

Encyclopedia of Prehistory

Volume 8: South and Southwest Asia

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Published in conjunction with the Human Relations Area Files
at Yale University

Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers

New York Boston Dordrecht London Moscow

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Encyclopedia of prehistory/edited by Peter N. Peregrine and Melvin Ember
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Contents: v. 8. South and Southwest Asia

ISBN 0-306-46262-1 (v. 8)

1. Prehistoric peoples—Encyclopedias. 2. Antiquities, Prehistoric—Encyclopedias. I.
Human Relations Area Files, Inc.

GN710 .E53 2000

960'.1'03—dc21

99-049489

ISBN 0-306-46264-8 (set)

ISBN 0-306-46262-1 (vol. 8)

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<http://www.wkap.nl/>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Printed in the United States of America

Akkadian

Akkadian Empire

ABSOLUTE TIME PERIOD: ca. 4334–4112 B.P. The date 2283–2143 B.C. is the two standard deviation, dendro-calibrated, weighted average of ten single harvest barley samples from the last Akkadian floor at Tell Leilan in northern Mesopotamia. Imperialization of northern Mesopotamia began no more than 100 years prior to regional abandonments and the Akkadian imperial collapse.

RELATIVE TIME PERIOD: Akkadian follows the Early Dynastic period and precedes the Ur III period. The chronological periodization of the Empire reflects its politicoeconomic development: (1) early Akkadian, the period of Sargon and his first two dynastic successors who conducted long-distance raiding; (2) the reigns of Naram-Sin and Shar-kali-sharri, who built imperial regional fortresses and administrative centers; and (3) the period of “confusion,” minor rulers, and collapse.

LOCATION: The empire controlled both irrigation agriculture in southern Mesopotamia (Sumer) and rain-fed agriculture in northern Mesopotamia (Subir). The latter extended from the Zagros piedmont on the east to the westernmost drainage of the Habur River, midway to the Balikh River. The Akkadian capital, Akkade, remains unlocated.

DIAGNOSTIC MATERIAL ATTRIBUTES: Period-specific characteristics appear in virtually all cultural domains, including ceramic and glyptic styles. The new cuneiform

ductus replacing Sumerian, and expressing Akkadian language, appeared gradually but emphatically. Akkadian imperial standard metrology (length, land, capacity, weight), was utilized throughout the Empire, and was even expressed in standardized mudbrick and ration bowl sizes.

IMPORTANT SITES: Brak, Leilan, Nineveh, Nuzi, Susa, Ur, among others.

CULTURAL SUMMARY

The Akkadian imperial system forced:

1. seizure and reallocation of southern and northern Mesopotamian estates and landholdings;
2. removal of northern secondary centers and concentration of population in walled cities; and
3. installation of Akkadian imperial metrology for rations and imperial taxes.

Taxation and tribute were transported to the empire's capital by land and by river.

The retrieval of imperial taxes required the intensification and extensification of agroproduction. In northern and southern Mesopotamia, the imperialization was facilitated by preadaptive urbanization.

Environment

Climatic conditions in Mesopotamia during the third millennium B.C. were stable from c. 3000–2300 B.C., when an abrupt climatic change, noted in globally distributed lake, marine, and speleothem cores, reduced precipitation to c. 20–30% from today's levels. The threefold dust spike that accompanied this abrupt climatic change was not reduced to Holocene background levels until ca. 1900 B.C. The abrupt climate change was synchronous with:

1. The Akkadian imperial collapse, as well as the collapse of sedentary settlement systems in Anatolia, Palestine, Greece and the Aegean, and Egypt.
2. Amorite pastoral nomad movements that challenged state political authorities, as did "The Sandcrossers" in Egypt.

The topography, geology, and biota of Mesopotamia were essentially unchanged from the preceding Early Dynastic period, and readers may consult that entry for information.

Settlements

Stabilized, albeit relocated, population distributions are noted during this period. Unusual numbers of intra- and extramural baby burials are significantly retrieved at Chagar Bazar and Tell Leilan towards the end of this period, and may reflect increasing malnutrition. Post-Akkadian population reductions are noted in northern Mesopotamia, and are synchronous with extraordinary population growth in southern Mesopotamia. The end of the Akkadian period is also associated with the unusual epigraphic visibility of pastoral nomad tribes.

Economy

Subsistence, as in the Early Dynastic period, was based on cereal dry-farming, irrigation agriculture, and animal husbandry. Copper, precious metals, and semi-precious stones were retrieved for the Akkadian capital by long-distance traders. According to an Old Babylonian copy of an Akkadian inscription, Sargon "moored the ships of Meluhha (Indus Valley), Magan (Iranian Makran), and Dilmun (Bahrain Island) at the quay of Akkade." Notable Mesopotamian imports from the Indus Valley included carnelian and rare woods, although few Mesopotamian products are visible in the Indus archaeological record.

Sociopolitical Organization

Imperial Akkad replaced the palace- and temple-dominated economies of individual Sumerian and Subarian cities with Akkadian governors, land surveyors, military officials, labor controllers, and scribes. Each performed duties to generate, measure, distribute, and transport agroproduction among the following:

1. regional ration-laborers recruited for harvest and other agro-tasks;
2. Akkadian landowners to whom regional estates were assigned;
3. remnant local landowners; and
4. distant depots for royal tax and tribute, both in "silver" and in kind.

The royal family enjoyed considerable imperial power: daughters of Naram-Sin ruled cities as far as Tuttul and Urkish, while daughters of both Sargon and Naram-Sin were priestesses of the god Nanna at Ur.

Historical inscriptions record Akkadian conquest as far as western Syria and eastern Anatolia, in addition to northern Mesopotamia, western Iran, and the Sumerian heartland. These conquests ultimately met local resistance, as related in early, post-Akkadian, historical legends, such as "Gula-AN and the Seventeen Kings Against Naram-Sin." Akkadian military garrisons were located in provincial fortresses, as at Tell Brak, Susa, and probably Nineveh and other provincial capitals. The Unfinished Building at Tell Leilan was designed for Akkadian administrative use, but was abandoned with the Akkadian collapse.

Religion and Expressive Culture

Akkadian imperialization implanted new deities and cults upon the older Sumerian temples, although this process appears syncretistic. New temple construction was specifically dedicated to Akkadian deities, for instance, the Eulmash Temple at the imperial capital. At distant imperialized centers, older cult installations were rebuilt and continued to be in use, such as Tell Leilan, Tell Brak, and Nineveh. The deification of Akkadian rulers was instituted with the statues of Sargon and Naram-Sin worshipped for more than 1500 years thereafter. Cuneiform writing, with Akkadian-specific ductus, begins to express Akkadian language, in official, administrative, and votive texts, although Sumerian continued in administrative and literary use.

Akkadian-specific styles are recognized in glyptic and sculpture. These emphasize mythological themes

and the glorification of the king in new, realistic, court styles. The art of bronze-cast statuary reached its apogee during this period (e.g., the most famous "bust of Sargon"), when copper imports from Iran are recorded in previously unknown quantities.

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