

Assignment 2

Warfare in Early Syrio-Mesopotamia

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Introduction: The following essay will discuss warfare in Syrio-Mesopotamia from the mid-4th millennium until the mid-3rd millennium, approximately 3500-2500. Selection of primary datasets is informed, in part, by an adherence to the modified middle chronology dating system utilized by CDLI:

Uruk V	3500-3350 BC
Uruk IV	3350-3200 BC
Uruk III	3200-3000 BC
Proto-Elamite	3100-2900 BC
Early Dynastic I-II	2900-2700 BC
Early Dynastic IIIa	2700-2500 BC
Early Dynastic IIIb	2500-2340 BC

According to some scholars, militarization came hand in hand with the rise of early urbanism, its accompanying social stratification, complex administration, militant kings – and its career soldiers.¹ The Anthropological/Archaeology definition of a state seems to hinge on the ability of a centralized government (of sorts) to enforce a given legal order over a population in a given territory; despite the need for caveats, it may be understood that urbanism and state formation generally go together, often emerging in close correlation.² Following Hansen’s definition, a city-state is defined as an urban center possessing a centralized government, a hinterland (generally) no greater than a day’s walk, a population generally in four-digits (or five-digits for larger city-

¹ Hamblin 2007, 36.

² Hansen 2000, 13-14. An emphasis on the urban-state does not preclude the existence of the nomadic-state: for example, Genghis Khan’s Mongol empire included a centralized government capable of imposing legal order. Despite being a nomadic people without a settled population, the Mongol empire may constitute an early state. Hansen 2000, p. 16 contrasts territorial versus non-territorial states.

states) and, importantly, an army and often fortifications.³ It is a micro-state consisting of one urban center. Accordingly (or not), Hansen goes on to list Uruk, Ur and Lagash as the “oldest known” city-states.⁴ In some cases, it may also be possible to identify territorial states⁵ in Pre-Sargonic Mesopotamia (see **2.0** below).

The following discussion will attempt to qualify these assertions, and additionally, to answer the following questions: What was the state of military development in early Mesopotamian and Syria? Does archaeological and textual evidence demonstrate that these early urban centers had sufficient military capabilities to meet the definition of a city-state?

1.0 Uruk Glyptic

Evidence for warfare in the Uruk period is every bit as tempting as it is fleeting and ephemeral. For decades, Scholars have examined and re-examined this evidence and no consensus is in sight. While writing certainly existed during the Uruk period, the fact that historical documents do not yet appear means that art historians are forced to conjecture about contemporary glyptic evidence. No Uruk era evidence has received greater scrutiny than that depicting the figure known variously as the “Priest-king,” the “En” or simply “the man in the net-skirt.” This figure is known from some 30 stone artifacts and is recognizable for his beard, “round headdress” and “long skirt.”⁶ Due to certain stylistic tendencies in the way the figure is depicted, for example, his

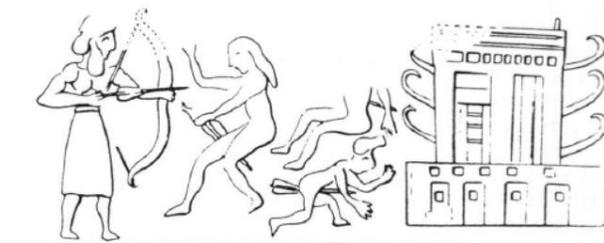
³ Hansen 2000, 17-18.

⁴ Hansen 2000, 18-20.

⁵ Hansen 2000, 18: A territorial state is defined as a state in possession of a large territory dotted with urban centers. Hansen prefers the term “country-state” or “macro-state.”

⁶ Schmandt-Besserat 1993 pg. 201.

large size in comparison to other figures, he is often understood as being the Urukian ruler.⁷ For the sake of discussion, the term “ruler” will be utilized below.



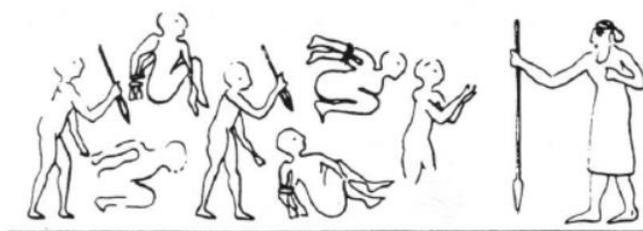
1a. Susa (Sb 2125/Amiet 659). Source: Potts 1999, p. 68/1



1b. Susa (AO 29389). Source: Potts 1999, p. 68/2



1c: Choga Mish (Amiet fig. 22.1). Source: Potts 1999, p. 68/4



1d: Uruk (Amiet 661). Source: Schmandt-Besserat 1993, fig. 14

⁷ For a recent and controversial claim that the man in the net-skirt represents a divine figure, see Marchesi, G./Marchetti, N. 2011 p. 186-196. This claim is doubtful in the view of the present writer.

Figures **1a-1d** above are often presented as evidence that the Urukian ruler was a figure of war. Figures **1a** and **1b** are impressions from seals found in Susa, both represent the ruler with a bow in the presence of enemies or captives; in both images a structure is present. In **1a**, the notion that this structure (perhaps palace or temple) is in flames seems to fit well as the ruler appears to be piercing his enemies (note long hairstyle) with arrows.⁸ Convincingly, this is a scene depicting a siege.⁹ If the “flames” are instead taken to depict some sort of cultic feature (i.e. horns), the interpretation of a siege could still hold. The image in **1b** differs in some details but could also depict a siege, given its compositional similarity to **1a**. The image in **1c** is found on a seal impression from Choga Mish and may depict the Urukian ruler holding two captives by a rope. Problematically, the head of the “priest-king” is missing but he is larger than the other figures in the scene and holds a mace in his right hand.¹⁰ For Schmandt-Besserat, the fact that three cylinder seal images which (arguably) depict Urukian aggression come from contexts outside of Mesopotamia is not coincidental: “this suggests that the seals featuring the Mesopotamian En did not make their way to Susa or Choga Mish by peaceful trade.”¹¹

Figure 1d, a scene from a seal found in Uruk, is sometimes said to also depict a battlefield. Against this interpretation, Schmandt-Besserat points out that the bound figures have shaven heads and are therefore likely to depict local Sumerians. She interprets the scene as depicting bound captives being put to death before the Urukian ruler, who holds a downward pointing spear.¹²

⁸ Hamblin 2006, p. 38. The understanding that the long hairstyle marks foreign enemies follows Schmandt-Besserat 1993, p. 214.

⁹ Variant interpretations are, of course, possible. Liverani 2014 p. 75 describes the scene in 1a as one where the ruler is defending the temple.

¹⁰ Potts 1999, 67; Hamblin 2006, 38, Schmandt-Besserat 1993, 214.

¹¹ Schmandt-Besserat 1993, 214.

¹² Schmandt-Besserat 1993, 215.

1.1 Militarism and The Uruk Expansion

The limits of the evidence discussed so far are apparent when the larger questions, the dynamics of the Uruk expansion into Syria, Northern Mesopotamia and Iran are considered. While the glyptic evidence seems to suggest that the Urukeans were familiar with weapons of war and raids on foreign temples and/or the taking of prisoners (or this is at least one interpretation), there is meager evidence to suggest that the commercial endeavors of Urukean ‘colonialists’ were forceful or assisted by any military activity. Conversely, the evidence that the expansion was non-military in nature is, in like manner, meager. Tell Habuba Kabira, a settlement showing signs of Sumerian occupation, appears to have had defensive three meter thick mud-brick walls and reinforced gates.¹³ Other fortified settlements are associated with the Uruk expansion, such as the walled “fort” at Tell Mashnaqa.¹⁴ With walls over three feet thick, even if one were to suppose that this precaution was not taken on account of hostile Syrian urban centers and (hypothetically) their soldiers, one would have to instead posit the threat of raids from a nomadic group or non-territorial state. As will be discussed below, in the centuries following the Uruk period, military raids with aim of acquiring plunder were frequently initiated by both urban and nomadic groups alike and constitute a form of warfare.

2.0 ED Mesopotamia: Textual and Archaeological

¹³ Meyers 1997, 446; Hamblin 2006, 41.

¹⁴ Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 200.

The topic of warfare in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia has recently been greatly supplemented by Steinkeller's 2013 publication of the "Prisoner Plaque," which he believes to have come from Kiš (or one of its satellites). The object was sold on the antiquities market and is currently in the possession of an anonymous private owner, hence it will be identified and referred to by its CDLI number.



2a. CDLI P453401, obverse.



2b. CDLI P453401, reverse.



2c. Frieze from Palace A, Kiš. Source: Steinkeller 2013, fig. 5.

This unique alabaster object features a carved relief on the obverse and a lengthy inscription on the reverse. Termed by the author "the oldest historical inscription from Mesopotamia on record,"¹⁵ it is this inscription that may finally mark the end of the military ambiguity. On the basis of the script, the inscription on the reverse of plaque can be dated to the ED II period (2750-2600), although, given the transitional form of some signs, Steinkeller also considers a dating to the ED I period (2900-2750) as a possibility.¹⁶

¹⁵ Steinkeller 2013, 131.

¹⁶ Steinkeller 2013, 132.

- Synopsis of Fig. **2a, 2c**: The observe of the plaque contains two male figures carrying bows and an as yet unidentified object (possibly, a throwing stick). It's likely that a third figure would have also been featured, but approximately 1/3 of the plaque is missing. Steinkeller notes that there is nothing to explicitly identify them as soldiers, yet he compares their clothing with that worn by a soldier in a shell inlay frieze found in Palace A, Kiš (fig. **2c**): a soldier pushes a bound captive forward and holds a sickle sword.¹⁷ On these grounds, he suggests that fig. **2a** also depicts military figures.¹⁸
- Synopsis of Fig. **2b**: The inscription on the reverse of the plaque, possibly the oldest historical inscription from Mesopotamia, is in fact a list of prisoners of war who were acquired as booty by the state of Kiš. Twenty-five toponyms are extent in the inscription and, for each locality, between 50 and 6,300 prisoners are recorded; 28,970 in total are accounted for on the extent inscription, although Steinkeller suggests that a figure closer to 36,000 would probably have been reached if the plaque was unbroken.¹⁹ Of the twenty-five toponyms, only three can be localized: Šubur - the old name for the territory that would become Assyria; Uri/Wari(um), a designation for the Diyala region; and Erud, somewhere in the trans-Tirigidian region.

This document provides, for the first time, direct evidence to substantiate scholarly reconstructions of a powerful Kišite kingdom in the early third millennium; previously, late and indirect evidence such as the Sumerian King List and emergence of the “king of Kiš” royal title

¹⁷ The shell inlay frieze has elsewhere been discussed as depicting a “war scene”; see, for example, Postgate 1992, 29.

¹⁸ Steinkeller 2013, 131, 137, 142.

¹⁹ Steinkeller 2013, 142.

among Mesopotamian kings *etc.* had been the primary evidence.²⁰ For Steinkeller, the accumulated evidence now indicates a hegemonic and militaristic Kišite state, which, in the ED II period, expanded its territory across upper Mesopotamia and also the most northern section of southern Babylonia in addition to parts of the Diyala region.²¹ For this reason, he feels that Kiš should be classified as a territorial state (a state possessing a large territory dotted with urban centers) rather than a city-state.

This claim is perhaps less controversial when the (roughly contemporary) state of Lagash is considered, a state which included seventeen provincial capitals and eight smaller centers.²² And yet, the claim that with ED II Kiš we already have a territorial state is problematic (although not necessarily wrong). What does it mean a state ‘possesses’ urban centers outside of its capital city? The prisoner plaque inscription seems to prove that Kiš was able to militarily subdue Northern Mesopotamia and extract booty, although this does not demonstrate whether this military action was enacted as a means of territorial expansion or merely as a means of acquiring booty. As the discussion below will indicate, the latter seems to have been the prime motivation throughout much of the ED period.

²⁰ Postgate 1992, 29; Hamblin 2006, 46.

²¹ Steinkeller 2013, 148.

²² Vanstiphout 1970, 21. Hence, Lagash would seem to have been more of a territorial (“marco”) state, rather than a city (“mirco”) state, as Hansen called it (Hansen 2000, 20).



3a. Stele of Vultures Detail. Source: RLA 11, 313



3b. Chariots from a seal impression, ED Kiš. Source: Miglus 2008, p. 241



3c. Shell Inlay, ED Mari (AFC 159).

In Southern Mesopotamia, some of the most solid historical evidence for Early Dynastic warfare comes from ED III Lagash.²³ Visual and inscriptional evidence dating from the reign of Ur-Nanše and his successors document their ongoing military feud with the neighboring Sumerian

²³ Mention should be made of the kings of Uruk, Enmerker, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh, who were roughly contemporary with ED II Kiš and whose epic stories are intriguing for their accounting of early warfare. However, these stories are known only from sources written down considerably later, and so they are not discussed here.

city of Umma. A Royal Inscription of Eannatum²⁴ relates an episode wherein the king, during a battle against the king of Umma, was pierced by an arrow fired by the enemy – as noted by Hamblin,²⁵ this is the first definite indication that bows were actually used in warfare instead of simple hunting (earlier glyptic evidence is ambiguous on this question).

Notable in the iconography of Mesopotamia and Syria in this period is the development of a sort of ‘chariot warfare’ (see **3a, 3b, 3c**). The classic Sumerian version was four-wheeled chariot which was more of a war cart. It seems to have been used originally to transport the king into, and out of, battle. By the time it had been developed for more direct military use, approximately 2700 BC, two wheeled versions had also appeared.²⁶ The four wheeled carts were pulled by equids with a driver in the front and a warrior in the back who wielded axe and javelin and who could draw additional ammo from a mounted javelin quiver box. Given the size and weight of the war carts, and the pulling power of the donkey-ones, it has been estimated that they could travel at about 10-12 MPH;²⁷ while not overly fast, it must have provided enough advantage over the enemy to justify the continued use of this military tactic.

Despite the fact that some evidence exists for the formation of proto-imperial or territorial states in ED Mesopotamia, for most of the period it should be stressed that military action seemed to have been initiated with more limited objectives in mind. According to textual evidence, primarily the royal inscriptions, the ED king seems to have had two main goals in mind: a) The destruction and looting of enemy temples. This would simultaneously weaken a rival economy

²⁴ RIME 1.09.03.01

²⁵ Hamblin 2006, 53.

²⁶ Hamblin 2006, 131-133. The two wheeled chariots eventually proved more effective and would replace the four wheeled versions by the early Middle Bronze period.

²⁷ Hamblin 2006, 136-137.

and, at the same time, provide the victor a means of maintaining his own army.²⁸ And b) control over trade routes was another objective. It's possible that the value of the Gu'edinna territory for the kings of Umma was that it provided direct access to the sea. For Vanstiphout, these limited objectives are an indication that ED warfare largely took the form of "raids upon enemy cites or important junctions."²⁹

3.0 Ebla and Mari in the ED IIIb Period

Significant textual data concerning warfare in Syria finally emerges in the 24th century BC in the form of the administrative texts from Ebla. While the texts do not represent a deliberate historical chronicle, they record deliveries of metals paid in tribute from one state to another and allow scholars to deduce political developments. These texts are intriguing not only for the light they shed on the region, on the ongoing feud between Mari and Ebla, but on the greater ED Syrio-Mesopotamian zeitgeist. As has been pointed out, the texts "clearly show the interconnectedness of key polities over a very broad geographical swathe..." and further, what happened in the triangle dominated by Ebla, Nagar and Mari "cannot be understood without an awareness of the fact that Kish, far to the southeast, even indeed the more distant Elam, played crucial roles in the fortunes of these players."³⁰ Indeed, it may be the case that the script itself, in addition to the textual content, also demonstrates the surprising interconnectedness of these regions.³¹

²⁸ Vanstiphout 1970, 22.

²⁹ Vanstiphout 1970, 23.

³⁰ Porter 2010, 168.

³¹ First Gelb, and subsequently Steinkeller, have argued that Kišite scribes modified the Sumerian Uruk III cuneiform script, adding additional signs and phonetic values to accommodate Proto-Akkadian. It was this modified Kišite script which was adopted by the scribes of Ebla – Steinkeller 2013, 147.

The hegemony of Kiš, which has been posited to have endured for roughly the first half of the third millennium, seems finally to have buckled around 2500 as a result (at least in part) of the rise in power of Mari and Akšhak.³² The administrative texts at Ebla, then, tell the tale of strong independent Syria urban centers able to vie with, and even subdue, their Babylonian counterparts. What is more, in a time contemporary or even predating Sargon of Akkad, they demonstrate that both Mari and Ebla pursued expansionist policies forcing all local city-states to submit to the hegemony to one or another macro-state.³³

4.0 Discussion

While almost any discussion of 4th millennium data will (predictably) fail to end conclusively, the glyptic evidence of the Urukian ruler and the presence of fortification against human threats of some kind in this period seem to suggest the feasibility of armed combat at this time. David Anthony states that by 4200-4000, people of the Pontic-Caspian steppes were already raiding their enemies on horseback.³⁴ Epigraphic evidence from Early Dynastic Egypt (3100-2700) indicates that the early kings were proud of their war-making capabilities.³⁵ In some ways, it would be surprising if 4th millennium Mesopotamians did not war.

The endless ambiguities of the 4th millennium are mercifully dispelled with the appearance of historical inscriptions by the ED II period. On the basis of important inscriptions such as the

³² Steinkeller 2013, 149.

³³ Archi and Biga 2003, 1.

³⁴ Anthony 2007, 460.

³⁵ Garcia 2010, 12.

Prisoner Plaque from Kiš, it's clear that urban centers of Mesopotamia engaged in frequent warfare in this period. From early in the historical period, hegemony and/or the creation of a marco-state (it's not clear to me when one or another term is more fitting, or if they are at any point mutually exclusive) was one object of ED warfare. However, as has been argued, the majority of military engagements amount to little more than raids conducted by one rival against another in pursuit of plunder. In terms of basic military objectives, there seems to be an essential unity between the urban kings of Mesopotamia and the various nomadic mountain peoples who (according to the Sumerian King List) regularly raided Mesopotamian cities and plundered the temples.³⁶

³⁶ This comparison may be substantiated by a reconsideration of pastoralism. While scholars have generally assumed that pastoralists raided urban centers because they couldn't produce their own food, Anthony argues that pastoralists in fact produced plenty. The motivations for their war making may therefore be more akin to the urban rulers – Anthony 2007, 460-461.

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