the British Empire
 - the Sumerians were not so very much different from their trading partners in complexity or technology
 - laws, conflict resolution, and maintaining order were a secular (palace) matter, not religious
 - Urukagina, last Early Dynastic king of Lagash (around 2350 BC) is known for his legal reforms, which were recorded in inscriptions on buildings of his time.
 - that is over 500 years before the famous law code of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BC)
 - Hammurabi is better known because we have a nice, complete copy of his law code, while earlier ones (well before Urukagina) are known only from fragmentary references
 - Urukagina, a king, proclaimed legal reforms that would restore the justice implied to have existed before
 - harking back to a memory or myth of a time when the temple ruled
 - this was, in fact, accurate history
 - the temple did exist long before the palace, and presumably was a place where conflicts were resolved
 - later on, that role shifted to the palace, for whatever reason
 - it also played on a perception that the power formerly exercised by the temple was legitimate
 - and that the palace now legitimately had that power
 - this could easily have been propaganda to justify new powers asserted by the palace...
 - Urukagina promised legal protections for common people from abuses by the temple and the palace
 - this implies that there *were* such abuses, and hints at the power these institutions had

- he also promised legal protection against confiscation of property and cheating in trade
 - implies that there was private property and regulated exchange
- Urukagina also promised to cut certain taxes on commoners (!)
 - heard that one before? (this promise dates to about 2350 BC)
 - confirms that the palace collected taxes
- these reforms would have increased the power of the king by giving him more regulatory authority
 - he is claiming powers here
 - this is the sort of maneuvering that anthropologists envision when they talk about leaders “strengthening and expanding their privileged positions”
- Technology and production
 - the Early Dynastic was not notable for technological innovation, but rather for increasing scale of production and amount of goods made
 - large scale weaving of wool and flax (linseed – linen cloth)
 - copperwork became more common for tools, containers, and art
 - including both arsenic bronze and tin bronze
 - (bronzes are alloys made by mixing copper and something else, usually tin or arsenic, to produce a harder metal with other desirable properties)
 - the increasing scale of production implies more specialist craftspeople
 - although still estimated to be under 20% of population
 - that is, over 80% of the people were still farmers, even in the cities
 - both the temple and the palace supported specialist production facilities and specialized workers
 - some worked for temple
 - frieze of the dairy at the Early Dynastic period temple at al ‘Ubaid suggests organized dairy production attached to the temple
 - some made decorations and supplies for ritual and the temple buildings themselves
 - goods for temple personnel
 - goods for exchange by the temple, to get foreign raw materials
 - others worked for the palace
 - making decorations and supplies for the royal court and palace personnel
 - goods for exchange to get foreign raw material
 - goods for the military arm of the palace
 - weapons, armor, chariots
 - still others worked for wealthy individuals
 - evidenced by hoards of valuables in some large houses
 - and apparent vendor’s stalls facing the streets
 - but there is still no sign of money, neither coins nor textual references
 - trade was by barter of goods
 - overall pattern in the Early Dynastic: lots of attached specialists producing goods that were controlled by institutions (temple and palace), some by high-status individuals, and maybe some unattached specialists - but probably not many