

Mesopotamia: Early Dynastic 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
- Hyperurbanism
 - a pattern of near-abandonment of the rural countryside and extreme concentration of people into large settlements
 - 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): more people moved into a few 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?)
 - most people quit living in small hamlets altogether
 - instead crowding almost exclusively into cities or the large towns that surrounded them
 - What Adams called “hyperurbanism”
 - 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
 - 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
- 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
 - so the different sizes of settlements may have differed not only in size, but also in kind
 - presumably ranked in importance, influence, and administrative role
 - with the larger ones higher in the hierarchy
 - these had additional, less common functions

- 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
- 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
 - living in roughly seven city-states
 - a city-state is a complex political unit (a state) made up of a single city and the smaller settlements associated with it
 - in contrast to a “nation-state” that would include multiple cities in a region
 - each city-state was comprised of a single “primate” settlement pattern with three levels:
 - one large city
 - surrounded by towns (the middle level)
 - and a very few small agricultural hamlets (the bottom level)
 - the city-states all shared the Sumerian culture, but were not united in a single organization
 - rather, they were in competition, and were walled to defend themselves from the others
 - the fact that so few people lived in small, rural hamlets hints that it was often not safe outside the walls
- Cities and architecture:
 - dense, with “blocks” separated by streets and alleys, like modern Near Eastern cities
 - in central, high-status areas, mostly two-story houses around central courtyards
 - some had latrines and drains
- 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
 - often 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
 - such as a stela from Khafaje that exactly matches one from Ur
 - suggests a lot of contact between high-level temple experts
 - or maybe traveling specialist craftsmen who worked in multiple cities
 - Early Dynastic temples were not just religious institutions
 - like modern institutional religions, they had huge economic and political power, too
 - some functions of temples in the Early Dynastic:
 - public, and probably also private, religious ritual
 - 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 based on contact with gods through omens
 - giving the temple a central role in agricultural production
 - controlled irrigation water distribution due to supernatural authority over water
 - again, giving the temple real economic power
 - initiated large corporate projects
 - temple buildings and facilities, canals, probably coordinated and financed 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
 - all in all, the priests and temple administrators would have been powerful for both supernatural and material reasons
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- Sumerian religion and ideology
 - mostly known from 2nd millennium texts (1000's BC), which are centuries later than the Early Dynastic

- but since temple architecture and religious iconography changed so little, the beliefs may also have not changed much since the Early Dynastic, Uruk period, or even earlier
- religious cosmology was a model of, 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
 - she was 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 ideology 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, 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
 - is that how it actually happened? maybe... we just don't know
- Functions of the palace
 - military role of the palace
 - 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
 - stelae and written inscriptions on buildings and artifacts commemorate kings who led professional armies with standardized weaponry
 - presumably supported by surplus collected and managed by the palace
 - and armed with standard equipment made in palace workshops
 - 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
 - wars were 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
 - by contrast, the temple institution apparently had little to do with warfare
 - at 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
 - 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 only modestly ahead of 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
 - Urukagina was also using a perception that the power formerly exercised by the temple was legitimate
 - and that the palace now legitimately had that power
 - this could 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 Urukagina's power
 - he is both exercising and claiming powers over other institutions
 - this is the sort of maneuvering that anthropologists envision when they talk about leaders "strengthening and expanding their privileged positions"
- overall, a 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
- 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
 - slavery may have existed earlier, but 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 rare 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
- another indication of social status hierarchy: the “standard professions list”
 - this is one of many texts that scribes in training would write over and over again for practice
 - it is 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

- another indication of social hierarchy: wide variation in houses
 - size and number of rooms
 - one vs. two stories
 - doors off main streets or alleys
 - presence or absence of central courtyard
- 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 workshops 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
 - as suggested 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
 - Review of long-term trends in social stratification
 - Late ‘Ubaid
 - burial evidence
 - over 200 graves at Eridu, but they show little variation on wealth
 - 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
 - temples 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 (20%) had one or two metal cups; 2 had numerous goods (the top < 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 refer to poor and slave classes, a ruling class, merchants
 - standard professions list shows a clearly conceived hierarchy of status according to peoples' occupations
- By this point, any definition of civilization was certainly met
 - and notice: we are still talking about numerous, competing, fairly small city-states
 - regional unification of multiple cities would not happen until the following century
 - when Sargon of Agade (Akkad) began to conquer other cities
 - rather than just taking some spoils, he would leave a governor and a garrison of soldiers
 - to force the conquered city-state to pay tribute to his city indefinitely
 - but notice how late in the development of complex society this is
 - we will see that in Egypt, for instance, regional unification started much earlier in the process
- So: when and how did civilization emerge here?
 - when in this parade of periods do you feel that civilization emerged?
 - what institutions and processes were involved?
 - what were the roles of economics, warfare, religion, population growth, the emerging elites themselves...?