

Mesopotamia: Early Dynastic royalty and synthesis

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2008

- in the Early Dynastic, social stratification became more pronounced than ever before
 - “royal burials” at Ur attest to a very privileged royalty and court or nobility
 - excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the 1920’s
 - over 2500 burials, mostly ED III (2500 - 2400 BC)
 - 16 were particularly lavish, and have been called “royal” tombs
 - most were badly looted, but not all
 - one example: tomb 789
 - larger outer chamber containing:
 - two wagons with oxen and male servants
 - 59 bodies, mostly richly-attired females, and a few male soldiers
 - maybe went willingly to their deaths, maybe drugged, with their valuables and finery
 - based on absence of traumatic injuries or positions that would suggest struggle
 - but there could be other ways to explain this...
 - gold, silver, lapis, musical instruments, wood inlay...
 - another tomb (800), had a queen’s chamber still intact
 - the queen was named Shubad or Puabi (depending on how the signs are read)
 - her remains were still on her bed, surrounded by rich jewelry
 - this tomb also had a larger, outer chamber in which many attendants wearing jewelry were apparently sacrificed
 - along with musical instruments, a sledge, animals to pull it, and some soldiers or guards
- at the other end of the social hierarchy, written records from the Early Dynastic period include the first documentation of slaves
 - although slavery may well have existed earlier, this is the first clear evidence of it
 - apparently not a large class; only a small part of the population and economy
 - mostly female
 - mostly worked at spinning yarn and weaving in shops run by the temple
 - records show citizens became slaves by falling into debt or being sold by their families (!)
 - it was possible to buy one’s own freedom
- intermediate social statuses included at least:
 - farmers, presumably low status, because there were many of them
 - laborers and craftspeople, probably of differing status by their products and skills
 - since some moved and stacked bricks, hauled cargo, etc.
 - others made bricks or mass-produced crude pottery
 - others made fine ceramics, metalwork, jewelry, etc. that required more training, contact with elites, etc.
- scribes
 - literacy was a skill in which people were specifically trained in schools or apprenticeships

- and it involved a lot of contact with traders, political and religious elites, etc. who had to trust them with crucial information
- scribes practiced by writing standard texts, including the “standard professions list”
 - a stereotyped list of particular jobs and offices
 - always in the same order, with divisions and titles that suggest that the order was from the highest status to the lowest
 - unfortunately, only some of the job titles can be translated
 - but just the existence of a standard, ordered list emphasizes that people thought in terms of an explicit social hierarchy
- variation in houses suggests a wide range of social standings:
 - size and number of rooms
 - one vs. two stories
 - doors off main streets or alleys
 - presence or absence of central courtyard
- Warfare between cities (city states) was rampant in the Early Dynastic
 - shown by huge defensive walls at all major sites, completing a trend that had begun already in the late ‘Ubaid period
 - nature of Early Dynastic wars:
 - evidence is from written references to wars and artwork depicting war
 - the palaces of at least some Sumerian cities provided standardized weapons and presumably supported professional soldiers
 - the Early Dynastic II/III stela from Lagash shows this kind of uniform, regimented army
 - ranks of men in identical helmets, with shields
 - other ranks with lighter shields and spears, etc.
 - indicating specialized regiments
 - this would have been based on arms production by specialists employed by the palace and working in shops there
 - those, in turn, based on the extraction of surplus agricultural production from the people of the city its surrounding hinterland
 - not for conquest (taking control of a group of people for the long term)
 - but rather, raiding (capturing wealth, animals, people)
 - or gaining and keeping control of disputed areas of irrigated farmland
 - as in the Gilgamesh and Akka story, apparently fighting over water sources
 - power relationships, alliances, etc. between cities were constantly shifting
 - groupings of more than one city were rare and short-lived, but were increasing near the end of the Early Dynastic
 - at many times during the Early Dynastic, one king and his city-state were seen as dominant, “ruling” Sumer, but there was little integration or centralization
 - the “ruling” king was just a “first among equals”
 - or one who happened to be the most militarily powerful at the time
 - the “ruling” city-state did not have any different functions than the other city-states
 - Government: the temple vs. the palace (summary)

- the temple as an institution (this is “temple” defined broadly, possibly including other forms of communal/public institutions involving elaborate monumental architecture suited to activities with many people)
 - public and probably private religious ritual
 - also production, labor mobilization, storage, redistribution
 - temple officials not only performed rituals, but also
 - accepted and stored surplus production
 - probably in the form of offerings, tithes, payments for ritual services, etc.
 - redistributed it to others
 - probably mostly in compensation for labor, services, or goods
 - advised on timing of planting and harvesting
 - giving the temple a central role in agricultural production
 - controlled irrigation water distribution
 - again, giving the temple real economic power through its supernaturally-sanctioned authority over water
 - initiated large corporate projects
 - temples, canals, probably involved in early city walls (before there were kings and palaces), etc.
 - owned land and employed agricultural workers directly
 - used surplus to support craft specialists
 - scribes, potters, masons, weavers, copperworkers, sculptors
 - managed long-distance trade
 - especially for exotic materials needed to build, decorate, and maintain the temple
 - and to clothe and ornament the priests and other religious authorities appropriately to their roles and importance
- temples started as small structures in the middle 'Ubaid period, and grew in size, complexity, and elaboration straight through the Agade and Ur III periods
- matching objects from temples in different cities suggest a network of contacts among religious leaders across the region
- temple personnel had some power through interpretation of omens as well as control of land and resources
- all in all, the priests and temple administrators would have been powerful for both supernatural and material reasons
- the palace: another institution recognized in part by architecture
 - compared to temples, palaces were a much later development, parallel to the temple, eventually overshadowing and apparently controlling it
 - first known definite palaces appeared in Early Dynastic III
 - large, impressive compounds with elite residences, workshops, storage, etc.
 - no venue for public ritual
 - associated with military (unlike the temple)
 - organized around hereditary kingship
 - kingship seems to have had different origins in different cities
 - but at least in some cities, kings were initially seen as military leaders
 - the palace came to have landholdings, storage, craft specialists, etc., much like the temples

- with apparently unfree and landless (“serf”) labor
- shifting balance of power between temple and palace
 - the temple was initially the only institutional power center
 - and was probably more powerful than the early palaces and the kings that operated them
 - but there was an apparent shift in power away from the temple and towards the palace, with its secular king/military leader
 - already pretty clear by the end of the Early Dynastic, with the royal burials at Ur, art and texts concerning military conquest, and even more so in subsequent periods
- government (by the Early Dynastic, if not sooner) may have involved a king with a citizen council that could override him, maybe multiple councils
 - as in the Gilgamesh stories

- meanwhile, in the later half of the Early Dynastic Period, some towns in northern Mesopotamia began to develop temple and palace institutions similar to the Sumerian ones
 - recall that northern Mesopotamian towns had remained smaller and simpler even in spite of the temporary Uruk expansion into the region

- Review of long-term trends in social stratification
 - Late ‘Ubaid
 - burial evidence
 - over 200 graves at Eridu
 - little differentiation
 - up to a few pottery or stone vessels, occasionally a figurine or beads
 - concentration of wealth and presumably status at impressive temple complexes
 - some degree of craft specialization suggests probably varied social roles and statuses
 - zoned housing, best near temple, workshops further out, farmers furthest away
 - that is, the burial evidence and the other lines of evidence don't agree
 - Uruk period
 - not much burial evidence
 - but many other indicators of social stratification, like the 'Ubaid but even more so:
 - wealth concentrated at the temple
 - suggests that people associated with the temple would have had access to more sumptuous goods
 - temple organization would have required priests, administrators, etc. with special power and status
 - for example, some people had the role of “signing” or certifying written records of temple transactions, presumably indicating some power or status
 - craft specialists probably had a different, probably higher, status than ordinary farmers
 - scribes would have had a higher status, since they had a valuable and scarce skill
 - and would have to be honest, accurate, and discreet
 - zoned housing, best nearest temple
 - Jemdet Nasr period (or transition from terminal Uruk to initial Early Dynastic)
 - burials: somewhat more variation, suggesting some stratification

- of 340 graves, 61 (about 20%) had one or two metal cups; 2 had numerous goods (the top less than 1%)
- Early Dynastic: clear evidence of huge status differences, especially by Early Dynastic III
 - burials ranging from poor to royal burials at Ur (Early Dynastic III)
 - variations in housing, up to palaces
 - variations in occupations (farmers, craftspeople, priests, royal court, officials who “signed” records, etc.) imply probable status differences
 - this was not new, but probably was even more exaggerated than it had been before
 - written legal protections indicate that there were poor and slave classes, a ruling class, merchants
 - standard professions list shows a clearly conceived hierarchy of status according to peoples' occupations
- So: when and how did civilization emerge here?
 - you should think about when in this parade of periods you feel that civilization emerged, and what institutions and processes were involved.
 - what were the roles of economics, warfare, religion, population growth, the emerging elites themselves...?
 - For example, was Witfogel right about the importance of irrigation projects?
 - canals were necessary from the beginning of the 'Ubaid period
 - but most people argue that the projects were not really large enough to imply extensive power until the later Early Dynastic period, well after 'Ubaid and Uruk cities flourished
- What happened next?
 - Agade Period (Akkadian State) 2373 - 2247 BC (126 years)
 - Sargon of Agade, the king and military leader of the city of Agade, in northern Mesopotamia
 - Leader of a different ethnic group, with a different language from the Sumerians (a Semitic language)
 - succeeded in conquering all of northern and southern Mesopotamia, including the cities on the Sumerian plain
 - forging the first regional state in Mesopotamia
 - this was possible in part due to his well-equipped, professional army
 - such armies were already being established in the Early Dynastic III period
 - But unlike earlier victors in inter-city warfare, Sargon not only captured spoils when a city fell, but also established a system to control and collect tribute from the city from then on
 - Sargon awarded captured land to his supporters
 - He put local agents in charge of conquered cities, supported by a garrison of soldiers
 - this united the cities for the first time as tribute-paying subjects of his empire
 - unlike earlier “rulers”, he actually controlled the conquered cities, which became parts of a larger organization with its capital at Agade
 - Sargon boasted of feeding 5,400 men every day, apparently his administration
 - this clearly required a lot of tribute to maintain
 - Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin, took on aspects of divinity

- he was depicted wearing a horned helmet previously shown only on gods
- his name was accompanied by a “rosette” symbol previously used only with gods
- Naram-Sin apparently united the institutions of the temple and palace under a single person
- when we get to Egypt, you will see that Sargon’s unification of Sumer happened hundreds of years after the regional unification of Egypt
 - Sumer was the first place to see the rise of city states
 - but it was *not* the first place where they joined together into a large political entity or nation state
- most definitions of civilization do not require large-scale regional unity
 - presumably a city-state can be civilized, even if it is separate from other city-states nearby
- Guti invasion 2247 - 2168 BC (79 years)
 - “tribes” from the Zagros mountains toppled the Akkadian state and held power in Sumer briefly
- Ur III 2168 - 2062 BC (96 years)
 - Ur-Nammu of Ur defeated the Guti invaders and founded a dynasty called Ur III
 - the last great Sumerian dynasty, it was a revitalization of the old traditions, sometimes called “Neo-Sumerian”
 - apparently a more integrated, administered empire than Akkadian state
 - standardized units of silver, grain, etc., with standardized equivalencies (prices, but not money)
 - Built the ziggurat at Ur, still visible today
- a long, complicated history continues from here
 - but civilization was clearly established and well developed by this time, so we will move on to another region