

Religious Control Mechanisms in Ancient Mesopotamia (2350 B.C. to 1600 B.C.)

Religion, theology, and worship have played an increasingly major role in society as civilizations grow more complex. Many know of the role of religious material in modern times as acting as a guide for the way in which people should behave. Many are also aware of the ways in which religion has been affected by a political agenda and used by certain organizations in the past couple of millennia. For instance, the way in which the Church has influenced the general populations in the past by using their religious authority in addition to manipulating religious texts. However, the idea of using religion as a control mechanism to influence the general population can be traced back much further than the past couple of millennia. Specifically, in the early third millennium B.C. in the ancient near east many developments were made in the use of religion by rulers of those times. Starting in the Akkadian empire (circa 2350 B.C.) and stretching to the Old Babylonian empire (circa 1600 B.C.), the rulers of Mesopotamia became increasingly adept at using religion to influence the general population, becoming more controlling and effective.

To fully grasp the increasing use of religion by rulers, the fundamental relationship between Mesopotamian kings and their religions must first be considered. Mesopotamian gods



Figure 1: Cuneiform 'Dingir' symbol (Richards)

and goddesses were representations of natural phenomena such as the night, rain, the sun as well as human phenomena such as kingship, perception, and fertility. These divine beings were integrated into many civilizations overtime and although their names changed their essence did not. Throughout the

Mesopotamian mythologies the concept of divinity is never clearly defined. What exactly makes something or someone divine? Only through the graphic, ideological representation of the divine can some definition be interpreted. The star or *dingir* (Figure 1) used to signify gods represents superiority, superiority over everything else including humans. Gods were beings that were 'grandiose, inaccessible, dominating, and to be feared,' incomparable to the normal citizen (Bottéro 57-59). People submitted to the gods' will and followed their instructions. As a result, if someone were to claim connection to these superior deities, then they themselves would be one step closer to the gods and thereby partake in the authority of the gods.

Although many Kings in the Early dynastic period of Mesopotamia claimed connection to the gods, it was Sargon of Akkad that first used his authority and power to build an entire empire known as the Akkadian empire. Sargon was likely just a commoner to begin with, but he rose to power in the city of Kish and eventually conquered the majority of Southern Mesopotamia and parts of Northern Mesopotamia. Sargon's dominance in the region was undoubtedly due to strategic skill and favorable conditions, but it is hard to imagine that these were the only factors that allowed him to dominate all the other city states that had been fighting for control of the region long before Sargon had been born. The most probable answer is religion. During his rise to power, Sargon claimed that he was favored by the goddess Ishtar (Inanna in Sumerian), and many texts of the time support his claim. Although many of the other Kings did something similar, none of them matched the extent to which Sargon was connected to the gods. In the *Legend of Sargon* translated by E.A. Speiser, Sargon is first introduced as the

son of a 'changeling' who, after his conception, cast him into the river. The story then details how Sargon was found and raised by a 'drawer of water'. However, the most important part of the story is what follows. It begins by saying "Ishtar granted me (her) love," the first indication that Sargon has some connection to the gods" (Pritchard 82). In a later part, the legend describes how Sargon was a cupbearer to the king Ur-Zababa. During his work, Sargon tells the Ur-Zababa of a dream he has where he is the goddess Ishtar covers him in blood. The king interprets this dream as Sargon's intention to kill him and orders the chief smith to ambush and kill Sargon. However, as Sargon approaches the place of ambush, Ishtar confronts him and says, 'no man with holy blood may go therein'. Listening to the goddess's advice, Sargon leaves only to return to the palace after 5 to 10 days. Upon seeing Sargon alive, the King 'trembles with fear in his own dwelling'. When considered as a whole, the meaning of the story becomes clear: Ishtar has covered Sargon with her own 'divine' blood to save him from death (Foster 4). This legend describes the origin of Sargon's connection to the gods with him being chosen by the goddess Ishtar who is responsible for all his victories. It is these types of texts that are likely what allowed Sargon to gain such a massive following and standing army in comparison to the other kings of the time.

In addition to the basic texts connecting Sargon to Ishtar, Sargon sought to increase the connection further and simultaneously connect himself more with the Sumerian version of Ishtar. In order to do so, he constructed numerous temples to Ishtar/Inanna and placed his own daughter in the position of the high priestess of Inanna in one such temple and gave her the

Sumerian name Enheduanna. In her position she created many hymns to the goddess, which made it seem as though Sargon had a symbiotic relationship with the Goddess. She granted him victory in battle and he gave her offerings and hymns of praise. By creating this connection to Ishtar and Inanna, Sargon gained the submission of the Sumerian city states just like he gained the following of his own Akkadian people. Given Sargon's clear strength and numerous claims of his

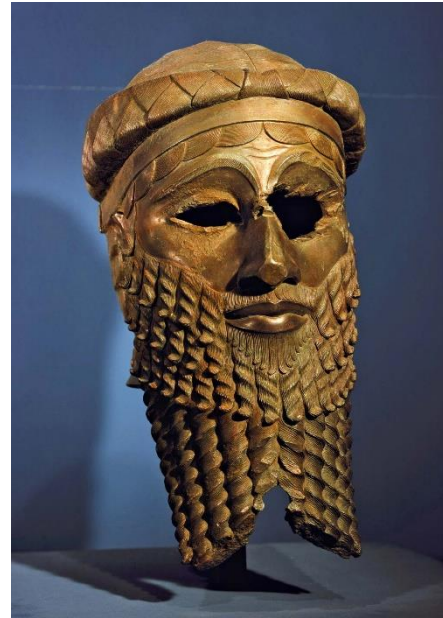


Figure 2: Bronze Head of Sargon (Dalley)

connection to the gods, even the Sumerians had to recognize his authority. By claiming connection to Ishtar, Sargon placed himself in a position superior to that of the normal man, and this was reflected in the artistic depictions of him. Sargon's beard and brimmed cap, as shown in Figure 2, are unique in comparison to the depictions of other people in Akkadian art. By emphasizing the difference between the common people and himself, depictions of Sargon act as a constant reminder to the people that Sargon is not common, but rather one chosen by God.

Although Sargon was evidently a master tactician at using religion to promote his political standing, his methods were surpassed by his own grandson, Naram-Sin. Like his grandfather, Naram-Sin credited his success to the goddess Ishtar as is evident from an inscription that read "Naram-Sin the mighty, king of the Agade, when the four quarters of the

earth attacked him together, through the love Ishtar bore him was victorious in nine battles in a single year and captures the kings whom they had raised against him” (Foster 13). Additionally, expanding upon Sargon’s work, Naram-Sin built numerous temples including but not limited to those in Nineveh, Zabla, Adab, Babylon, and Sin, where he too placed his daughter as the high priestess of Inanna to maintain control over the Sumerians. However, Naram-Sin took his godly connection one step further by claiming to be one of the gods himself. In the same inscription as before, Naram-sin’s deification is written: “Because he defended their city in crisis, the people of his city asked him that he be the god of their city Agade ... and they built his temple in Agade.” After joining the ranks of the gods, records of Naram-Sin’s conquests also grew to godly proportions. He faced massive casualties of up to 360,000 soldiers and his enemies where either ‘neither flesh nor blood’ or legendary beings such as Tiamat the mother of the gods (Foster 14). The supposed nature of his conquests was compounded by the fact that he named himself ‘King of the four quarters of the universe,’ and equally inflated claim considering he was still combatting the Gutti and Marhashi as well as facing rebellions in Kish and Uruk.

In addition to fantastical accounts of his battles, depictions of Naram-Sin also increased in their god-likeness with “elements of attire, hairstyle, attributes, and stances” adopted from the gods (Crawford 219). One of the best examples of this is the stele shown in Figure 1,

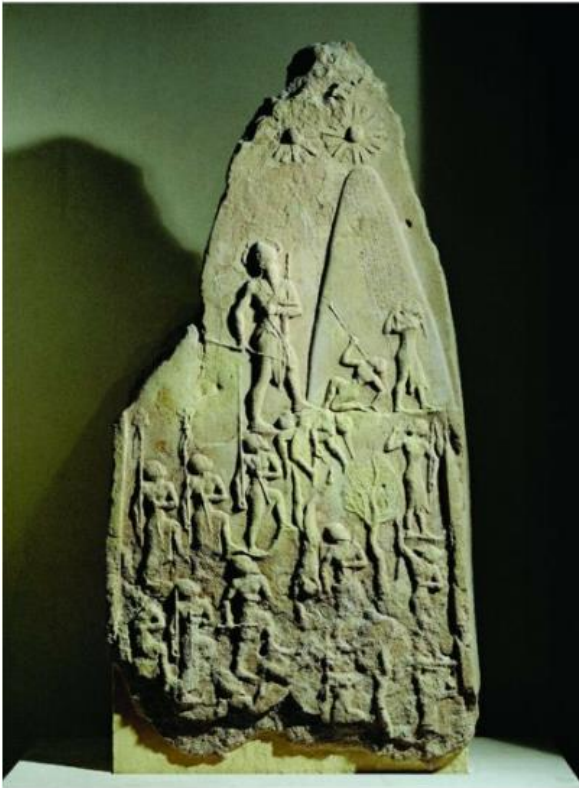


Figure 3: Victory Stele of Naram-Sin (Van De Mierop 74)

featuring Naram-Sin and his army defeating the Lullubi of the Zagros mountains. First of all, Naram-Sin is wearing a bull-horned helmet, the symbol of divinity in Sumerian and Akkadian artworks. In addition to the symbols of royalty that Naram-Sin holds (bow, arrow, and battle axe), he is also much larger than his soldiers and his gaze is directed towards the 2 stars representative of one of the Akkadian gods (Van De Mierop 101). In a sense, this implies that Naram-Sin is considered to be at the gods level as he is both superior to normal people and is capable of

interacting with other gods, something his grandfather Sargon was never capable of.

Ultimately, Naram-Sin ratified his position as a god by denoting his name with a star, the ideogram for *dingir* or god.

Even after the fall of the Akkadian empire, the concept of deification remained as demonstrated by the rulers of the Ur III kingdom. As Naram-Sin did, the Ur III king Shulgi denoted his name with the *dingir* ideogram and claimed the title of ‘King of the four quarters of

the universe'. Shulgi also repaired the religious architecture from his Akkadian predecessors and constructed many new temples and Ziggurats strengthening his connection to the divine. In the cases of both Naram-Sin and Shulgi, their deification allowed them to amass greater authority over the general population. Naram-Sin evidently used his authority to raise a large army to campaign against various nations. Deification allowed Naram-Sin to raise an even larger army, supposedly allowing him to expand his empire to places that Sargon never had such as Lebanon or Oman (Foster 10). However, Shulgi took a different approach. Rather than expanding his territory further, Shulgi used his authority to administer heavy bureaucratic reforms. In order to create a more hyper-centralized kingdom, he placed his own family in positions of power across and subjugated temples so that they were supervised by the royal family. Given the respect that the general population had for the temples, it would have likely been impossible for Shulgi to maintain such tight control over the temples unless he was accepted as a god by those very temples. In this manner, Shulgi used his deification to control the religious material spread among the population, perhaps disseminating even more text of his godly status. To an extent, this can be considered even more manipulative of the population than Naram-Sin, as it makes it so that no one can produce religious material countering the deity status of Ur III rulers.

Nevertheless, the religious control mechanism of deification was soon surpassed by the king of the Old Babylonian Empire, Hammurabi. In the old Babylonian period, a critical piece of religious literature known as the Enuma Eliš: The epic of creation came to be known throughout

the empire. At first glance, the content of Enuma Eliš seems relatively straightforward.

However, upon further inspection various concealed messages can be seen throughout the epic undoubtedly influencing the perspectives of those who read it. In fact, some scholars even go so far as to call the work a piece of propaganda directed at the population by Hammurabi himself. In order to fully understand the messages from the epic, one must first understand the general structure and story. Enuma Eliš was first discovered in the library of Assurbanipal as 7 clay tablets, each containing approximately 115 to 170 lines. The version of the story as translated by W.G.Lambert begins with the existence of two beings of 'water', Apsu and Tiamat, who come together to create the first gods, Lahmu and Lahamu, and soon after created another pair Ansar and Kisar. Ansar and Kisar created two new gods, Anu and Nudimmud (often known as Ea). The 'clamour' of these new gods disturbed both Tiamat and Apsu, yet Tiamat did not want to harm her children. Apsu, on the other hand, wished to destroy the 'lawless way of life' of the new gods. Upon hearing of Apsu's plan, Ea uses an incantation to put Apsu to sleep, after which he kills Apsu and proceeds to live in Apsu's remains. Of the remains of Apsu, Ea, and Ea's wife Damkina, the god Marduk is born. Marduk immensely strong and is described as superior in comparison to the other gods. After these events the gods accuse Tiamat of not loving them, who in response produces a horde of other beings, one of which being Qingu, whom she makes her spouse. To combat Tiamat, Ansar first sends the god An, who is too weak to defeat her. He then sends Ea, who was too scared to fight her. As a result, Marduk steps forwards and states that if he defeats Tiamat then the other gods should place him in control such that his command can be neither 'nullified nor altered'. The gods agree to this offer and

make Marduk king of the whole universe, once again saying that 'his destiny is superior to that of all gods'. In return, Marduk faces Tiamat and violently kills her: piercing her belly, tearing her open, slitting her inwards, and then smashing her skull. With half of Tiamat's body Marduk creates the sky and the stars, with her foam he creates clouds, from her eyes he creates the Tigris and Euphrates, and from the other half of her body he finally creates the earth. Praised by the other gods, Marduk decides to be clever and create mankind. To do so, he and Ea use the blood of Qingu to form mankind and 'impose the service of the gods on them'. After these monumental events, fifty of Marduk's names are listed, taking up the remainder of the seven tablets.

When taken in isolation, the epic has little relevance, but when considered in parallel with the actions of Hamurabbi and the Babylonian empire it makes far more sense. To begin with, it is important to notice that all of the gods that played a major role in the epic were male, which is interesting considering that Babylonian society was patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal. The epic may have played some role in motivating men to be more dominant and women to be more subservient in Babylonian society. Additionally, when Hammurabbi came to power he claimed Marduk as the patron god of Babylon. In the epic, when Marduk is first born he is labeled as superior to the other gods and is eventually placed in a position in which he is formally superior to all the gods. This is perhaps saying that Babylon is superior to the other city-states who claim other gods as their patron. Marduk then proceeded to violently defeat Tiamat and use her remains to construct the world in his vision. The sheer violence

demonstrated in the epic as well as the superiority of Marduk (and by extension Babylon) was likely an influencing factor in the Babylonians drive to subjugate other nations and expand their empire. Furthermore, the concept of splitting up the enemy and using the remains to construct a world or empire is incredibly similar to the Babylonian concept of mass deportation, where citizens of a captured land are redistributed throughout the empire to farm and build. After defeating Tiamat, Marduk takes his place as king of the gods a never seen before position in the hierarchy of the gods. For the devout citizens of Babylon and other cities, the formalization of this position of 'King' is a type of validation of Hammurabi's position as King. Along those lines, the commands of the King of mankind could also not be 'nullified nor altered' by other men, granting him a position of absolute authority. Lastly, when Marduk and Ea create mankind they say that they are imposing the service of the gods on them. In other words, mankind's only purpose is to serve the gods and the gods' will. This phrase in Tablet 6 of Enuma Eliš is what amalgamates the previous ideas that are planted in the subconscious of the readers. The gods' will is most accurately portrayed by the gods' actions. Therefore, the readers of Enuma Eliš may seek to imitate the gods, unconsciously following the propaganda in the epic, perfectly hiding the true intentions of the text behind the guise of religion.

Now that the propaganda contained in the Enuma Eliš has been discussed it raises the question: how did the common people read this text? Archeological sites in southern and central Babylonia have revealed tablets used in scribal schools known as *edubba*. These tablets show evidence of a very developed scribal school system where many many students received a

basic training in vocabulary and grammar and some students passed on to receive an advanced training in copying text such as sections of Enuma Elish (a tablet for this purpose can be seen in Figure 2), while others received specialized training in certain fields (Spada). With the advancement of the scribal school system, more citizens of Babylonia became literate and were capable of reading and spreading the content of the Enuma Elish. The epic was also recited yearly at the Babylonian New Year's festival, which helped spread the ideas in the text to those who were not literate (Westermann).

Although the Babylonian Kings did not deify themselves as Naram-Sin or Shulgi did. The way in which they spread the propaganda of the Enuma Elish through the scribal system and yearly recitations is arguably more manipulative than deification. While deification gives a King greater authority and more control over the general population, the Enuma Elish acts as a message for the gods directly, which is likely more influential than the highly religious Mesopotamian population. Moreover, as discussed before, the parallel between the King of Gods and the King of Mankind provides the King with an authority close to that of a deity, making the use of Enuma Elish to influence the population more manipulative and superior to deification. The strength of the religious control mechanisms instituted by the Babylonian kings in comparison to that of Sargon, Naram-Sin, or Shulgi is supported by relatively clear historical events. Firstly, the expansion of the Babylonian empire was at the level of the Akkadian empire, yet the majority of this expansion was completed in a mere 5 years. This utter dominance of Mesopotamia could only have been accomplished if the Babylonians had a drive to conquer

that was greater than that of the Akkadians. The greater authority of the Babylonian Kings and the 'violence against enemies' propaganda of the Enuma Eliš would have undoubtedly played a role in this. Another instance of the strength of the Babylonian religious mechanisms can be seen by the society-altering changes that Hammurabi and his successors implemented. The most famous example of this is Hammurabi's law codes. Hammurabi's code is a series of laws, which describe how people should be treated for certain 'criminal' acts based on the severity of the act as well as the status of the criminal and victim. The implementation of Hammurabi's sense of justice through the law codes is altering the fundamental structure of society, creating punishments and penalties for Babylonian residents. Although there is some discussion that the law codes were not really utilized by the executive authorities of the time, one thing that is evident is the clear splitting of classes into 3 categories: awilum (freeman), mushkenum (dependent), and wardum (slave). Records of criminal cases show the difference in treatment of these classes, a sentiment from Hammurabi's Law code (Van De Mieroop 121). Nevertheless, Hammurabi implemented these radical changes, which was one again more likely aided by his greater authority and ideas from the Enuma Eliš such as the subjugation and use of slaves (wardum) in the empire. Overall, it can be seen how Mesopotamian rulers were very clever with their use of religion to control the population. Moreover, it is clear that the methods used by the later rulers were even more manipulative than the previous rulers, which becomes evident when looking at the way in which the general population followed the kings' orders without question, whether it was to attack other nations, deport foreign people, or to completely change the system of justice in the empire.

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