

CHAPTER ONE

A History of the Ancient Near East

Mario Liverani

Unity and Diversity

The history of the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations is very long; its timespan from the late fourth to the late first millennium BCE is equal to or even longer than the rest of history, from the collapse of the Near Eastern cultures to our own time. It is correct to use the label “the first half of history.” We could even say “of our history,” because this long trajectory is now considered part and even the very foundation of our own “Western” history – not like other more remote civilizations in India or China or elsewhere.

The reasons for the Western appropriation of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures and history were especially important at the time of their rediscovery. These included the colonialist ideology and practice of the nineteenth century, the interest of the Christian world in Biblical antiquities, coupled with the Islamic disregard for pre-Islamic heritage. In recent decades these motivations have faded, and they are no longer primary to the community of scholars. Yet Biblical connections are still widely of concern to popular audiences, and so the interest in the history of the Ancient Near East is something more serious than curiosity about a remote and alien past.

Our Western civilization acknowledges a privileged role for Greek civilization in generating the foundational values of freedom, democracy, individual personality, economic enterprise, rational thought and science, and the aesthetics of the visual arts and poetry. But our indebtedness to the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations in the material foundations of culture (urban life, political organization, administration, writing) and in the field of religion remains important.

But is the Ancient Near East a unified subject for historical inquiry? The area is characterized by a notable diversity in natural environments (hills and steppe-lands, river valleys and Mediterranean countryside), by different peoples and languages (Semites and Indo-Europeans and others), by various ways of life (urban to nomadic) and modes of production (from agriculture and pastoralism to specialized crafts and complex financial

dealings), by different complicated writing systems, by social diversity in access to resources, communication, and decision-making – so that a unitary treatment may seem unjustified. Nevertheless, when compared with other centers of civilization (including the contiguous centers of Egypt, the Indus Valley, the Aegean basin, and Central Asia), and especially when contrasted to the periphery between the centers of the major civilizations, the Ancient Near East seems compact enough to allow for a unified treatment because of intensive cross-fertilization. But such a treatment must not neglect the specific features of the regional sub-units of Lower Mesopotamia, Upper Mesopotamia, the Levant (areas bordering the eastern Mediterranean), Anatolia (modern Turkey), and southwestern Iran.

The history of the region, as far as it can be reconstructed from written and archaeological records, follows a trajectory that is diverse in details but unitary in its major features. The relevance of the environmental factors, the introduction of technological improvements, and socio-economic development, can be followed all over the area with similar patterns.

Environmental constraints, painstaking production of food, the difficult access to basic resources, and the consequent low levels of demographic growth, were all factors that contributed to the slow development of the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations. We are accustomed to appreciating the large cities and the monumental temples and palaces, the elegant artistic and literary compositions, and the great polities and “empires” as something obviously resulting from high levels of civilization. We should never forget, however, that such accomplishments were the result of painstaking labor and of forced allocation of the limited resources then available, and that the periodic crises were not an accident but a structural feature in the system.

In fact, the ancient history of the Near East can be summarized as a cyclic sequence of growth and collapse, a sequence that is apparent also in the preservation of the documentary record. The periods of major development – with burgeoning polities, big cities, important monuments, extensive archives, and rich craftsmanship – are separated by “dark ages” of localism and fragmentation. We have to consider that the ups and downs are mostly pertinent to the upper classes, to the political structures, and to the complex urban economy, while the common peasantry in rural villages and pastoral units continued their basic struggle for survival. The ups and downs are the result of a different equilibrium between the two opposed strategies of development and of survival, typically located in the royal palace and in the village, and carried on by the political elite and by the local community. The strategy of development required a leaching of resources from the local communities that was detrimental to the local strategy of survival, and therefore could be carried on only during limited periods, in selected areas, and under specific circumstances, allowing the political elites to impose their will through the exercise of power and through shared ideologies.

Notwithstanding these constraints, we see a long-lasting tendency toward enlargement in the scale of the political units, improvement in the technologies of production (and also of destruction), widening of the geographical horizons, and also the increasing role of individual personalities. The most objective and concrete proxy for expansion, however, namely demographic development, seemed to remain more subject to the recurrent fluctuations than to a positive trend.

The Urban Revolution, about 3500–2800 BCE

The beginning of the historical trajectory was marked by a phenomenon of tremendous relevance, currently assumed to mark the shift from prehistory to history in the proper sense. The phenomenon can be labeled in various ways. We can use the label “urban revolution,” if we want to underscore demography and settlement forms, or the “First Urbanization” if we take into account the subsequent cycles of urbanization. We can speak of the origin of the state or the early state, if we prefer to underscore the political aspects. We can also emphasize the beginning of a marked socio-economic stratification, and of specialized crafts, if we want to underscore the mode of production. We can also use the term “origin of complexity,” if we try to subsume all the various aspects under a unifying concept. The origin of writing has also been considered to mark the beginning of true and proper history, because of the old-fashioned idea that there is no history before the availability of written sources. But now that such an idea is considered simplistic or wrong, we still can consider writing the most evident and symbolic culmination of the entire process.

The “revolution” took place in Lower Mesopotamia, now southern Iraq, and was the result of particular technological improvements and socio-political strategies. The agricultural production of barley underwent a notable, possibly tenfold, increase thanks to the construction of water reservoirs and irrigation canals, of long fields adjacent to the canals watered by them, and thanks to the use of the plow, of animal power, of carts, of threshing sledges, of clay sickles, and of improved storage facilities. The agricultural revolution could not have taken place without the managerial activity of central agencies, the temples, which were able to overcome the purely local strategy of survival carried on by the rural villages.

The technological improvements alone, however, could generate no “revolution” at all if the food-producers had devoted the entire surplus to their own consumption. The role of the central agency was decisive in diverting most of the surplus to social use: both for financing the common structures (irrigation networks, temple building, defensive walls), and for the maintenance of the specialized craftsmen and the sociopolitical elite. The “redistributive” economy of the early state, centered on the temples, was not based on the procedure of taxation, that is, the extraction of a part of the product from the producers’ families or local communities, but basically on the procedure of forced labor or *corvée* work imposed on local communities to work the temple lands. In this way the central agency, the owner of the best irrigated lands, could transfer to the local communities most of the social costs, paying just the rations for the workmen but not their families in limited periods of harvest and other seasonally concentrated operations.

The result of the technological improvements was a rate of seed to crop of around 1:25 in comparison to 1:5 outside the river valleys. The result of the central management was that only a third of the crop covered the expenditures of seed for the next year, rations for workmen and animals, and two-thirds went to the central agency for the social uses described above. Also the breeding of sheep and goats for the production of wool underwent a tremendous increase under temple management, again thanks to technology (the weaving loom) and social exploitation (slave women and children concentrated in temple factories). The administration of an economy based on unequal transfers of product, rations, and services generated writing. Already available tools (tokens, seals, clay sealings) were coordinated to produce round clay seals we call *bullae*, then “numerical” tablets, and

finally proper clay tablets with numbers and logographic icons for the various items to be recorded. The “archaic texts” from the city of Uruk levels IV–III attest to the organization of scribes, schools, and archives.

The transition from the Late Chalcolithic (the Ubaid culture in Mesopotamia) to the early urban economy around 4000 BCE went hand in hand with the sudden increase in the size and structure of the city and of the temples. As for the cities, the transition from the small villages and hamlets of the Ubaid period (under one hectare or 2.47 acres in size) to the walled cities like Uruk (70 hectares or 172.9 acres) is quite impressive. Inside the cities, the small shrines of the Ubaid period, which were devoted to cultic use only, became large buildings including shops and stores besides the sanctuary of the god, along with the apartments of the clergy and the administrative personnel. The social changes were as important: beside the rural communities, based on family structures and communal self-government, a ruling class emerged as the necessary premise, but also the result, of the centralized administration of the economy.

The Uruk culture is so called because of the archaeological discoveries at that site. In Uruk the entire complex of Eanna (with the adjacent Anu temple) has been excavated, while the contemporary levels in other Lower Mesopotamian sites remain hardly touched by digging. The only other important center of the same period in the lowlands is Susa in Iranian Khuzistan. The impression that Uruk could have been the most important center in the period is probably correct, since it is supported by memories preserved in the later mythological and epic literature of Sumer.

The paramount role of the temple in the Uruk period was the obvious result of the strongly unequal relationships that the complex structure of the early state introduced into society. The elite could successfully exploit the rural population only by convincing them that their work was intended to support the god, his house, and his properties. A religious mobilization was necessary in order to keep the unequal relationships effective and enduring. No purely physical constraint could have been effective, but the ideological constraint made the exploitation tolerable. The priestly leadership also had the effect of depriving the kinship groups of their role and thwarted their ambitions for prestige; the priests moved the whole community toward an impersonal management.

Outside the core area, Uruk culture spread in a wide periphery, by means of various types of colonies and outposts. Upper Mesopotamia was colonized both along the Euphrates (at Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda) and the Tigris (at Nineveh) and in the Syrian Jazira (at Hamukar and Tell Brak). The most remote colonies were located along access routes to the highlands of Anatolia (at Samsat and Hassek Hoyuk) and on the Iranian plateau (at Godin Tepe). Important local cities were also influenced by the Uruk culture in their autonomous development (Arslan Tepe is the best known site of this type). Trade and access to highland resources (copper and timber in Anatolia, tin and semi-precious stones in Iran) were most probably the main factors for the spread of the Uruk colonies, and the resultant “regional system” brought different ecosystems and cultural traditions into reciprocal relationships. During the same period, the Early Dynastic civilization of Egypt underwent a similar process of state formation and urbanization, but remained separate from Mesopotamian civilization, except for isolated contacts.

The collapse of the entire system came abruptly at the beginning of the third millennium. Most colonies were abandoned in Upper Mesopotamia and in the highlands. The destruction

of the Uruk period complex at Arslan Tepe is really impressive, and the burial of a Trans-Caucasian chief on the top of the ruins may hint at the role of the pastoral mountaineers as responsible for the disaster. But the crisis is also visible in Lower Mesopotamia, with no northern intrusion, so that we can doubt whether the nomads were the primary factor in the collapse; they may just have profited from an internal structural crisis. In any case, the unitary horizon of the Uruk period was followed by the emergence of various local cultures: the Jemdet Nasr culture in Lower Mesopotamia, the Proto-Elamite in Susiana, the Ninevite V in Upper Mesopotamia, and others in Eastern Anatolia and in Iran. All of them are characterized by a decline of city life in the river valleys, or even by a total reversion to village life in the periphery. The “first cycle of urbanization” had come to its end.

The Second Urbanization, about 2800–2000 BCE

The new cycle of urbanization encompassed an enlarged horizon and was based on a deeper rooting in the society. The urban cultures spread again from Lower Mesopotamia in the so-called Early Dynastic period, about 2800–2350 BCE, to include Upper Mesopotamia, the Levant, Anatolia, and Elam. The spread of cuneiform writing in most of these regions, except Anatolia and Palestine, makes the interconnections more visible. The adjacent areas also underwent similar processes of growth and consolidation in Old Kingdom Egypt, in the Early Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley, and in northeastern Iran and Central Asia. All these areas were linked together by trade contacts and cultural cross-fertilization.

The large size of the area involved and the spread of writing made the ethnic diversity much clearer than in the previous period. Lower Mesopotamia hosted two different linguistic groups: the Sumerians prevailed in the south, or Sumer, and the Semites in the north, or Akkad. The two groups, although coexisting in the same polities, differed not only in language and other cultural traits (for example, the style of figurative arts) but also in basic social and political features. The heritage of the temple-city was characteristic of Sumer, while in the Semitic area the influence of the kinship groups and pastoral tribes was more visible. In Upper Mesopotamia the prevailing population was Hurrian, and in Susiana and Anshan, the later Fars, it was Elamite. In Syria, an early stage of the later northwest Semitic dialects was represented by Eblaite. For Anatolia we lack direct evidence, but the analysis of later languages and personal names makes us believe that the area was inhabited by Hattians and other non-Indo-European peoples.

The typical polity was the city-state in the densely inhabited regions of the lowlands, and probably some kind of “ethnic” state among the mountaineers and the steppe-dwellers. In the Sumerian south, the city-state was basically a “temple-city” as already described in the Uruk period, although the royal palace acquired a separate political role, leaving to the temples the role of managerial agencies of the economy in addition to their cultic role. The city leader in the south was usually a “priest-king” (e n), or a “city administrator” (e n s i), the ideology leaving the role of the true sovereign to the city god. The temple-city was in theory the property of the god, and was in practice a state centered on the city and dominating a rural landscape of some 10 to 20 km or 6 to 12 miles in radius. The major Sumerian city-states of the period were Ur (whose “Royal Cemetery” provides the most brilliant image of wealth and craftsmanship), Uruk, Eridu, Umma, Lagash, Adab, and

Shuruppak. Between the Sumerian south and the Akkadian north, the city of Nippur played a special role as seat of the leading god of the Sumerian pantheon, Enlil – a role of providing political legitimacy to kings who held the city and of providing a symbol of cultural unity for Sumer in the theory that only one king could be paramount at any one time. At an early stage of development, in Early Dynastic II, a “league” of Sumerian cities seems to have played an important political role. More often, competition for agricultural lands could spark wars among neighboring cities, and the long war between Lagash and Umma in Early Dynastic III is well known from the royal inscriptions of Lagash. But the equilibrium between the various city-states seems to have been resistant to imbalance.

In the area of Akkad, city-states like Eshnunna or Akshak seem to have shared the southern model. But the most important city, Kish, was formed differently, with a neat prevalence of the palace over the temple, with a larger territory, with a warlike king (*lu gal* “big man”), and clear expansionistic intent. It is possible that ethnicity had some influence in generating the two different models, but certainly the ecological and economic basis was also a factor. In the north pastoralism was more important, and agriculture was less dependent on irrigation, with local systems of square fields prevailing over the temple-run sets of elongated fields in the south. The modified model also spread to Upper Mesopotamia: along the middle Tigris (at Assur) and the Middle Euphrates (at Mari), in the Jazira (at Tell Brak/Nagar and other centers), and in Syria (at Ebla).

Various administrative archives have been recovered, both in the south (Ur “archaic” in Early Dynastic II, about 2700–2600; Fara in Early Dynastic IIIa, about 2600–2450; and especially Lagash in Early Dynastic IIIb, about 2450–2350), and more recently in the north (Mari, Tell Beydar) and Syria (Ebla, about 2500–2350). The two major archives, Lagash and Ebla, have been correctly contrasted as representing different socio-economic systems. In fact the economy of Lagash was managed through a system of temples, by a class of priestly administrators, and was mostly based on intensive agriculture. Ebla was managed by the palace, with an important role left to the representatives of kin groups and local communities, and it was based on mixed agricultural and pastoral production and on long-distance trade in metals and textiles. The temples at Ebla were devoted to cultic activities and ceremonial redistribution, but nothing comparable to the administrative redistribution of the Sumerian temples.

The competition among the various trade networks was an important factor. Apart from local exchange in city markets and fairs, long-distance trade was especially important in the cities located between the river valleys and their periphery from which most of the raw materials came: Susa trading with the Iranian plateau, Assur with the upper Tigris and Anatolia, Abarsal with the upper Euphrates, Mari and Ebla with Syria. Trade was carried on with caravans of donkeys by merchants dependent on and financed by central agencies. Relationships between merchants and palace or temple were of the “administrative” kind, with fixed prices and a system of yearly accounts, the value of the imported goods being balanced against the value of entrusted goods. But when outside the area of control of the central agency, the merchants were free to negotiate for profit, and could also use their money for loans at interest and loans with personal guarantees.

The competition in trade networks was a factor in the struggles between the most important city-states, especially during the final phase of the Early Dynastic III. In some cases the competition was settled by agreement and delimitation of the respective networks, as in the

treaty between Ebla and Abarsal, and in other cases by recourse to war as between Mari and Ebla. The rise of a new polity in central Mesopotamia, Akkad as heir of Kish, brought about a series of destructive wars. Some of them, under the first ruler of Akkad, Sargon (2335–2279), were intended to conquer the Sumerian south and gave origin to the first regional state that included the entire Lower Mesopotamian river region. After that, more wars were intended to acquire control of the trade network, and were directed against Susa (Iranian network), against Magan (Gulf network), against Mari and Ebla, both of them destroyed by Naram-Sin (2254–2218), the most important king of Akkad. The celebrative inscriptions and monuments of the Akkadian kings were the expression of a new idea of “heroic” kingship and of enlarged territorial control. The deification of Naram-Sin clearly contrasted with the old Sumerian ideology of the city leader as administrative representative of the god. Later legends and epic compositions, while reserving to Sargon the image of the pious and successful king, blamed Naram-Sin for hubris and disaster.

The Akkad dynasty did not survive for long, and the decline started after Naram-Sin. A major factor was the pressure of the outer nomads, both from the mountaineers (Gutians and Lullubi in the Zagros Mountains) and the steppe tribes (Martu, better known as Amorites). Archaeology also gives a picture of decline of the splendid civilizations of the Early Bronze age, in Anatolia, in the Levant, in Iran, and the Gulf area. We get the impression that the “second urbanization” reached its peak around 2300, and then started a fast decline. The massive intrusions of the Gutians (about 2200) and the Martu (about 2000) in middle and lower Mesopotamia were part of this scenario. In Egypt, the fragmented socio-political order in the first “Intermediate Period” was roughly contemporary. In the Levant, the so-called “Intermediate (Early/Middle Bronze) Period” showed an archaeological picture dominated by pastoralism and decline of urban life. As usual, the periphery was more decisively affected, while the main core of urbanization, in lower Mesopotamia, could better resist the troubles.

The last century of the third millennium, when the crisis was already well advanced in the peripheral areas, was dominated in the river valleys by the third dynasty of Ur (2112–2004), which represented the most efficient and stable state organization that Mesopotamia ever experienced, in earlier or later times. In a short period, under Ur-Nammu, Shulgi, Amar-Sin, and Shu-Sin, the Ur kings were able to revitalize Sumerian culture and religious ideology, and to extend the model of the temple-city to a wider region in which the former city-states were transformed into provinces. Instead of celebrative monuments, they left temple buildings, including the famous temple-towers or ziggurats, irrigation canals, and defensive walls. They unified prices and measures inside their kingdom, and provided it with a law-code and a land register. They produced a uniform and efficient bureaucratic record of the economy with the most detailed accounting procedures: crop estimates before harvest, estimates of growth for herds and flocks, balanced accounts for merchants, all based on administrative conventions and fixed rates. Cultic literature and royal hymns flourished during the “Neo-Sumerian renaissance,” while cities and countryside in the core of the empire flourished in peace and order.

However, the effect of external troubles could not be avoided forever. In spite of various expeditions carried on in Subartu (Upper Mesopotamia) and on the Zagros piedmont, and in spite of the “Martu-wall” erected from Tigris to Euphrates in order to stop, or at least to check, the infiltration of the West Semitic nomads, the Martu finally succeeded in penetrating in substantial numbers into Mesopotamia, possibly driven out of their

homeland in the Syrian steppe by an unfavorable climatic change. The Martu conquered and ravaged all the provinces, and Ur was left without revenues and protection. The capital city was finally besieged and conquered by the Elamites. The name of the last Ur king, Ibbi-Sin, remained in the handbooks of Babylonian omens as a symbol of disaster.

The Regional System, about 2000–1200 BCE

The cycle of the “Third Urbanization” was quite long (about 2000–1200 BCE) and included both the Middle and the Late Bronze periods in archaeological terminology as applied to the Levant and Anatolia; these periods followed each other with no obvious break. The geographic scene was wider than in the previous cycle, but while some areas remained flourishing during the entire period (Egypt from Middle to New Kingdom; the Aegean civilization from the first Minoan palaces to the Mycenaean period), others underwent an evident decline toward the mid-second millennium (the Indus Valley and Central Asian civilizations).

This decline – from Middle to Late Bronze – in amount and distribution of settlements (an obvious proxy for demographic estimates) also affected some areas in the Near East. In Syria and Upper Mesopotamia many large settlements in the semi-arid lands were abandoned, and population concentrated in the areas better provided with water from rainfall or rivers, so that a long-term drier trend can be suspected of being responsible for these general developments.

In contrast to the “Second Urbanization,” which had been clearly centered on Lower Mesopotamia as the area of origin of the basic cultural features and also as the seat of the major political powers, the “Third Urbanization” was much more multicentric and balanced in technological levels, in socio-political organization, and in military power. The role of Syria and Upper Mesopotamia, and eventually also of a mountain area like Anatolia, became paramount, marking the shift from a monocentric arrangement with a clear center/periphery contrast to a “regional system” of competing and interacting “peer” polities. The previous periphery became part of the inner system, mountains and steppe were fully integrated into the multidirectional exchange of resources, and peoples formerly considered barbarian became accepted partners.

The entire system, stretching from Egypt and the Aegean in the west to Elam and the Gulf in the east, coalesced into half a dozen regional states. Starting from a marked fragmentation at the very beginning of the period, a process of unification took place during the Middle Bronze period (about 2000–1600), to reach its final shape during the Late Bronze period (about 1600–1200). The regional states (the extent of which ranged from 200 000 to 500 000 km², or 77 220 to 193 050 square miles, roughly from the size of Great Britain to that of France) were: Egypt, the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia, the Hurrian state of Mitanni and later the Middle Assyrian kingdom in Upper Mesopotamia, Kassite Babylonia in Lower Mesopotamia, and Elam on the Iranian plateau.

The minor polities were annexed or integrated into the major powers in two ways: either direct annexation or indirect rule. In some areas, mostly in the river valleys, the former independent kingdoms were annexed as provinces of a conquering kingdom. This process was clear in Lower Mesopotamia and culminated in the annexation by Babylonia under Hammurabi (1792–1750) of the rival kingdoms of Eshnunna and Larsa,

which had previously annexed Isin and Uruk, and Mari. Also Assyria developed from a city-state (Assur) to a regional power, structured in a series of provinces and finally (fourteenth–thirteenth centuries) encompassed all of Upper Mesopotamia. In central Anatolia, a series of competing city-states (nineteenth–eighteenth centuries) was unified by the Old Hittite kingdom (seventeenth century). In other areas of Syria, Palestine, southern and western Anatolia, and the mountain lands of Armenia and the Zagros, the local polities, be they formal kingdoms in the urbanized area or chiefdoms in the hills, remained autonomous but not independent, becoming vassals of the major powers, namely of Egypt in Palestine and southern Syria, of Mitanni and later Hatti in northern Syria, and of Hatti also in western Anatolia. The extent of the local kingdoms varied from the small city-states in Palestine and on the Lebanese coast (about 2000km² or 772 square miles) to the larger ones in Syria and Anatolia (about 6000km² or 2316 square miles).

The leaders of the regional states conceived political relations as based on a hierarchy of “great kings” (the regional powers) and “small kings” (the local city states), the latter being “servants” of the former, their “masters.” In some cases, especially under Mitanni and Hittite rule, formal treaties were required in order to define clearly the duties of the two parties, basically a duty of loyalty from the vassal king toward his master, and of protection from the master toward the vassal. Treaties were also written to regulate specific problems of border, refugees, and compensation. Egypt did not engage in direct military control, only requiring an oath of loyalty from its vassals. Treaties between great kings were rare: treaties between Hatti and Kizzuwatna in southeastern Anatolia were formally reciprocal but masked an uneven relation. Only the treaty between the Hittite king Hattushili and the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II (about 1270) was really conceived in terms of equality.

Diplomatic relations inside and among the regional states were better documented when important archives were preserved. This was especially the case of the “Mari age” (seventeenth century) for Upper Mesopotamia, and of the “Amarna age” (fourteenth century) for the Levant. But the Hittite and Middle-Assyrian archives also provide useful information. The diplomatic language in letters and treaties of the time was Babylonian, and cuneiform writing was also used in most of the area for internal court and administrative records. Interpreters, messengers, and ambassadors carried out diplomatic missions, which were based on the exchange of messages, gifts, and women.

Letters had to express “brotherhood,” friendly attitudes, wishes of good health for the partner and information about the good health of the sender, and at a formal level the exchange of greetings was the most important message. Letters were normally accompanied by gifts, in order to express generosity and to please the other king. Both to give and to receive gifts increased prestige in the eyes of the kings and of the public. The ideology of gifts based on disinterest and on more valuable return gifts was formally expressed, but actually contradicted by miserable bargains and obvious greed.

Gifts were just the tip of the iceberg when compared to normal trade exchange. It has been calculated that the largest amount of copper sent as a gift from the king of Cyprus to the pharaoh was just 5% of the copper found in a single cargo shipwrecked off the coast of Turkey. And we know from the Old Assyrian trade documents that a 5% gift was requested by the Anatolian kings to allow the Assyrian merchants to practice their trade activities in the kingdom. Of course, gifts were personalized and had a social or political aim, while trade was carried on for profit, and in order to get resources not available locally. In both

cases, gold came from Egypt, copper from Cyprus, tin and lapis lazuli from faraway Afghanistan, while textiles mostly moved from the urbanized areas to the periphery.

Trade procedures were very well attested in the archives of the Old Assyrian merchants, found at Kültepe, ancient Kanish, in central Anatolia in the nineteenth century. These were the most detailed commercial archives of the entire ancient world – similar for their relevance to our understanding of trade to the documents of the Cairo *genizah* for the Levantine trade of medieval times. The Kanish archives were unique, but the amount and modalities of trade they revealed should have been quite similar in many other cases as well. The Assyrian merchants, organized in family firms, and moving with donkey caravans, exported textiles produced at Assur or Babylonia and tin from Iran, and got back silver to be reinvested in more textiles and tin, and their big profits largely covered taxes and risks.

Exchange of women was quite important at the political level. We know of two different systems, one centralized and the other reciprocal. The centralized movement of women was attested in the Mari archives and also in the Hittite kingdom. The great king gave his daughters in marriage to the small vassal kings in order to increase their loyalty and to ensure the local throne to a descendant of the great king. The Egyptian pharaoh used the centralized system in reverse, by requesting women from the Levantine vassals and from the Asiatic great kings, but never offered his daughters to them, just to increase his own prestige. The reciprocal system was widely practiced by the Asiatic kings, giving and receiving daughters to and from neighboring kings – a system known through the entire period but better documented from the Amarna and Hittite archives. In addition to wives, professionals including artists, scribes, doctors, and magicians also circulated among the royal palaces of the Late Bronze period, increasing cross-fertilization in the cultural sphere.

Inside the various kingdoms, the political ideology and the related socio-economic measures underwent a notable change from the Middle to the Late Bronze period. In the first phase, the most evident feature was paternalism, that is, a view of the king as a “good shepherd” for his people, attentive to the needs of his subjects, and interested in turn in winning the consent of a large free population outside of the limited palace circles. The paternalistic attitude was possibly related to the tribal origin of most royal dynasties in Mesopotamia and Syria, who were the descendants of the Amorite invaders at the turn of the millennium. In any case, the attitude materialized into law codes (the famous code of Hammurabi is just the largest and best preserved in a series) and into royal edicts regulating the remission of debts, and therefore resulting in the liberation of enslaved debtors and in the restitution of land to families.

Toward the middle of the second millennium, the attitude shifted toward a different model of kingship. Also in this case it is possible that the new ideology was linked with the prominence of hill peoples like the Kassites, Hurrians, and Hittites, but even more directly with technological changes. The introduction of the horse and the two-wheeled chariot as the most important war machines changed not only war tactics but also the socio-political relations. The new aristocracy of chariot warriors (the *maryannu*) could condition the behavior of kings, giving rise to a “heroic” attitude whereby the king’s prestige was based on his personal merits, rather than on justice and tradition, and this also led to more strained socio-economic relations. The royal edicts of debt remission were no longer proclaimed, debt slavery increased, landed properties concentrated in the hands of creditors, and the basic support for the king was no longer the free population but palace circles and the warrior aristocracy.

Socio-economic relations had already undergone an important change at the beginning of the second millennium, when workers under *corvée* (forced labor), used widely during the Early Bronze, were replaced by hired workers. Of course, the *corvée* system was based on the existence of substantial village communities, while hired manpower came from a large dispossessed peasantry. Yet during the Middle Bronze the idea that free families had the right to keep their ancestral lands, and individuals had the right to keep their free status, was still quite strong. The royal edicts reflected this idea. Land could be sold only to relatives, in order to remain in the family; sons had a right to inherit family land which brothers often farmed together. The increased practice of adoption undermined the traditional system, by accepting the alien buyer into the family in order to overcome the time-honored rules and traditions about not selling land outside the family. In the Late Bronze, as an effect of the new ideology, inheritance became something to be earned and won, property could be sold outside of the family, the hierarchy of brothers became ineffective, and the number of dispossessed people increased.

This growing socio-economic harshness, along with the long-term demographic and agricultural decline due to climatic worsening in the semi-arid belt and due to deterioration of the irrigation system in the river valleys, was the precondition for the final crisis of the Bronze Age. This culminated in an external shock, the invasion of the “Sea Peoples” at the beginning of the twelfth century. The invaders of Mediterranean origin destroyed the Aegean, Anatolian, and Levantine coastal cities, and reached the Egyptian Delta about 1180 BCE. A few years later the Phrygian invaders in central Anatolia, where the Hittite kingdom collapsed completely, reached the Upper Tigris area. A parallel movement took place on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where the Libyan tribes moved from the Sahara region to invade the Nile valley. All these movements, probably caused by a sharp climatic drying about 1200 BCE, drastically changed the political and urban system in the area west of the Euphrates. The former regional powers of Hatti and Egypt disappeared, city life and local royal dynasties remained in just a few cases on the Phoenician coast and in some Neo-Hittite kingdoms, and room was left for intruders of pastoral origin, the Arameans and related peoples. The entire socio-political order had to be built anew along different lines. East of the Euphrates, in contrast, the regional powers of Assyria, Babylonia, and Elam were unaffected by the western intruders, although they suffered from Aramean pressure, and were able to continue their life along traditional lines.

The Early Iron Age, about 1200–750 BCE

West of the Euphrates, the serious crisis of the twelfth century had to be surmounted by increasing the basis for productive activities and for political consensus. Various technological improvements were effective to this end. The collapse of the palace-centered scribal schools left freedom for the emergence of the alphabet from the Levantine belt. This writing system was a much more accessible tool that produced a kind of democratization of writing competence. The disruption of international trade in copper and tin made it necessary to have recourse to iron production, for which raw material was more widespread, and making iron was easier than bronze. Agricultural exploitation extended to landscapes that were marginal during the Late Bronze period, into the hills, thanks to wood clearing and

terrace building, and in the arid belt, thanks to deeper wells and wadi-bed water capturing systems. Irrigation, previously limited to the large alluvial plains, became a factor also in mountain valleys, because of the Iranian *qanat* (artificial underground water channels), and in the mountain/desert contact areas, because of the huge dams of Southern Arabia. Large desert spaces were opened to more intensive frequentation and use in the breeding of camels in the Iranian plateau and in Central Asia, and dromedaries in the Syro-Arabian desert.

Other changes took place in the area of socio-economic and socio-political relations. After the collapse of cities and palaces in the Levant and Anatolia and also in the Aegean area, the difference between small towns and fortified villages became less marked. The increased size of the pastoral tribes generated new political relations based on common descent, language, and religion—contrasting with the Bronze Age polities based on dependence on a royal palace.

Two kinds of polities characterized the western half of the Near East in the Iron Age: city-states, the direct heirs of the “small kingdoms” of the Late Bronze especially along the coast, and ethnic states especially in the arid belt of Arameans and related peoples and in the hilly areas of the Phrygians in Anatolia, and the Medes and related peoples in Iran. The new royal dynasties reserved a larger political role for collective bodies of elders and assemblies who had previously devoted their time to judicial matters. Royal ideology reverted to a “paternalistic” model stressing justice and protection of the kin-based social structures. Trade and crafts, previously centered on palaces, were left to the free enterprise of private firms or individuals. The independent states of the Levant became centers of a lively artistic and commercial life.

Breeding of camels and dromedaries and parallel improvement in nautical techniques opened enlarged horizons in the Mediterranean Sea, along the caravan roads from Syria to Central and Southern Arabia, and along the caravan roads from the Zagros to Central Asia. Trade routes were centered on the new polities, the city-states of Phoenicia and Greece, the ethnic states of Media and Arabia, and the routes avoided the traditional states of Egypt and Mesopotamia which kept their roles as major areas of demographic concentration and markets.

The remaining regional states underwent a phase of decline, but were able to reach a new equilibrium. In northern Mesopotamia, Assyria had to suffer from Aramean intrusions and was reduced to its original core in the twelfth and eleventh centuries. But it kept alive the idea that its theoretical borders were those once reached by the Middle Assyrian kings Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207) and Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076) – that is, from the Zagros Mountains to the Euphrates. The reconquest took up the tenth and ninth centuries, with Assyrian kings leading military campaigns inside Assyrian territory, a process culminating with Assurnasirpal II (883–859), who recovered the entire area to the old borders and celebrated his military success in annals of unprecedented length. Assurnasirpal was also important as builder of a new capital city, Kalkhu, Calah in the Bible, with a palace decorated with impressive sculptured slabs.

His successor Shalmaneser III (858–824) started a new policy of an “imperial” kind, by invading outer regions in Syria (the Aramean city-states), in southeastern Anatolia (the Neo-Hittite states), in Armenia (the new kingdom of Urartu), and in the Zagros Mountains (the rising ethnic states of Mannea in northwest Iran and Media). For a while it seemed that nobody could stop the growth of Assyria, neither the small city-states in the west, nor

the ethnic states in the north, nor the enfeebled Babylonian kingdom in the south. But the growth had been too fast, and competition arose inside Assyria itself. The major governors of the western provinces tried to acquire a position of virtual independence. Half a century of “feudal” fragmentation halted the imperial expansion, and the smaller states west of the Euphrates were able to keep their independence and restore equilibrium in the area.

The case of Babylonia was different. After the end of the Kassite dynasty, and after the brilliant reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125–1104), the kingdom suffered from Elamite and Assyrian forays, and from nomadic infiltration of the Arameans along the corridor between the Tigris and the Zagros, and later also of the Chaldeans along the lower Euphrates. But the main problem was the disruption of the irrigation system, bringing about a demographic and economic decline. The central power was unable to follow the Assyrian model and recover control of the whole area. Various dynasties of different origin, including Chaldeans, were in control of limited parts of Lower Mesopotamia. The Aramean and Chaldean intruders did not establish independent kingdoms as in Syria, but were not subjugated as in Assyria, and they became components of the political scene. Beyond Babylonia, Elam was strong enough to become a permanent actor in Mesopotamian affairs.

In a sense, the fate of Babylonia was similar to that of Egypt. Egypt was also unable either to reject or to absorb its Libyan invaders, and it fragmented into various dynasties mostly of Libyan origin. It was threatened by Nubia playing the same role as Elam in Babylonia, and it was no longer a factor on the international scene.

Empires, about 750–330 BCE

The situation changed in the mid-eighth century. The state of fragmentation and equilibrium was broken by the sudden expansion of the only major power left, namely Assyria, along the lines already indicated by Shalmaneser III, but on a wider scale and with more stable results. Tiglath-pileser III (744–727) defeated Urartu and its Neo-Hittite allies and conquered most of Syria and northern Palestine. He then penetrated deeply into Media, finally defeated the Chaldean tribes and proclaimed himself king of Babylon. The empire was organized in small provinces with no possibility for “feudal” fragmentation, and the celebrative apparatus of both texts and images proliferated.

The borders of the empire were extended farther under Shalmaneser V (726–722), Sargon II (721–705), and Sennacherib (704–681), but in different ways in various directions. In the West, the Levant was almost completely annexed except for a few minor and marginal vassal kingdoms like Judah. In Anatolia, the Neo-Hittite kingdoms were also annexed, while Sargon’s attempt to conquer the central plateau (Tabal, later Cappadocia) was short-lived. In the North, Urartu was defeated but remained independent, and Sargon’s attempt to extend the provincial system to Media was also brief. Babylonia, which recovered independence under Merodach-baladan, was the scene of important fights between Assyria, Elam, and the Chaldean chiefs, until Sennacherib opted for the final solution of total destruction that brought about serious reaction because of the religious and cultural prestige of the city. The Assyrian capital cities, the ephemeral Dur-Sharrukin, built by Sargon, and Nineveh, finally selected by Sennacherib as metropolis of the empire, were embellished by huge palaces and refined sculptures.

When Esarhaddon (680–669) became king, Assyria apparently had no rival, and the dream of a “universal empire” had come true; the effort of military expansion could end. The only surviving polities belonged to two distinct types. On the one hand three “great kingdoms” were still independent: Egypt, Elam, and Urartu. On the other hand, the tribal polities in the highlands, the Medes, and on the arid steppe, the Arabs, were unified in large confederations. The conquest of the great kingdoms was more prestigious, and they became the major targets for Esarhaddon and for his son Assurbanipal (668–631). Egypt was conquered, but it proved impossible for Assyria – with the logistics of the time – to annex a region so distant, large, and populous. Elam was conquered and its capital city Susa destroyed, but that allowed for the growth of a new power, Persia, in the same area.

As for the Medes and the Arabs, conquering them proved impossible because of logistic problems and because they lacked a political structure suited to being reused as provincial divisions of the empire. The tool of the loyalty oath was therefore applied as a sufficient act of subordination. The “ethnic” periphery of the empire remained basically independent, and was viewed as ideologically irrelevant from the point of view of an empire based on royal palaces, urban centers, formal administration, and an agricultural economy.

The huge royal palaces of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal in Nineveh, the expensive celebrative programs in architecture, visual arts, and inscriptions, and the enlarged royal court including large numbers of officials and officers, astrologers, and scribes, were supported by an economy that during the conquest phase was partly based on booty and tribute. But during the phase of Assyrian-imposed peace it could only depend on internal production. Wars, destructions, and deportations intended to break local resistance and to provide manpower opened large voids in the productive structure of the empire, and the attempt to colonize marginal lands proved ineffective. Establishment of the empire had been based on the physical and cultural destruction of the annexed areas; the maintenance of the empire proved a very hard task on such a depleted productive basis.

After Assurbanipal, 20 years of wars over succession to the throne were sufficient to bring the empire to its final collapse. The external shock came from two different directions. The Chaldeans of Babylonia and the Medes united their forces to defeat the empire, to destroy the capital cities, and to transform the center of the civilized world into a wasteland. The two conquering powers were quite different and exploited their victory in different ways.

The Medes, the heirs of the pastoral tribes of the Zagros that had been attacked and oppressed for centuries by the Assyrian empire, put all their enraged energy into the destruction of Assur and Nineveh. They themselves later disappeared from the political scene, reverting to a tribal organization and even abandoning the ceremonial centers built during the Assyrian period. They were happy enough to exert their hegemony on the peoples of the highlands.

The Chaldean kings Nabopolassar (625–605) and Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562) inherited the lowlands and the urbanized part of the empire, and basically inherited the Assyrian imperial strategy. They conquered the entire Levant, including Judah, and the sieges of Tyre and Jerusalem remained famous in later historiography. Then they defeated the Egyptians, deported the vanquished populations, and devoted most of their resources to rebuilding the capital city of Babylon as the most populous and splendid metropolis of the time. They also tried to restore lower Mesopotamian agriculture to high levels of productivity.

The mental map of the “universal empire,” however, was not so satisfactory in the Chaldean version as it had been in the Assyrian version. Besides Babylonia, the political system included a major state like Egypt (Saite dynasty), a growing state like Persia (heir of Elam), and the Anatolian kingdoms of Lydia, Tabal/Cappadocia, Armenia, and Khilakku/Cilicia. The ethnic confederacies of the Medes and the Northern Arabs were no longer an outer periphery, but they became an integral part of the system. Farther away, the Greek cities and the South Arabian caravan cities were also becoming more and more linked through trade and mercenary military service to the Near Eastern world. The system remained mostly stable during half a century, although the Medes included Armenia and Cappadocia under their hegemony, and the last king of Babylonia (Nabonidus, 555–539) conquered North Arabia at the very end of the period.

The age was significant from a cultural point of view. It is the core of the so-called “Axial Age,” with the rise of the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Zoroastrianism, the activity of the major Israelite prophets in the Babylonian exile, and the blooming of the Greek “archaic” civilization with the Ionian philosophers, poets, and artists, and the formative period of democratic ideologies. It is significant that the major innovations took place not in the area of the traditional states of Babylonia and Egypt, but rather in the new ethnic states and city-states, and that the most accelerated change took place in the century of disruption between the decline of the Assyrian empire starting about 630 and the consolidation of the Persian empire about 540.

The Persian empire of the Achaemenid dynasty was not the heir of the loose Median confederacy, but rather of the Elamite tradition. Persia was virtually congruent with Elam in its narrow definition, and the Persian administration at Persepolis used the Elamite language and script for its archives. The empire was founded by Cyrus II, called the Great, who defeated the Medes in 550, annexed most of the Iranian plateau, and then conquered Lydia in 547, and Babylonia in 539, while the date of annexation of Bactria and Sogdiana, the “outer Iran” of Central Asia, remains unclear. His successor Cambyses annexed Egypt in 525, approximating again the mental map of the “universal empire” to the inhabited world of his time.

The conquest of Babylonia marked the end of independent Mesopotamian history, at least from the political point of view, since the seat of power shifted to Iran. However, the material basis of civilization remained largely unchanged. No technical innovations mark the new period, and Babylonian irrigation agriculture bloomed spectacularly in the last part of the Chaldean period and the beginning of the Achaemenid period without any breaks. Also the cultural tradition remained unchanged during the Persian period. The Babylonian scribes continued to use their own script and language, and the Babylonian deities were still worshiped in the same temples. Astrologers continued to record the position of the stars and the historical events according to their time-honored tradition, and Akkadian literary texts, omen collections, and lexicographical lists were still copied in the schools as before.

The Persian empire was in a sense a synthesis of different traditions, among which the Babylonian tradition was predominant. The empire inherited from Assyria the very idea of empire, and the basic features of the celebrative apparatus. It inherited from Elam the federal system of governance that had been typical of the Iranian peoples for a long time. And it inherited from Media important features of court life, and probably the Zoroastrian religion. The empire included the Babylonian temple-cities and the Phoenician city-states as different but equally acceptable centers for running the economy. At a symbolic level, it is significant

that the celebrative inscription of Darius I (521–486) was written in three different languages, Babylonian, Elamite, and the new Persian script, and that the seat of the court shifted seasonally between the highland cities of Ecbatana, modern Hamadan, and Persepolis and the lowlands cities of Susa and Babylon, as a formal acknowledgment of the role that the four regions of Elam, Babylonia, Media, and Persia played in the building of the empire.

Under Darius I the empire extended farther, to include the Indus Valley in the east, and Ionia in the west, but it left the Arabs and the Scythians alone. The Oriental empire had finally annexed the entire Levantine zone. Oriental despotism had prevailed over the autonomous city-states and the ethnic polities. In the extreme western periphery, in Greece, a few small city-states were still left, however. The expeditions by Darius (490) and Xerxes (480) tried to eliminate that minor anomaly and to absorb the distant and almost irrelevant appendix of the Near Eastern world. But things went differently from what the Persians planned, and the struggle between the universal empire and the last city-states not only ended in the unpredictable rebuff of the Persians, but also generated in Greek, and later European, minds the opposition between East and West, between despotism and democracy, slavery and freedom, magic and rationality, and redistribution and enterprise, which was to mark world history for many millennia to come.

FURTHER READING

The standard historical treatment of the Ancient Near East is Edwards, Gadd, and Hammond (1971–92). A recent synthesis of the subject can be found in Kuhrt (1995). On Mesopotamia proper, the best introduction remains Oppenheim (1977). For a thematic introduction, see Sasson (1995). For more technical discussions, see Ebeling et al. (1928–). For historical geography and maps, see Röllig (1977–). More synthetic is Roaf (1990). A good collection of sources is Pritchard (1975).

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