

Notes on “The Eden that Never Was”

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“*Karhide is not a nation but a family quarrel.*“

Ursula K. LeGuin

Susan Pollock made clear in the title of her book, “Ancient Mesopotamia – The Eden that Never Was” (1999), that all was not sweetness and light in ancient Mesopotamia. In conjunction with a recent project about “fragility” in Mesopotamia (see below) I began to wonder whether conflict, violence, repression, resistance, and war were characteristic of the biography of Mesopotamia. Although I have not devised a research project on the subject, I do want to scatter in this brief essay some notes on war and how armed conflict affected citizens/inhabitants of Mesopotamia and contributed to the fragility of Mesopotamian political systems. Susan, herself, has of course been interested in the archaeology of war, albeit how modern wars affect the material culture of the past (Pollock 2008; 2016; Starzmann et al. 2008). In this work she has discussed how modern archaeologists must deal with the facts of warfare; I shall consider, in passing, how modern historians and archaeologists have studied war in Mesopotamia.

Some history textbooks do not cite war in their index, for example, the excellent book of Marc Van De Mieroop (2016). “*Krieg und Frieden*”, the papers from an Assyriological congress (Neumann et al. 2014) should be cited (and see Neumann’s *Vorwort* for references to earlier congresses on war), but I shall not review the chapters here. In Benjamin Foster’s essay

(2007) in a book on “War and Peace in the Ancient World” (Raaflaub 2007), the author doubts that “conflict” was “the normal state of being” in Mesopotamia, and he cites many instances of peace-making, which one might interpret as also indicating the ubiquity of conflict.

Why do Mesopotamian historians (and archaeologists and art historians) downplay the incidence of war in Mesopotamia? I cannot say with any confidence. Here are only some anecdotes. Dominique Charpin contributed an essay to the Liverani Festschrift (Bartoloni and Biga 2016) on “Flight in the Near East” (2016). His title, originally in French, echoed an essay by Johannes Renger, “*Flucht als soziales Problem*” (1972); flight was a “*problème*” for the kings of Mari. When asked at the conference why “flight” was not a possible solution to servitude and economic catastrophe, Charpin conceded the point (and subsequently changed his title eliminating the word “*problème*”). Do Mesopotamian historians (unconsciously) take the side of their sources, as it were, and reading texts from palace archives become royalists?

In earlier histories of Mesopotamia, for example William Hallo’s (1971), that I read as a graduate student, successful kings were those members of a long-lived dynasty, who conquered their neighbors and ruled over large amounts of territory, even establishing empires. Sargon,

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Ur-Namma, and Hammurabi were exemplars of successful kings in early Mesopotamian history who were instructed by the gods to conquer their less pious neighbors. Nowadays, historians are not so enamored of victorious kings whose royal inscriptions unfailingly reported how they brought law and order and peace to the places they laid low.

Neither do I need to claim any revisionist status to report that the old image of a temple-state in the late fourth and early third millenniums changing into a palace-state at the end of the third millennium has been put to rest. The picture is now of contemporaneous temple-estates and palace-estates alongside aspects of community controls. The organizations of merchants in the Old Assyrian period, in the early second millennium, who are self-organized, not agents of the state, may provide a model and lead to new research in how goods were transported from distant places to Mesopotamia in the third millennium.

Piotr Michalowski (2011) discusses the standard explanations for political change as the invasions of Mesopotamia of a succession of peoples: Sumerians, Akkadians, Kassites, Arameans. But what drove or impelled these peoples to invade Mesopotamia? How did they establish their power?

Let me review the case of Hammurabi, king of Babylon, and the fall of his dynasty (see Yoffee and Seri 2019 for this narrative and also a fuller account for earlier periods of the rise and fall of kings and dynasties). In the Old Babylonian period, there was a veritable perfect storm of resistance to power. After the collapse of Hammurabi's "empire," which lasted for only the last five years of his reign and the early years of his successor, Samsu-iluna, in the latter king's eighth year, a ruler named Rim-Sin from Larsa marshaled troops against Babylon. An archive from the city of Uruk (Seri 2013), dealing with "the house of prisoners" of war, shows that revolts against Samsu-iluna involved local leaders

from all over Babylonia trying to achieve independence from Babylon's control.

A subsequent uprising was led by a "Sealand" dynasty, that is, a local dynasty that emerged in the marshy southernmost part of the land. Rulers from this dynasty were able to fight a kind of guerilla war against the diminished power of the kings of Babylon. In central Mesopotamia, not far from the former capital, Babylon, armed groups of Kassites established camps in the countryside. In Babylon and the nearby cities still under its control, the Crown's funds, lacking tribute and taxes from conquered territories, were failing. Agricultural laborers on royal estates could no longer be permanent employees but were hired for seasonal work (Yoffee 1977). However, the palace required the permission of the local "head-man" (or mayor) to requisition community members for the work (Stol 1976). Urban temples in this period were similarly desperate for funds. They created a series of loans in which the "debtor" borrowed money from the temple and promised to return the loan with interest when they were "healed" through the intercession of the gods. Finally, the nearly powerless royal house in Babylon was attacked by an expeditionary force of Hittites from Anatolia. The Hittite army had launched a campaign into northern Syria, which was a vital corridor for communication and trade with the south, east, and west. Finding no opposition, the army proceeded to Babylon, sacked the city and carried off the sacred statue of the patron god of Babylon, Marduk.

Whereas some histories report that the Hittites came down "like a bolt from the blue" (Postgate 1977, 100), which is undoubtedly true, in fact this was not a case of a stable and integrated Babylonian state that was defeated by a superior armed force. Babylon fell from a variety of factors – local city-state resistance to a territorial state created by Hammurabi, the presence of several marauding ethno-linguistic "tribes" (as Kassites are sometimes

described) that had been attracted to Babylonia by its riches and the possibilities of serving Babylonian rulers as mercenaries, and not least by resistance within the conquered city-states by locally constituted authorities who acted against the rulers of their cities.

How typical of contestation and resistance to the expansionist goals of rulers in other times and places in Mesopotamia was this Old Babylonian scenario? Whereas there were of course specific differences in means and tactics of resistance, the inherent fragility of governance in early Mesopotamian history make the Old Babylonian patterns of behavior far from anomalous. Stability is a kind of historical fiction, as is the uncontested power of the strongest of Mesopotamian kings. Although many rulers were certainly powerful and were brutal tyrants who built enormous palaces and furnished magnificent temples and led mighty expeditionary forces, the irony of such power is that it led to systematic and successful resistance.

The incidence of warfare in Mesopotamia was itself a critical component in the fragility of political systems on both the territorial and local (urban) levels. The need to enlist citizen-soldiers, mainly as *corvée* laborers (Steinkeller and Hudson 2015) for the construction of palaces, temples, and city walls, on a more or less constant basis, as well as for fighting abroad, posed a problem for those workers who maintained agricultural activities including irrigation. There are documents about the hiring of "substitutes," since wealthy men could pay for others to work and fight in their places (Landsberger 1955). Guillermo Algaze (2018) has speculated that population of Mesopotamian cities could only be maintained by migrants because the mortality rate due to disease in cities would have been very high. Perhaps these "migrants," seen in some Mesopotamian texts as uncouth outsiders and by some modern historians of Mesopotamia as violent invaders, were attracted to Mesopotamian cities as needed

soldiers and workers. Their not infrequent seizure of power in cities did not come as an invading horde (see Michalowski 2011 for the case of Amorites in Mesopotamia).

Most of the foregoing narrative is adapted from an essay written by Andrea Seri and myself for the online publication "The Evolution of Fragility" (Yoffee 2019a). This publication consists of the papers of a conference held at the Getty Museum (Yoffee 2019b). The authors, representing areas in which the earliest cities and states in their regions appeared – China, Angkor, Indus, Mesopotamia, Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa, Cahokia, Maya, Andean South America – took up new questions about these cities and states. That is, we considered issues between the traditional questions like "Is it a state?" or "How do we identify a state in the archaeological record?" and "Why did the state collapse?" or even "Did the state really collapse?" and moved to newer concerns: "How did people resist the power of rulers?" and "What were the limits of state power?" among other questions about the organizations, belief-systems, actions, and agency of individuals and institutions, community assemblies, and so forth in ancient states.

Archaeologists like Susan Pollock have studied how early states and their cities (and other complex societies) often evolved rapidly, even suddenly, from times of modest village life, as certainly seems to be the case in Mesopotamia. These demographic changes resulted in the appearance of the earliest cities in which various peoples and their own social orientations (including different languages and beliefs) came together in new urban configurations. These local organizations, however, did not disappear in their new and unprecedented geographic and social conditions, for which new kinds of political organizations were invented. Indeed, the variety of groups embedded in new kinds of complex societies could become the foci of struggle against new political regimes. The new goals of rulers and governments were

to make their regimes “legible” (borrowing a term of James Scott [1988]) in order to control the flows of goods and services in their societies and the behavior of newly incorporated peoples. Such “controls” were often only partial when not ineffective. The study of ancient cities and states must thus concern the “fragile” nature of these societies and so the evolution of fragility.

The “Eden that never was” seems increasingly an apt term to describe early cities and states. Is the picture of armed rebellion by the younger gods against the older gods, as depicted in the epic of Atrahasis, marching in a torch-lit parade to the temple of the high gods to demand worker’s rights (as it were), only a figment of a poet’s imagination? I doubt that Susan Pollock thinks it so.

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