

# The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings

---

MARIO LIVERANI

TWO PROCEDURES ARE AVAILABLE to the modern historian of ancient Mesopotamia: either to painstakingly collect the administrative, epistolary, and archaeological primary documentation in order to reconstruct anew the development of socioeconomic, political, and cultural relationships; or else to be satisfied with easy recourse to the historical summaries provided by the royal inscriptions—from the shortest dedications to the lengthy “annals,” where military and civil enterprises are chronologically arranged.

The first procedure would provide quite a banal image of ancient Mesopotamia, of anthropological and mundane character: the image of a society and a life-style endowed with their own peculiar features, differentiated by socioeconomic level and political environment, gaining mastery of space and following the rhythms of time as dictated by the available technological equipment. This procedure has only recently become available to scholarship.

The second, more widespread procedure has yielded a supercharged and quite memorable image of ancient Mesopotamia as a country inhabited by great kings devoted to building temples and palaces, to digging canals, to fighting enemies and repulsing invaders, to dispensing justice and providing for the prosperity of their

people, according to directions coming directly from the gods.

We all know that this second image is grossly exaggerated, one-sided, and unreliable. A single example among hundreds of similar cases—an inscription by Sin-kashid of Uruk (circa 1850 BCE)—will suffice:

During his reign, according to the market rate of his land, one shekel of silver was the price of 3 *gur* of barley, of 12 minas of wool, 10 minas of copper, 3 *ban* of oil. His years were years of abundance!  
(After Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period*, 1990)

The information coming from the contemporary administrative texts demonstrates that the real prices were three times higher. Why did the king issue such a deceitful “summary” of the economic life of his reign? Obviously, prices are low in times of abundant commodities, and high in times of want. The utopian picture thus effectively provided, in apparently technical (although patently forged) terms, the evidence for the final statement “His years were years of abundance,” thereby celebrating the king’s capability.

Historians’ use of the celebrative texts issued by the ancient kings requires an understanding of their background and their purposes, and of

the communicative conventions in use, in order to reach a deeper level of reading, to recover truth behind propaganda, and to identify the real problems behind their verbal resolution. Ideology is not seldom a virtual inversion of reality.

~~of the~~

## WHY DID THE ANCIENT KINGS PUBLISH THEIR ACHIEVEMENTS?

The first question to be asked in seeking deeper historical insight is about the audience: Who was expected to read the messages of the ancient kings? The official answer, provided by the texts themselves, is that the royal inscriptions address a purely ideological audience: the gods and future kings. The former have to be told how properly and successfully the man behaved whom they had selected to fulfill the difficult task of government. The latter have to learn how to behave in difficult circumstances and have to restore and care for the old inscriptions (instead of appropriating or destroying them), in order to ensure their predecessors of survival after death, which is only entrusted to the "name" (*šumu*), that is, to fame. The properly ideological character of such an audience is confirmed by the fact that in most cases the celebrative inscriptions were inaccessible to a real public—buried under the foundations of buildings, or located in secluded rooms—in any case written in a very complicated writing system that 99 percent of the population was unable to understand.

p. 17, 5<sup>th</sup> l.

If we read the ancient inscriptions, however, and if we try to analyze them using a normal semiological grid, we get a different answer: they were written for a human audience, and for the purposes of present, not future, times. They were written to become known—in some way—to subjects and enemies; they were written for self-justification, or to obtain or increase sociopolitical control, or to mobilize, or to impress, or even to frighten.

The "imaginary" and the "semiological" answers are distant, even opposed, yet not necessarily contradictory. They are simply located at different levels of interpretation and elaboration of reality. Consider, for example, the letter written by Sargon II to the god Assur (Ashur) in 714 to announce the triumphal result of the campaign he led against Urartu (Armenian plateau).

? The letter must, in fact, have been read to the god in the course of a ceremony, presumably in the presence of representative groups of the populace, and perhaps accompanied by the exhibition of the plundered goods and the prisoners. In the frame of the Assyrian ideological system, such a report is dutiful, since the king is but a regent of the state in the name of Assur. Assur and the other gods gave the order (*qibitu*) to start a campaign against the enemies and to enlarge the borders of Assyria; from the gods came the oracular guarantee (*tukultu*) that the campaign would be a success. There could hardly be a clearer example that the gods are the hypostasis of the sociopolitical community, and that when addressing Assur the king is in fact addressing Assyria. And the message is that the war had been necessary and victorious, that the treachery of the enemies and the obstacles of an alien landscape have been overcome by the king's courage and decision, that the political order of the area has been changed to the advantage of Assyria, that the plundered goods pay for the expenses of war, that the human casualties have been insignificant. Not too different, after all, from modern bulletins after a victorious war.

## SPHERES OF AUDIENCE AND LEVELS OF MOBILIZATION

The message certainly serves to strengthen the king's position within the political community and to further his activity. But how could such a message reach its audience? In the form we have it—a tablet inscribed in cuneiform characters (inaccessible without long, specific training) and kept in an archive—it was available to very few people, no others but the scribes. This limited audience, the very same people who issued the text, is able not only to read the document, but also to understand all the political implications, and to appreciate all its allusions and nuances. This "inner" audience comprises palace officials, priests, courtiers, and administrative personnel and is the only one that really needs to understand the text in all its details.

A second, wider audience comprises the Assyrians (of course free, male, adult Assyrians) who live in the capital city or in other towns: although they have no access to writing, nonetheless they

gain some access to the content of the message through the channels of oral transmission, ceremonial staging, and iconic representation. In this way the message loses part of its political meaning and narrative elaboration but remains perfectly adapted to the purpose of mobilization. The populace has no part in formulating the political decisions and could not appreciate its theoretical (or theological) frame, but it provides the (military, working, fiscal) base for the king's action and must be convinced and satisfied.

A third audience is even more peripheral, in the social sense (above all, women) or in the topographical (the villages): it will be reached only via a pale echo of the celebration, deformed by the intermediate passages and kept to the essential facts. This outer audience needs only to know that in the remote capital city, inside an impressive palace, a king is living and acting, beloved by gods and people alike, able to ensure well-being and justice, victorious over enemies, and protecting the borders.

The enemies themselves (be they actual or just potential enemies) are the addressees of the message, or parts of the message, or of some communicative features of the message. The ambassadors admitted into the Assyrian palace have to wait in a hall decorated with scenes of victory and cruel destruction and of exemplary punishment of those who "rebelled" against Assur. At the opposite (lower) end of the communicative range, the only Assyrian "message" received by the mountain tribes is the cloud of dust raised by the approaching army—a message expressive enough to make them fly to the remotest recesses of their mountains, to be "swallowed by caves and gullies." In any case, the enemies have to realize the truth of the Assyrian statement that the transgressors of the loyalty oath (*adû*) will sooner or later be reached by divine punishment, through the action of the Assyrian king and his army.

#### AUTHORS AND SPONSORS, FORM AND CONTEXT

As the audience is diverse and the communicative level is more or less elaborated accordingly, so also are the promulgators of the texts. The scribes who actually composed the inscriptions

are certainly important, and they were the best in their profession. (Only some of the scribes were able and allowed to compose royal celebrative inscriptions.) They sometimes produced elegant and well-organized texts. Yet they are almost completely overwhelmed by two elements: the burden of tradition and the personal interest of the sponsoring king. There is an evolution in the composition, phraseology, and style of the royal inscriptions, but it is a slow process, affecting generations rather than individuals. The literary model of a royal inscription is very rigid and based on previous inscriptions; all a scribe can normally do to show his literary talent is to devise a new combination of the usual time-honored, ideologically dictated set of verbs and nouns. If any individualistic features emerge, they always belong to the king: to his idiosyncracies and personal background, to his political problems and projects.

#### *Sumerian and Old Babylonian*

The most evident developmental trend is dictated by material (even technological) conditioning; but the most meaningful is dictated by the ideological development of kingship. The earliest royal inscriptions are very short votive epigraphs on objects dedicated to the gods, sometimes mentioning the origin of the object itself: "from the booty of land X" or "when he vanquished/destroyed country Y." Just as short are the earliest, simplest forms of building inscription, on bricks or foundation tablets. Yet as early as the middle of the third millennium we find more elaborate and extensive "historical texts," in which the narration of past events proves that the present king operated according to right and justice, following divine advice, and against treacherous enemies. The "origin of historiography" in the legalistic attitude of proving oneself to be right can be found in the narration of both internal political competition and external military encounters. As an example of the former, the "reform" text of Urukagina (or Uru-inimgina) is paramount:

Formerly, from days of yore, from (the day) the seed (of man) came forth, the man in charge of the boatmen seized the boats. The head shepherd seized the donkeys. The head shepherd seized the sheep. The man in charge of the fisheries seized the fisheries. . . . The *sanga* (in charge) of the food

(supplies) felled the trees in the garden of the indigent mother and bundled off the fruit. . . .

The houses of the *ensi* (and) the fields of the *ensi*, the houses of the (palace) harem (and) the fields of the (palace) harem, the houses of the (palace) nursery (and) the fields of the (palace) nursery crowded each other side by side. From the borders of (the god) Ningirsu to the sea, there was the tax collector.

(But) when Ningirsu, the foremost warrior of Enlil, gave the kingship of Lagash to Urukagina, (and) his (Ningirsu's) hand had grasped him out of the multitude (literally, "36,000 men"); then he (Ningirsu) enjoined upon him the (divine) decrees of former days.

He (Urukagina) held close to the word which his king (Ningirsu) spoke to him. He banned the man in charge of the boatmen from (seizing) the boats. He banned the head shepherds from (seizing) the donkeys and sheep. He banned the man in charge of the fisheries from (seizing) the fisheries.

(After S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 1963, pp. 317-319)

As an example of the latter case, the narration by Entemena of the Gu-edinna war against Umma (Tell Jokha) is just as famous and typical:

Enlil, king of all lands, father of all the gods, by his authoritative command, demarcated the border between Ningirsu (i.e., Lagash) and Shara (i.e., Umma). Mesalim, king of Kish, at the command of Ishtar, measured it off and erected a monument there.

Ush, ruler of Umma, acted arrogantly: he smashed that monument and marched on the plain of Lagash. Ningirsu, warrior of Enlil, at his (Enlil's) just command, did battle with Umma. At Enlil's command, he cast the great battle-net upon it, and set up burial mounds for it on the plain.

(After Jerrold S. Cooper, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions*, 1986, p. 54)

And the text goes on to narrate the full sequence of events, with treacherous Umma always transgressing the gods' decision and righteous Lagash always winning thanks to the gods' support.

But it is only with the Akkadian Dynasty that a real propagandistic apparatus is set up, and the monuments of Sargon and Naram-Sin are located in the major temples of the country, especially the Ekur, the Enlil temple in Nippur (modern Nuffar). The Akkadian monuments are equally significant in their iconic and textual features: the heroic and individualistic personages engraved on the Naram-Sin stela of victory, freely

acting in an open landscape where the gods are reduced to mere symbols, make a sharp contrast with the Sumerian city phalanx and city ruler acting as mere instruments of the preeminent and overpowering city god in the Stela of Vultures. (See "Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art" below for an illustration of the Naram-Sin stela.) The textual counterpart of such a new attitude is easily found in inscriptions celebrating the bold enterprises of the Akkadian kings, who were effective not in restoring the time-honored order of things, but in changing it and in opening new horizons:

Sargon, king of Kish, won 34 battles, destroyed the city walls up to the sea shore. He made ships of Meluhha [Melukkha], ships of Magan, ships of Dilmun dock at the harbor of Akkad. Sargon, the king, bowed down in prayer to Dagan in Tuttul, and (the god) gave him the Upper Country: Mari, Yarmuti, Ebla, up to the Cedar Forest and the Silver Mountains. Sargon, the king to whom Enlil gave no rival: 5400 people daily had their meal in his presence.

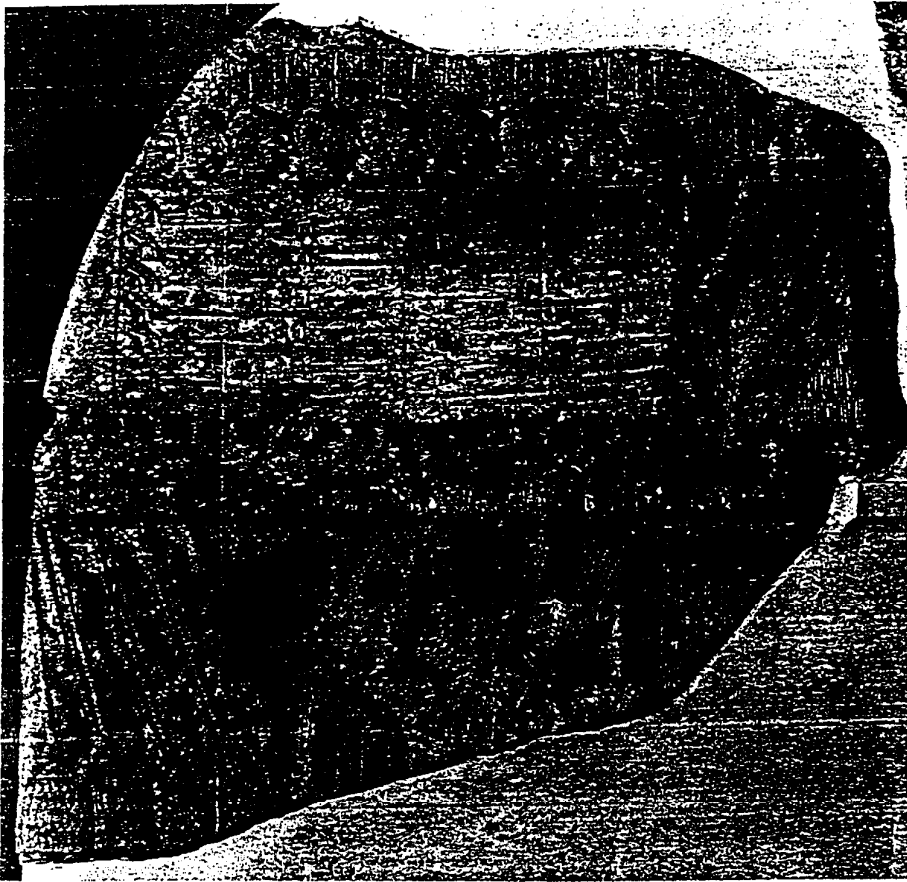
Since the establishment of humankind, no king among kings had ever ravaged Armanum and Ebla. Nergal opened the road of Naram-Sin, the strong one, and gave him Armanum and Ebla, and offered him also the Amanus, the Cedar Mountain, and the Upper Sea. Thanks to the weapon of Dagan, exalting his kingship, Naram-Sin, the strong one, vanquished Armanum and Ebla.

(For these documents, see "Kings of Akkad" in Part 5, Vol. II)

The monuments of the Akkadian kings, kept for centuries in the main temples of Sumer and Akkad, visible to future generations, were an effective channel for perpetuating the fame of their enterprises and giving rise to a whole series of popular narratives and poems.

The "heroic" kingship of Akkad remained a model to be imitated, or at least to be taken into account, even though the following Ur III and Isin-Larsa periods in southern Mesopotamia saw the revival of a "cultic" kingship, more interested (at least in the official propaganda) in the welfare of the country than in its military power and expansion. Celebrative inscriptions were still being composed (some of them clearly in the tradition of the Akkadian ones), but the most typical kind of texts in which the king expresses his program and narrates his achievements are the royal hymns. These are addressed to an inter-

## The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings



Detail of the Stela of the Vultures found at Girsu, circa 2450 BCE. The stela records the victory of Eannatum of Lagash over the city of Umma. In the stela, the soldiers of Eannatum I are shown trampling over corpses of enemies as they follow the king. In the lower register, Eannatum holds a long spear from his vantage point in a battle wagon. LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS

nal audience of temple and palace officials, and wider diffusion of their content (parallel to that of the royal monuments) is unlikely. Internal cultic and civic activities are the principal topics, while war activities are minimized, sometimes even denied (Shulgi goes so far as to imagine setting up an antiheroic stela of "no-victory," with the boast, "Cities, I did not destroy; walls, I did not pull down").

While the Neo-Sumerian and Old Babylonian kings in the south (the land of Sumer) based their royal image and their prestige among the populace on cultic activities, culminating in self-divinization, and on administrative skill and public works, ensuring the welfare of the country,

the contemporary kings in the north (the land of Akkad and upper Mesopotamia) preserved and revived the Akkadian tradition, underscoring military achievements and heroic behavior. The royal inscriptions of Yakhdun-Lim of Mari or Shamshi-Adad of "Assyria" contain lengthy and elaborate "historical" passages, taking up far more space than was required by the traditional formulaic "historical" sections of the genre (see "Shamshi-Adad and Sons" in Part 5, Vol. II). Not by chance, shortly afterward northern Syria and the Old Hittite kingdom were prompt in following the example of northern Mesopotamia by developing their own historical narrative. Again and not by chance, at the same time the model

of kingship provided by the kings of Akkad finds other ways of expression, in spurious royal inscriptions (the so-called *narû* stelae) and in short poems (usually called "epics" by Assyriologists) that do not emanate directly (or officially) from the kings' will and are not explicitly intended to ensure the kings' success and fame. They derive, though, from the very scribal circles that produced the royal inscriptions and provide additional details on the political ideologies and debates of their time.

#### *Kassite and Middle Assyrian*

After the "classical" achievements of the Old Babylonian period, the royal inscriptions of the Kassite Dynasty are almost insignificant as media for celebrating the king's image and his "historical" achievements. Yet the Late Bronze period is not at all devoid of examples of the use of history and politics as arguments for celebration and propaganda. In the highly international world of the time, the most significant topos is provided by the declarations of war, already well attested in the Old Babylonian period but now spread all over the Near East, in the wars between Egyptians and Hurrians and Hittites, Kassites and Assyrians and Elamites. The declarations of war are significant because the issuing king has to condense into a few words all the reasons for his being right and the enemies' being guilty, for the gods to support him and abandon the other country. This is demonstrated by tracing back the course of past relations between the two countries, in a style of argument quite similar to that of legal contests. Just as the royal inscription is the best record of all the arguments a king can produce to build support inside his kingdom, so functions the war declaration in the field of external relations.

At the same time, the Middle Assyrian kingdom becomes a privileged center for the elaboration and the improvement of old and new literary tools in the service of the palace. On the one hand, the narrative sections of the royal inscriptions become ever longer and more complex, culminating with Tiglath-pileser I (circa 1100) in a clearly annalistic arrangement of the military campaigns, and consolidating a stock of sentences and stylistic features that will last for almost a millennium. On the other hand, the deeds of the kings are also recorded and celebrated in

different kinds of compositions: chronicles (a genre to be further developed in the first millennium), which originate by joining the political aim of celebration with the practical task of chronological recording; poems (the poem of Tukulti-Ninurta I is paramount in this genre), which now have as protagonists the present kings instead of the model heroes of the past; and even letters to foreign kings, or prayers to the Assyrian gods that beyond the peculiarities of their genre contain political messages as well.

#### *Neo-Assyrian*

The further developments of the "annalistic" royal inscriptions under the Assyrian kings in the ninth to seventh centuries are well known. They provide by far the most important corpus of political addresses from Mesopotamia, in which the problems of political communication in the ancient Near East can be most conveniently studied and exemplified. Among the arguments of interest, we must at least mention: (a) the literary and stylistic development through which the original patterns of the building and votive inscriptions become but a pretext for independently conceived and developed historical narratives; (b) the connection between the texts, their architectural context, and the iconic representation of the same events (the "historical" reliefs)—three media using quite different codes yet physically superimposed and mutually interdependent; (c) the connection between royal titular and historical narrative, the latter being to some extent a justification (or a detailed demonstration) for the use of the former; and (d) the periodic rewriting of the annals (for some kings many successive "editions" have been preserved), in order not only to add new campaigns and bring the record up to date, but also to correct previous statements under the influence of subsequent developments.

Scholarly attention has obviously focused on the royal inscriptions, but other political compositions are also known from the Neo-Assyrian period (as from the Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian periods). Epic poems are still composed to celebrate the Assyrian kings (e.g., Shalmaneser III); the prayer to the god Assur becomes a real historical narrative (best exemplified by Sargon II and Esarhaddon); and the chronicles become a tool for ideological and

political debate between Assyrian and Babylonian scribes (and their respective royal palaces).

### *Neo-Babylonian*

In the Neo-Babylonian period, the royal inscriptions are—in a sense—a compromise between the local tradition of the sober and mostly cultic- and building-oriented content of the Kassite and Middle Babylonian inscriptions, and the unavoidable model of the Neo-Assyrian historical narratives. The chronicles become instead the paramount literary expression of the kings' right to impose their own reconstruction of history. It has repeatedly been noted that as much as the Assyrian royal inscriptions are biased, exaggerated, bombastic, and self-celebrative, so the Babylonian Chronicles are sober, accurate, even prompt to record failures besides successes. This is certainly true and partly to be credited to the different cultural backgrounds of Assyrian and Babylonian political ideologies. But we have to remember that the Assyrian inscriptions were real political addresses (to be received in one way or another by a large audience), while the chronicles were "scholarly" documents circulating inside the closed world of the scribal schools. Their bias is somewhat subtler and goes back to a theology of history rather than to an immediate search for support. But the borders between historiography and politics, between theology and practice, are uncertain in the Neo-Babylonian period—as always in world history. Babylonian independence, it is well known, ends in a military struggle between the local dynasty and the Persian invaders, but when reading the inscriptions of the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus, or the polemical texts that the victors addressed against him, or even the (apparently neutral) chronicles, we get the impression that the basic problems at such a juncture were theological in character: whether Babylonian kingship was granted by Sin or by Marduk; whether the New Year celebrations had been omitted due to the king's neglect or to his concern to avoid risks; whether the king had correctly understood the divine signs or not; and so on. The political elite of priests and scribes, officials and administrative personnel, was certainly involved in such debates, wherein the basic problem of legitimacy was discussed according to the specific code of the time. We can hardly be sure

that a similar concern and a similar competence were widespread among the common people.

### SUCCESS AND LEGITIMACY

Not all kings equally needed, and not all were in the position, to issue celebrative messages. First, most Mesopotamian kings did not live and reign long enough to have anything to celebrate, be it a new building or a military success. Also, many of them met with such internal political or economic (even meteorological!) difficulties as to be unable to mobilize the necessary resources and human consent for any kind of celebration. These are the kings who have no place in the history books, who are just the silent majority against which the successful rulers stand out. In terms of ancient ideology they prove—by the way of contrast—the exceptionality and legitimacy of those few who really had something to celebrate.

Success and legitimacy are related: while in practice success generates legitimacy and acceptance, in ideological terms (in the characteristic inversion of reality) success proves the existence of a previous true (though hidden) legitimacy. Legitimacy is an important matter. It means a correct chain of relationships from god to king and from king to people. In case a king lacks (or loses) legitimacy, he will be unable to ensure order and prosperity for his country: it will be a disaster for the people, and to wait for "proofs" of legitimacy could make it too late. The population of any kingdom is therefore very concerned (and understandably so) with the legitimate origin of a new king; and the critical points in any reign are the beginning and the end, his enthronement and the designation of his heir. Between these two points, the rest of the reign is almost routine—provided the gods assist.

Now, if a new king is the son of the previous ruler, if he was designated by his father as heir to the throne (an inheritance hardly to be shared among brothers!), no special "proof" of legitimacy is necessary, and the populace will remain confident unless or until some specific problem arises. But if the king achieves his position through some irregular procedure, he has to justify himself, in various ways. If he is a member of the royal house but not the legitimate heir to

the throne, he can try to turn his position around, from usurper to legitimate heir threatened by aggressive and treacherous brothers. If his access to power is related to opposed socioeconomic interests, the usurper will assume the role of the restorer of order and justice—as we have already seen in the case of Urukagina. If no excuse at all can be found to justify the usurpation, the final possibility will be to underscore the very lack of previous and apparent justifications, implying that the decision of the gods was based on hidden qualities that will later become evident to everybody: remember again Urukagina singled out from among thirty-six thousand people!

In fact, the most important and decisive legitimation comes from good government and therefore becomes known after, rather than before, the exercise of power. This is true at the level of actual political relations, since an effective and successful government increases consent and leaves no room for opposition, while a negative government produces disaffection, hostility, and rebellion. This is also true at the ideological level, since success is only possible with divine help, and divine help is only granted to legitimate kings—while the unsuccessful ruler is clearly one who has been abandoned by the gods. A military defeat or a series of unfavorable growing seasons are equally indicative of a lack of the proper connection between gods and people that should be ensured by the presence of a proper king on the throne.

In royal inscriptions, the properly ideological “code” is generally used: the king claims to have divine support in order to receive (automatically) the people’s support. Very seldom is popular support directly celebrated—as if the attitude of the populace were not the result of different possible options but the necessary issue of the quality of rule. The crude mechanism is: Peace and availability of goods make people happy. But the ideological code is: The gods put on the throne the right king.

## BUILDING AND FIGHTING FOR THE GODS

Provided that the problem of legitimation has been solved, the celebration of the normal, day-

to-day activity of government mainly concerns two sectors: buildings and wars. The successful Mesopotamian king is portrayed as a relentless builder and a victorious warrior. This characterization requires some comment, since it is not directly connected with real advantages to the population: in this sense we would rather expect a celebration of economic prosperity and of the correct administration of justice. These are indeed sometimes celebrated, especially in periods of “paternalistic” attitudes, like the Old Babylonian period. Yet the celebration of economic prosperity is rather the frame than the real subject of celebration; only the digging of canals (the most important agricultural infrastructure in ancient Mesopotamia) is the object of direct celebration. As for the quality of the king as a righteous judge, it finds expression in specific kinds of texts, namely the law codes, whose aim is to demonstrate, through a lengthy list of practical examples, how correctly the kingdom was run under the king who authored the code.

By and large, the most common celebration is that related to temple-building or restoration and to dedication of cultic objects inside the temples. This means—again—that Mesopotamian society is deeply embedded in ideology, an ideology shared by the ruling elite and the common people, so that the religious code is preferred to the realistic one. The very same activity of building temples and concentrating wealth in their furnishings is a metapolitical activity: it is devoted not to the direct care of the country and people, but to the care of the gods who are ideologically considered to be responsible for the care of country and people. Consequently, the celebration of temple-building instead of more direct economic intervention has a precise meaning, in the sense of a “fatalistic” society whose problems and expectations receive an answer which is more symbolic than technical, more formal than real.

The other royal feature to be celebrated, namely success in war, is also not directly concerned with the prosperity of the country (since war generally means death of people and destruction of material goods) and seems not even to be a part of the most ancient repertory. Clearly enough, it is the result of competition for control of the limited resources within the landscape (land, water, and work force), and to a lesser extent for access to remote sources of raw materi-



als. Yet it must be noted that in a condition of balanced coexistence of different states, the celebration of victory is quite moderate in tone and extent. The topic becomes pivotal, and almost obsessive, only in the case of states especially engaged in an expansionistic and "imperialistic" policy, from the Akkadian Dynasty down to the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In differing formats (the few lines of the Akkadian monuments versus the many columns of the Assyrian "annals"), the purpose is the same: to accredit the image of a king "who has no rival" (*lā šanān, ša māhira lā išu* or the like) throughout the world and who exerts his power not only in avoiding the threat of a barbarian invasion, but in extending by force of arms the control of the inner country over the periphery (*murappiṣ miṣri* and the like) in every direction.

In this context, the obvious topoi of the enemy as treacherous and vile have a secondary relevance, in comparison to the pure and simple exaltation of the king's valor, success, and cruelty. Here is Assumasirpal II (circa 875):

I approached the city Tela. The city was well fortified; it was surrounded by three walls. The people put their trust in their strong walls and their large number of troops and did not come down to me. They did not seize my feet. In strife and conflict I besieged (and) conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword. I carried off prisoners, possessions, oxen (and) sheep from them. I burnt many captives from them. I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms (and) hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, (and) extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living (and) one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city. I burnt their adolescent boys (and) girls. I razed, destroyed, burnt, (and) consumed the city.

(A. Kirk Grayson, *Royal Inscriptions*, 1991)

The modern (secondary, and unforeseen) audience of such a passage is disgusted at the brutal display of cruelty and sadism. As a matter of fact, this text and the related images (not to speak of the "operative" message on the spot) contain an exemplary warning to other possible "rebels." But in terms of Assyrian ideology, such a crude attitude is somewhat sublimated and justified: in refusing Assyrian suzerainty, the enemies refused to acknowledge the world order established by the gods; in their impious hubris, they put their trust in purely human features, while

the Assyrians put their trust in God their sponsor. The enemies were wicked—this is the recurrent message of every victor, in order to overcome the guilt complex of murder—and it was their fault if we had to kill them.

## THE CONTRASTIVE UNDERSCORING

The purposes of celebration and mobilization, which are the very kernel of the royal inscriptions, are best realized through the use of very simple formal devices—commonly used in propagandistic texts of all times—mostly centered on the pattern of counterposition. Counterposition is effective at a very basic psychological level: it produces self-identification and mobilization against the alien; it makes easier and obvious the choice, and the moral reasons for the choice.

Most common is counterposition with respect to time. Of course the present time, under the happy government of the ruler who issues the texts, is quite positive. Its positiveness is enhanced by contrast with a past time (under the ineffective predecessors) when the gods withdrew their support, the enemies prevailed, the country was threatened or even invaded, and so on. And the positive present time is even more highlighted by linking it to the remote past of origins, to the happy "golden age" when things (just created by the gods) functioned perfectly. So the present reign is a restoration of the original positive time, after an interval of dysfunction and disorder. The present king is to some extent repeating the divine work of creation by restoring the primeval state of affairs as established by the gods and therefore endowed with inherent superiority.

A variant form of the motif of the "restorer of order" is the motif of the "first discoverer." Here the celebration of some positive achievement by the king is underscored by counterposition to a past when such an achievement did not yet exist. The achievement can be of any kind: the opening of a new road or the reaching of a remote land, the possession of an exotic product or the introduction of a technological improvement, even the building of a new temple or the estab-

ishment of a new festival. Here is Sennacherib, circa 690:

In times past, when the kings, my fathers, fashioned a bronze image in the likeness of their members, to set up in their temples, the labor on them exhausted every workman; in their ignorance and lack of knowledge, they drank oil, and wore sheepskins to carry on the work they wanted to do in the midst of their mountains. But I, Sennacherib, first among the princes, wise in all craftsmanship, great pillars of bronze, colossal lions, open at the knees, which no king before my time had fashioned—through the clever understanding which the noble Nishiku (= Ea) had given to me, (and) in my own wisdom, I pondered deeply the matter of carrying out the task, following the advice of my head and the prompting of my heart I fashioned the work of bronze and cunningly wrought it.

(After D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, 1927)

In this way the king is claiming a role in the process of organization of the world. Of course, the basic arrangement had been provided by the gods—from the organization of the cosmos in its physical features to the creation of man. But the elements of human culture were subsequently provided by old “heroes” (kings and “sages”) who introduced all the features of human culture as it is now. Finally, the present king can also become a member of such an honorable congregation by discovering something new and unprecedented, by leading human possibilities a step further than his predecessors.

Counterposition in space is more strictly concerned with the problem of mobilization. The “inner” country is well ordered, prosperous, and civilized, thanks to the positive action of the king. The foreign lands, mostly with “no king” (or not the right one) and “no god” (or just minor ones), are still in a state similar to the chaos before creation, without the advantages of order and civilization, often without the basic requirements of physical life. The counterposition is effective in two ways: first, as proof of the positive role played by the king, and therefore as an element favoring social and political cohesion; second, as justification for the king’s intervention against foreign lands, intervention that will prove advantageous to the conquered lands themselves, which for the first time are put in a condition to become part of the cosmos.

In a sense, the distinction between center and periphery is eliminated thanks to the conquering and civilizing action of the king of the central country. But in another sense, this is a structural and permanent distinction. Landscape itself is significantly different: not by chance is the central country a fertile plain, while the periphery is built up of impassable mountains and arid steppes. Only the central country produces all the elements (first of all food) that are necessary for life, while the peripheral lands are entrusted with the production of just one commodity each: one land (or mountain) produces cedar, another lapis lazuli, still another copper, and so on. Clearly, the gods have arranged such a “topography of commodities” with the advantage of the central country in mind, where all the products converge and find their use. The central country is the only land of life; the outer lands exist for its sake, and not for their own—how could a land (and a people) survive on lapis lazuli alone?

Yet the empty periphery, inconvenient for human life, seems from time to time to host numberless peoples, all of them pressing to get hold of the treasures of life and culture contained in the towns of the central country:

The (foreign) countries surround the city Asshur from everywhere with a circle of evil, and their assemblage hates the shepherd you appointed to keep your people in order. . . . For your city Asshur the work of the battlefield is standingly prepared, and all the onslaughts of the flood are raised against it. Your adversaries and enemies keep looking at the site of your residence, and they made a wicked agreement in order to plunder your country, Assyria. Night and day the (foreign) countries are longing for the destruction of your marvels, and apply themselves to destroy your towns from above and below.

(Prayer of Tukulti-Ninurta I to Assur, circa 1225; after M.-J. Seux, *Hymnes et Prières aux Dieux de Babylone et d'Assyrie*, 1976)

These peripheral peoples, pressing at the borders, are aggressive and wicked, uncivilized and unfearful of the gods; it could even be suspected that they do not properly belong to humankind (compare the Gutians “with human instinct but canine intelligence and monkeys’ features” or the Martu “with instincts like dogs or like wolves”). Happily, the central country will prevail owing to its superior civilization, but espe-

cially owing to the presence of the right king on the throne and to his positive relations with the gods. The motifs (at the same time literary and ideological) of "conspiracy," "confederation," "encirclement," "treachery," and "agreement-breaking" are the typical constitutive features of a real syndrome (the "siege" complex) of a civilized people surrounded by a multitude of barbarians. The use of such a syndrome (and of such literary motifs) has a sure mobilizing effect and provides the psychological—even the moral—justification for what is in reality the aggression of the central country against the peripheral lands and its hold on and exploitation of their economic and human resources. Once again, ideology is the inversion of reality.

### MODELS FOR KINGSHIP: FROM HISTORY TO WISDOM

While mobilization of the population is the basic and original reason for writing royal inscriptions, some products of this literary genre follow a development of their own, partly unrelated to the functional use of the texts, and limited to restricted scribal circles. The celebrative monuments of the early kings, kept in the main temples of the country for centuries and centuries, gave rise to a "historical" interest in the visitors, at various cultural levels. The common people were interested in the memory of the famous heroes of the past, whose adventures (partly stimulated by etiological explanations of the monuments themselves) became the subject of popular stories and anecdotes. The learned scribes copied (as a paleographic exercise) the early inscriptions, made calculations of their chronology, tried to translate into contemporary terms the archaic (and mostly obsolete) toponyms, used the early monuments as reservoirs of stylistic features and of stereotyped boasts, and above all suggested to their kings the most appropriate models of behavior. Since the most effective celebrative apparatus had been set up by Sargon and Naram-Sin, these kings became the standard heroes to be imitated by later kings.

The most obvious case is the direct imitation of old inscriptions by later rulers. To mention just a couple of examples, when Shamshi-Adad

restored a temple in Nineveh (Kuyunjik, Nebi Yunis) that had been built by the Akkadian king Manishtushu, he recovered the original building inscriptions and assumed a titulary that he found there. Or when a minor king of Kish (modern Tell al-Uhaimir, Tell Ingharra), Ashduni-yarim by name (circa 1880), had to fight against his neighbors, he decided to imitate the inscriptions in which Naram-Sin had celebrated the general rebellion of the entire world against him. The boast sounds rather pathetic and awkward:

When all the four quarters of the world rebelled against me, during eight years I made war, and in the eighth year my worth was reduced to nothing and my army was reduced to 300 people. But when my lord Zababa decided in my favor, and my lady Ishtar came to my rescue, although I had taken just a little bread as my food, and I had left for an expedition of one day only, I held the country in awe for 40 days.

(After E. Sollberger and J.-R. Kupper, *Inscriptions royales Sumériennes et Akkadiennes*, 1971)

But the most elaborate texts in this vein were not intended for publication as new building or celebrative inscriptions. They circulated instead among the learned people (scribes, priests, and palace officials) as false inscriptions, "stelae" (*narû*) in the spirit of the early heroes. The purposes of such fabrications cover a range of possibilities, from the most "candid" one of pure erudition or story-telling, to the most purposefully "functional" falsification providing a new decision with the juridical and religious sanction of time past. The so-called Cruciform Monument of Manishtushu is this kind of fraud from Late Babylonian times but was composed on the basis of authentic early texts. Most of the texts are to be located between these two extreme points: they belong to the political debates of their times and were composed in order to provide one or the other of the contending parties with the authoritative support of the model kings of the past.

While traditional (Assyriological) interest has been focused on the search for the "historical kernel"—always presumed to be found under the anachronisms and literary embellishments of the historical poems—the most important information we can extract therefrom is certainly related to the political problems for whose solution they had been written. The "King of Battle"

(*šar tamhāri*) probably has to do with the resuming of Old Assyrian trade activities in Cappadocia at the time of Shamshi-Adad. The "Curse of Akkad (Agade)" probably has to do with the restoration work in the Ekur by Ur-Nammu of Ur (or perhaps by Ishme-Dagan of Isin). The "General Rebellion" was reworked in the frame of the wars between Kish and Babylon. And so on. In all these cases, the discovery of the historical context is only a reasonable hypothesis, since the extant literary compositions are the only evidence for the debates from which they originated.

In their actual political activities, the kings and their advisers had to decide on the basis of their practical knowledge of the affair, but they had to use the cultural codes of their times. There are basically two codes. The main code of Mesopotamian politics was that provided by divination, a set of techniques putting the king in direct contact with the divine world, the only source for correct instruction. Spontaneous omens (especially dreams) and solicited omens (especially extispicy, inspecting entrails) assured the ruler about the feasibility of his projects. The two opposed attitudes are "to be afraid" (*palāhu*) and "to be confident" (*takālu*) about the issue of the enterprise. Even though the difficulties might seem excessive, the king has nothing to fear, provided he is confident in the gods' assent. By the way, the behavior of enemies is opposite to the correct one: instead of being confident in the gods and not fearful of natural or human elements, they are confident in natural or human elements (the mountains, the city walls, the numbers of their troops, their allies) but are not afraid of the Assyrians and of the gods' verdict. This behavior is clearly impious and foolish and cannot but end in disaster.

Besides this basic code of decision making, the literary and historical models provide an additional code, or perhaps just some additional elements. The achievements of the early heroes can suggest the correct choice, can demonstrate that the enterprise is not beyond human capabilities, and can stimulate the competition for fame. The two model Akkadian kings are endowed with opposite characters. Sargon is the model for correct behavior, the one who followed divine advice even when human judgment would have suggested caution or renunciation. On the con-

trary, Naram-Sin is the one who did not care for gods or for omens and made his decisions according to purely human evaluations, on the basis of human information (see "Kings of Akkad" in Part 5, Vol. II). In the *Legend of Naram-Sin*, the king sends a scout to test the possibility of defeating the enemies and does this before asking the gods' advice:

I summoned an officer and instructed him: 'Take a lance, take a spear, touch them (= the enemies) with the lance, prick them with the spear. If blood comes out, they are men like us; if blood does not come out, they are evil spirits, spectres, ghosts and fiends, creatures of Enlil.'

(After Oliver R. Gurney, "Sultantepe Tablets," 1955)

No wonder that eventually the omens will turn out to be negative. And at this point, Naram-Sin's second mistake (or "sin") is to imagine that he is able to do without the consent of the gods:

What lion ever observed oracles? What wolf ever consulted a dream-priestess? I will go like a robber according to my own inclination, taking with me a spear of iron. (After Gurney)

A similar concern for the omens is to be found throughout the epic literature of historical content, where the success or failure of kings is explained by their pious or impious behavior, by their capability of listening to the advice coming from the gods. Such literature is therefore deeply embedded in the political and theological theories of ancient Mesopotamia. Only secondarily is it a poetic celebration of the heroic qualities of the king and his soldiers.

The final development of the genre is wisdom, a development already implicit beforehand, since the political and theological principles pointed out above are the very basis for wise behavior, and the example of the model kings of the past has a didactic value for later kings. While the "true" royal inscriptions put their emphasis on celebration (underscoring the valor and the success of the king), the "false" ones—the literary fabrications originated by, and giving origin to, the scribal learned debates—put their emphasis on teaching. Here is the close of the "Legend of Naram-Sin":

Whoever you are, whether governor or prince or any one else, whom the god shall call to rule over

## The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings

a kingdom . . . read this document and listen to the words thereof. . . . Let wise scribes read aloud your stele. You who have read my stele and kept out of trouble, you who have blessed me, may a future one bless you.

(After Gurney)

And here is the close of the "Synchronistic History":

Let a later prince, who wishes to achieve fame in Akkad, write about the prowess of his victories. Let him continually turn to this very stele (and) look at it that it may not be forgotten. . . . May the praises of Assyria be lauded forever. May the crimes of Sumer and Akkad (= Babylonia) be bruited abroad through every quarter.

(After A. Kirk Grayson)

The kings' desire for eternal fame (the only possible survival after death) generated the "historical" narratives in the royal inscriptions. But the scribes' pride added the further qualification that the most heroic enterprises of the most powerful king would not have survived, and would not have functioned as models for kingship, were it not for the scribes who put them into writing. We can add a further consideration that is not present in the ancient inscriptions—since it belongs to the "materialistic" level of understanding that the royal inscriptions tried to sublimate and conceal: namely that even the most powerful kings would not have been able to keep their kingdoms in subjection by pure force, were it not for the words of propaganda causing people to believe that the social and political imbalances were necessary for the benefit of the exploited and the exploiters alike, and that the efforts of the whole community had to be addressed to the care of the gods—and of the king, their delegate on earth.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Mesopotamian Historiography*

BERTIL ALBREKTSON, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (1967); J. J. FINKELSTEIN, "Mesopotamian Historiography," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*

107 (1963); JEAN-JACQUES CLASSNER, *Chroniques mésopotamiennes* (1993); A. KIRK GRAYSON, "Histories and Historians of the Ancient Near East: Assyria and Babylonia," *Orientalia* 49 (1980); MARIO LIVERANI, "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts," *Orientalia* 42 (1973); JOHN VAN SETERS, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (1983).

### *Historical Traditions Concerning the Akkadian Kings*

HANS G. GÜTERBOCK, "Die historische Tradition und ihre literarische Gestaltung bei Babyloniern und Hethitern," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 42 (1934) and 44 (1938); MARIO LIVERANI, "Model and Actualization: The Kings of Akkad in the Historical Tradition," in *Akkad, the First World Empire*, edited by MARIO LIVERANI (1993).

### *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*

RYELE BORGER and WOLFGANG SCHRAMM, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königsinschriften*, I–II (1961–1972); *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis*, edited by F. MARIO FALES (1981); A. T. OLMSTEAD, *Assyrian Historiography: A Source Study* (1916); *History, Historiography and Interpretation*, edited by HAYIM TADMOR and MOSHE WEINFELD (1983).

### *Ideology and Propaganda in the Royal Inscriptions*

J. J. FINKELSTEIN, "Early Mesopotamia, 2500–1000 B.C.," in *Propaganda and Communication in World History, I, The Symbolic Instrument in Early Times*, edited by HAROLD D. LASSWELL, DANIEL LERNER, and HANS SPEIER (1979); A. LEO OPPENHEIM, "Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires," *ibidem*; MARIO LIVERANI, "Ideology of the Assyrian Empire," in *Power and Propaganda*, edited by MOGENS TROLLE LARSEN (1979); PETER MACHINIST, "Assyrians on Assyria in the First Millennium B.C.," in *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike*, edited by KURT RAAFLAUB (1993); TREMPER LONGMAN III, *Fictional Akkadian Autohistory: A Generic and Comparative Study* (1991).

### *War and Building Accounts*

JERROLD S. COOPER, *Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: the Lagash-Umma Border Conflict* (1983); SYLVIE LACKENBACHER, *Le palais sans rival. Le récit de construction en Assyrie* (1990); MARIO LIVERANI, *Prestige and Interest: International Relations in the Near East ca. 1600–1100 B.C.* (1990); MANFRED WEIPPERT, "'Heiliger Krieg' in Israel und Assyrien," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 84

(1972); K. LAWSON YOUNGER, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (1990); BUSTENAY ODED, *War, Peace and Empire: Justification for War in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (1992).

**Translations**

JERROLD S. COOPER, *Sumerian and Akkadian Royal Inscriptions, I: Presargonic Inscriptions* (1986); BENJAMIN R. FOSTER, *Before the Muses, I–II* (1993); DOUGLAS FRAYNE, *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia,*

*Early Periods, IV: Old Babylonian Period* (1990), and *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods, II: Sargonic and Gutian Periods* (1993); A. KIRI CRAYSON, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (1975) and *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods, II: Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC* (1991); OLIVER R. CURNEY, "The Sultantepe Tablets. IV: The Cuthaeen Legend of Naram-Sin," *Anatolian Studies* 5 (1955); DANIEL DAVID LUCKENBILL, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vols. 1–2 (1927); SAMUEL NOAH KRAMER, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (1963).

SEE ALSO *The Historiography of the Ancient Near East* (Part 9, Vol. IV) and various chapters in PART 5: HISTORY AND CULTURE.