

The City-States of the Early Neo-Babylonian Period

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The classic Mesopotamian pattern of political organisation is the city-state. The very earliest developments on the alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia during the fourth and third millennia B.C. were characterised by an unmistakable example of a city-state culture, a political system that was intimately linked to Sumerian cultural, religious and social institutions, as described in Glassner's contribution to this volume. Its early predominance came to define the crucial importance of the city and of city-life in succeeding centuries and indeed millennia in the region. During the early phases of the fourth and third millennia this Sumerian city-state culture had an enormous impact on all of southern Mesopotamia, and its influence reached far into the surrounding regions; there may have been direct immigration to newly founded settlements on the periphery, but the exact nature of the expansion from the Sumerian area is not entirely clear.¹

Although central traditions that bound all of the Sumerian cities together in a true city-state culture were developed, these did not impinge on the independence of each city, and in contrast to the situation in ancient Egypt there was no attempt to unite the entire region in a territorial state until late in the third millennium B.C. Certainly, warfare among the cities appears to have been relatively frequent, but it seems that such incidents had their roots in local disputes over water rights or access to other agricultural resources.

In the 24th century B.C. we find the first attempts to expand the power of one city-state over all of the region, and the territorial state became a reality with the first Akkadian, Semitic-speaking ruler, Sargon of Akkade. The state created by him and his dynasty soon developed into what we must call an empire, expanding in all directions and installing a new political system of control over subject populations. The Akkadian domination had its basis in peripheral city-states on the northernmost part of the plain, and the

development meant that Sumer simply became part of an imperial structure imposed from outside.

During the succeeding second millennium B.C. the territorial state – sometimes several competing ones, at other times one centralised and expansionist state – became the dominant pattern of organisation. The fundamental importance of the city may be seen in the fact that several of these territorial states were named after their capitals: “Assur-land” is Assyria, etc. The Old Babylonian kingdoms during the first half of the second millennium B.C. – in part contemporary with the Old Assyrian city-state – were succeeded by the Kassite monarchy around 1600 B.C., and in the period until ca. 1100 we have a shifting pattern of such territorial states.

This paper is concerned with the developments that characterised the following centuries, especially in southern Mesopotamia or Babylonia. The general breakdown of political authority in large parts of the Near East that happened in the twelfth century B.C. also touched Babylonia, and here it may have been caused by, or was at least coincidental with, the invasion of Syria by very large groups of Aramaic-speaking tribesmen from the steppes. These new groups, known as Arameans and Chaldeans, settled extensively in southern Babylonia, where they created small states with a socio-political system that was based on a tribal structure. Very large parts of the rural areas of southern Babylonia were settled, and new cities were founded by the immigrants to function as capitals of the tribal lands. However, in this massive development it seems that the old Babylonian cities were only to a limited degree subjected to direct immigration; the newcomers settled in the open countryside, leaving especially the southernmost cities as islands, so to speak, in a sea of tribal lands.

This obviously led to a fragmentation of Babylonia, i.e. the old territorial state referred to with this name, not only geographically, but also politically. After ca. 1100 B.C. the traditional capital city of the entire

region, Babylon, was only for brief periods in a position to exercise direct and extensive control over any of the tribal lands. This necessarily meant that the other cities in the south also became less directly dependent on the king in Babylon. It is against this background that the resurgence of a city-state pattern of political organisation appears to have become possible, a development that will be the main topic of this paper.

The thesis then is that a virtual collapse of centralised power in the region, which did not, however, lead to a complete disintegration of city-life, created a unique situation where a reversion to an ancient political pattern became a logical solution to a set of practical organisational problems. The historical awareness of the immensely old traditions of the various cities undoubtedly played a vital role, as may be seen from the re-invention of political titles, etc.

The leading expert on this period, Tony Brinkman, has described the political situation in the region in the following words:

“Political power had become fragmented and was shared between a weak central government, semi-independent cities, and vigorous tribes which controlled substantial portions of the hinterland” (Brinkman [1984] 1).

He notes that by the middle of the eighth century Babylonia “seems almost to have become a loose territorial agglomeration of its competing sociopolitical groups”, and he points out that for the entire period “there was no single native term to express ‘Babylonia’ as a unit.” (*ibidem* 16 n. 62). Another significant observation is that between 810 and 626 there is only one known instance of a Babylonian father-son succession on the throne in Babylon; and a particularly poignant indication of the weakness of central royal power is the fact that the most ambitious program of public building projects in the period, as known from extant texts, was undertaken by the governor of the city Ur in the extreme south, not by the king at Babylon.

There is no doubt, on the other hand, as Brinkman states, that “cities were the focus of local government, society, and economy and remained critical factors in the political and cultural life of the land” (Brinkman [1984] 18). The question therefore arises, whether we are justified in seeing these developments as a re-establishment of a city-state pattern? There are not many examples in world history of such a return to an earlier system of political and social organisation, but it seems to me that the definition of “self-government” suggested by our symposiarch opens the door

to a better and more sensitive understanding of these political developments. He has placed the emphasis on “internal sovereignty” as the condition for his categorisation, claiming that a city-state can be “a tributary polity or a dependency of another city-state, or of a federal central government, or of a monarch” (*supra* 18). I shall accordingly concentrate a good deal of my attention here on this question of internal sovereignty in the cities that have been characterised by Brinkman as “semi-independent”.²

Historical Development

In the twelfth century B.C. the so-called Kassite dynasty which had ruled Babylonia for ca. 400 years was brought to an end by invasions from Elam in southwestern Iran. Then for nearly three centuries we find a succession of new dynasties in Babylon with rulers who at times managed to create the conditions for peace and prosperity, though only briefly (Brinkman [1968]). In the absence of a strong political power in Babylonia, which could unite and impose central authority over the many different groups in the area, the country’s direct neighbours, Elam in the southeast and especially Assyria to the north, came to have a decisive influence on political developments in Babylonia.

Elam was separated from the southern Babylonian lands by a vast stretch of marshes, a region that was dominated by Chaldean tribes, chief among which in the earliest phases was the one known as Bit Yakin. The Yakin chieftains were generally able to reckon with Elamite support in their fights against the kings in Babylon, whether these were local rulers or Assyrians. In fact, placing a tribal leader on the throne in Babylon must have been the primary aim of Elam in this period, since this would guarantee not only peace in the south along its border, but substantial Elamite influence, if not outright control in the capital. The other player in this was of course Assyria, whose interests were diametrically opposed to those of Elam, so the forces in Babylonia that remained hostile to the Assyrians could always rely on active military aid from Elam. The pattern was extremely complex, however, for some of the old cities were clearly not on good terms with their tribal neighbours, and such cities as Ur and Uruk which were located in the extreme south, surrounded by tribal lands, nearly always supported the Assyrians. There can be little doubt that this allegiance was dictated by their special position, i.e. the perceived threat from the surrounding tribesmen.

It was the Assyrian empire that came to have the most pervasive and violent impact on Babylonia, however, and this country's history down to the fall of Assyria in 612 B.C. is the story of the relationship between the two regions, see the map *infra* 126.

It is fitting to start with the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (859-827), a most successful conqueror in Syria, the Taurus region and in the mountain valleys of the northern Zagros chain, and one of the architects of the neo-Assyrian empire. Among the monuments left from his reign is a throne pedestal from his palace in the capital Calah, and the relief decoration at the front of this platform, directly under the king's feet, shows a remarkable scene where the kings of Assyria and of Babylon are seen meeting in peace and sealing a treaty with a handshake. This is a clear demonstration of the Assyrian acceptance of Babylonia as an equal power, an equality that was perhaps more in terms of culture and economic strength than of military might.

The scene depicts an important moment in the history of Shalmaneser III's reign, when around 850 B.C. he had intervened directly in Babylonian politics, coming to the aid of the heir to the throne in Babylon who was faced with a rebellion. The Assyrian king and his army on that occasion ended their successful campaign with a pilgrimage to some of the old cultic centres in northern Babylonia, clearly because the gods venerated there were part also of Assyrian religious life, but presumably also in order to show to the inhabitants of the ancient cities that the Assyrians were their true allies and friends, cousins who spoke a closely related language, and whose culture and religion was practically identical to their own. Such an exercise in diplomacy, designed to charm the Babylonians, would make sense in a world where the Babylonian cities were under increasing political, military and economic pressure from the newcomers, the Arameans and Chaldeans who had settled in the south.

The Assyrian king logically ended his visit to Babylonia with a brief military campaign directed precisely against these tribes; this led to the capture of a couple of cities and payment of tribute by at least some of the tribal rulers.

It seems that at most times it was an aim of Assyrian imperial policy towards Babylonia to drive a wedge in between the old, traditional Babylonian cities, especially on the northern plain, and the Aramean and Chaldean tribesmen. Assyria wished to enlist the cities in some sort of alliance with the empire, and the tribesmen were always regarded as a threat to such a policy; in the background lurked

Elam. During the following couple of centuries various political devices were made use of in the pursuance of this policy: an alliance with a local king in Babylon, outright subjection of the south, a dual kingdom or a policy of "friendly" domination.

Shalmaneser's son and successor Shamshi-Adad V, who came to the throne in Assyria after another revolt and a civil war which he won thanks to the support of the Babylonian king, reversed his father's policy of alliance with Babylonia, perhaps because of humiliating terms defined by the Babylonian king, and he was the first to campaign widely in the south. These campaigns caused such havoc that from this time on – ca. 810 B.C. – central power in the northernmost parts of the Babylonian plain suffered a virtual collapse, allowing the Chaldean tribes an opportunity to step into the vacuum created by the Assyrian invasions.

Eventually this meant that the Babylonian kingship would be usurped by the newcomers; a Chaldean called Mukin-zeri seized the throne in Babylon in 732 B.C., and this then led to a major Assyrian invasion under Tiglath-pileser III. Mukin-zeri was deposed and eventually killed in his stronghold in the southern marshes, and after that the Assyrian king installed himself on the throne in Babylon, thus creating for the first time a double kingdom of Babylonia and Assyria. His campaigns against the tribesmen led to the forced deportation of very large numbers of people to other parts of the Assyrian empire.

After the death of the Assyrian monarch another Chaldean, the chief of the tribe Bit Yakin, a certain Marduk-apal-iddina (known in the Hebrew Bible as Merodach-Baladan), seized power in Babylon in 721, and with Elamite support he managed to hold on to power here for twelve years until he too was deposed by the Assyrians. His reign has been explained by Brinkman as the crucial turning-point in the relations between the cities and the tribesmen, for Marduk-apal-iddina proved himself to be a successful ruler who created a degree of stability and prosperity, and who was able to function convincingly as a "real" Babylonian king. From then on the fundamental aims of Assyrian policies in Babylonia became much more difficult to achieve (Brinkman [1964]; [1984] 47-52).

Sennacherib's reign in Assyria (705-681) marked a drastic deterioration in Assyria's position in the south. For unknown reasons he was unwilling to function as king of Babylon himself in accordance with the pattern instituted by Tiglath-pileser III; he first attempted to rule through a local man, then placed his own son on the throne in Babylon, and after he had been deposed, handed over to the Elamites and killed, Sen-

nacherib decided to utterly destroy the city itself. The walls, houses and temples were razed and the population dispersed, and essential elements of the vitally important Marduk-cult in Babylon were transferred to the Assyrian national god Assur, whose total supremacy was emphasised.

Sennacherib's harsh policy was reversed in certain aspects by his successors on the Assyrian throne, who rebuilt Babylon and brought back the Marduk-cult (Machinist [1984-5]). A new political system was created in 672 B.C., when the succession after the next king, Esarhaddon was fixed: Assurbanipal (669-627) became king of Assyria, i.e. ruler of the empire as a whole, whereas his brother Shamash-shum-ukin became king of Babylon. This new arrangement, establishing yet another type of relationship between Assyria and Babylonia, worked until 652 B.C., when the Assyrian king in Babylon revolted and started a civil war that lasted until 648, when Babylon was conquered.

A certain Kandalanu, presumably a local nobleman, was then placed on the throne in Babylon, and he ruled peacefully until 627. Babylonia as a whole appears to have prospered economically from this period of *pax Assyriaca*, which ironically created the conditions for a revival of the old national ambitions in Babylon. At Kandalanu's death a new Chaldean chieftain, a certain Nabu-nasir, started a general revolt against Assyrian rule, and this eventually led to the expulsion of the Assyrian armies from Babylonia. In 614 the Babylonians were capable of conducting campaigns in Assyria proper and two years later the Assyrian capital Nineveh fell to a joint attack by the Babylonians and the Medes.³

Sources

Because of the lack of textual documentation from Babylonia for the early part of the period in question, we have to rely heavily on a recently published small archive from the second half of the eighth century discovered in Nippur in central Babylonia. According to the editor of the texts they had originally belonged to the archive of the governors of Nippur, a city that was located in the middle of the alluvium.⁴ Assyrian sources are more widely available, and for the period during which the empire included Babylonia we have a variety of texts, royal inscriptions and letters from the royal chancery at Nineveh in particular. One of the problems in this context is therefore that the earliest part of the period, before 745, when the city-state pattern may have manifested itself most clearly, is very poorly represented in the sources. The texts from

the period of Assyrian domination can and must of course be drawn into the argument, but they are apt to show a situation which had changed in fundamental respects.

In line with the chapter on the Old Assyrian city-state I shall present the argument under the headings contained in the symposiarch's programmatic statement on city-states.

Territory. We have no way of estimating the territory controlled by the various cities in Babylonia; from Nippur we have at best a rough idea, being told that the governor there had some kind of authority over the city of Der, 125 km away. Clearly, he did not control all of the region in between the two cities, but he was involved with and interfered in political matters in a quite large region.

Population. This point too must remain without any clear answer. Excavations in Babylonia have never been able to provide reliable answers to such questions. The decline in population generally in Babylonia that is characteristic of the "dark age" from the twelfth century B.C. on, seems to have been arrested around the middle of the eighth century (Brinkman [1984] 10).

Urbanisation. As appears from some of the quotes from Brinkman given earlier, it is obvious that the city was the main focus for the social organisation of the traditional Babylonian population groups in the region; the Chaldeans also had major fortified cities, described by some of the Assyrian kings who laid siege to them, but it is less clear that the Aramean and Arabic tribes were urbanised to any extent.

Economy. In his analysis of the governors' archive from eighth-century Nippur Cole has placed special emphasis on the role of the city in the commercial network operating in Babylonia and in a wider sphere of contacts. He has shown how "merchants and businessmen, including the *shandabakku* of Nippur, seem to have dispatched agents to markets across southwest Asia, including Kalhu, the capital of the Assyrian empire" (Cole [1996a] 67). He has singled out as Nippur's local market specialties the three categories wool and textiles, agricultural produce, and slaves. Wool produced by the tribes in the city's hinterland was used for the production of textiles in Nippur, apparently especially a variety of blue-purple cloth; grain, sesame and dates were traded there, apparently

imported from other areas since Nippur itself was located on the edge of the cultivated zone; and slaves feature prominently in the texts from the archive, indicating that a brisk trade was conducted in this city.

Settlement pattern. The very special nature of the settlement patterns existing in Babylonia has already been mentioned, and it is not possible to say what the cities' precise relationship with the hinterland was in this respect. Nippur in the eighth century seems to have had fairly large groups of Arameans, Chaldeans and Arabs living in the city, but it may well have been a special case, since the city was located on what Cole calls "the tribal frontier" (Cole [1996a] 44).

Ethnic and political identity. Our sources are of course strongly centered on the cities, which means that we have no or very little knowledge of the conditions in the various tribal regions. It is clear that the old cities with their "Babylonian" population formed a cultural unity, one that was perceived as different from and occasionally in conflict with the Aramean and Chaldean states in the hinterlands. What could be called a "city-state culture" seems to have united them. This does not necessarily imply that the cities always regarded the tribesmen as such with hostility, and the texts show a significant degree of interaction on all levels between the various ethnic groups. The Assyrians, on the other hand, saw it as in their best interest to constantly emphasise the contrast between the cities and the tribes, and a great deal of our information comes from Assyrian sources.

In the life of the cities themselves we can observe certain features which indicate that they consciously adopted what were perceived to be ancient traditions in an attempt to stress the local sense of cultural identity. This would be understandable in a world that was under pressure not only from the Assyrians but certainly also from the new tribal groups who had taken over large areas of the land, and who had different linguistic, religious, political and social traditions. It is surely highly significant that the city populations in these centuries began to adopt a new way of identifying themselves as individuals by way of family names, a practice that marked them very clearly as different from the new groups (Brinkman [1984] 11). Where the traditional reference to a person would be by way of name and patronymic ("PNa son of PNB"), the city folk refer to themselves with an additional reference to an ancient ancestor ("PNa son of PNB, descendant of PNC") – a usage that is reflected in many private documents and which allows us to

reconstruct very extensive family units. In contrast, when Arameans and Chaldeans are referred to in such documents, it is simply with their name and tribal affiliation ("PN, the Gambulean"). The family names were often names of professions rather than personal names, and they regularly refer to typically urban occupations, again establishing a decided contrast to the tribesmen.

Defence. The Nippur archive indicates that the governors in this city disposed of an army, and among their officials was a so-called *sakrumash*, a high military man who was involved with chariotry and horses; one of the central persons in the archive appears to have raided men and cattle from the king in Babylon, and we hear of an escort of one hundred archers accompanying some travellers. Another governor is known to have lost his personal chariot during a war that had taken him all the way to the shore of the Persian Gulf (Cole [1996a] 50-51).

Babylonian cities were fortified. There are descriptions of sieges and scenes that take place in front of the city-gates. Military matters are naturally prominent in many of the letters from the Assyrian royal archives, and especially from the period of the civil war in Babylonia, 652-648 B.C., we have accounts of battles, sieges, etc. Each city was supposed to be in a position to defend itself, and when hard pressed by the tribes would appeal to the Assyrian king for military assistance.⁵

Self-government. At the beginning of the period in question we have a kingdom centred on the city of Babylon in the northern plain, a political system that had been in existence for centuries. The other cities on the alluvium, situated along the banks of the rivers and major canals leading down towards the marshes at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, were originally to be seen as provincial centres in a territorial kingdom, ruled by so-called "governors" who were appointed and controlled by the central administration in the capital. When exactly this system began seriously to deteriorate, leaving the individual cities with much more feeble links to Babylon, cannot be determined precisely, but the Assyrian invasions around 810 B.C. certainly helped in the general weakening of centralised power.

The Governors. Our best information concerning the position of governors in the early phase comes from the already mentioned archive of the governors of Nippur which is dated to ca. 750-725; this means

that these texts fall into the period of disintegration, but antedate the massive Assyrian involvement in Babylonia that began with Tiglath-pileser III after Mukin-zeri's revolt. The archaeological context of the archive is unfortunately unrevealing, and the interpretation of the editor of the texts has been called into question on some points. Nevertheless, one possible interpretation of the texts is that at this time the governor of Nippur, referred to with the ancient Sumerian title *shandabakku*, was virtually independent of the king in Babylon. Clearly, if Nippur could enjoy such a status, the other Babylonian cities further away from the traditional political centre must have been similarly free to pursue their own interests.

The governor at Nippur could enter into treaties with the tribesmen, he waged war far afield, and he could even engage in raids on caravans belonging to his nominal overlord. One of the letters in the archive seems to have been destined for the king in Babylon, who was addressed on equal terms by the governor as "my brother" (Cole [1996b] texts 8 & 1). Three men who may have been governors are attested in the archive, but whether they were related by family ties to each other is quite impossible to say, and we have no knowledge of how they were chosen for their post or by whom in this period. In view of their extensive independence of any other authority it seems plausible to suggest that they were local men whose power base was in Nippur itself.

Immediately after the end of the archive, when the Assyrians began to intervene heavily in Babylonian affairs, the position of such governors clearly changed somewhat, and the texts from the Neo-Assyrian royal archives give certain clues as to how they were appointed. In Nippur it seems clear that the Assyrians tried to find local men who could be trusted. That this was not an easy task can be seen from the fact that a series of *shandabakkus* are known to have been deposed by the Assyrians, and the city was often engaged in alliances with Chaldean tribes directed against Assyria. In view of its strategic position in the middle of the alluvial plain and on the tribal frontier, it is not surprising that from around 660 the city became very strictly policed by the Assyrians (Cole [1996a] 52-55).

From the Assyrian-controlled period we also have a fairly clear and very interesting case from the city of Ur in the extreme south, where we find a succession of four governors: Ningal-iddin (ca. 689-670) who was followed by his three sons Sin-balassu-iqbi, Sin-tabni-usur and Sin-sharra-usur. We are here clearly dealing with a local ruling family, whose members

gradually lost some of their independence, as the Assyrian pressure became stronger. The first one of the line – as far as we know – dated documents by his own regnal years, one of the traditional prerogatives of independent rulers; his first son, Sin-balassu-iqbi, carried out what Brinkman describes as "the most ambitious building program in Babylonia during this period" (Brinkman [1984]18). Frame points out that similar situations appear to have existed in other cities as well: "certain families in a city or province, presumably the leading families, constituted a 'ruling class' which tended to provide the chief officials" (Frame [1992] 228).

During the time of the civil war, 652-648 B.C., the Babylonian cities came under various kinds of pressure from the Assyrians, the king in Babylon, the Chaldean and Aramean tribes, and of course Elam. The governors had to manoeuvre adroitly in order to save their cities from being sacked, and we have a most interesting and revealing indication of the position of these rulers under the Assyrian empire's watchful eye in the letter ABL 1274, which dates to around 651. At this time some of the most important cities in the extreme south stuck to their alliance with Assyria, refusing to join the rebellion led from Babylon. For this they were put under hard pressure from the surrounding Chaldean and Aramean tribes who generally supported the uprising.

The people of Ur at this time wrote a despairing letter to the Assyrian king, asking for his help. They claimed that they were so hard pressed that they might be forced to resort to cannibalism, but their real message was a defence of their governor Sin-tabni-usur; he had, they said, been compelled by the circumstances to join the rebels but in reality he remained loyal to the king.⁶ In fact, the city never did join the insurrection and the governor retained his position.

At this late stage there can be no doubt that the position of the various governors depended on their acceptance by the Assyrian king. In some cases, at least in the tribal areas, they were simply installed by him, perhaps even without any reference to local wishes or the existence of ruling families. In ABL 289 from 650 B.C. king Assurbanipal addresses the people of the Sealand, informing them that as a gesture of goodwill he has now appointed one of his devoted servants and courtiers, a certain Bel-ibni, to lead them. Since this was in the middle of the civil war, and since the position of the area called the Sealand was a crucial one for all the cities in the extreme south, this was clearly a militarily determined appointment, presumably designed to reassure the

pro-Assyrian faction in the region. It is not at all clear, however, that it represented the normal procedure.

Interestingly, the Sealand appears in another letter which was concerned with the appointment of a new leader, and here (as in the letter from Ur referred to above) the local elders played a major role. In this somewhat earlier letter to the Assyrian king Esarhaddon from the people of the Sealand we are informed about a situation where a delegation from Elam tried to make them accept a new leader, one who was pro-Elam of course, and they tell the Assyrian king how they rejected the offer:

They (the Elamite delegation) said: "Come now, accept Nabu-ushallim, the son of your lord, to lead you!" But as for us, we did not agree. We said: "Na'id-Marduk, our lord, is still alive! Also, we are servants of the king of Assyria. If you wish to make him a great man in the land, then send him to the king of Assyria, and if it pleases him, the king may make a great man of him."

At a later stage the pretender sent a more direct threat to "the elders of the Sealand", ordering them to come over to him; if they refused "you will have nothing more to say. I shall come and destroy your country and your houses."⁷

Although we see that the elders were heavily involved in these political negotiations, they made it clear that they understood that the final authority lay with the Assyrian king, who alone had the right to appoint their leader. Another letter, ABL 293+CT 54:484, written by the Assyrian king to the people of the Gambulu tribe, contains a promise to install as their leader a certain Rimutu, "of whom you spoke to me".

These letters indicate that the local community were supposed in normal situations to have suggested a candidate, and it was for the Assyrian king to ratify and accept their choice. This was surely the regular procedure, and one should note that in the case of the Sealand referred to above the contenders for the leadership were all local men belonging to the same family, where one son supported Elam while the other was loyal towards Assyria. These governors therefore must have come from the leading families in both the tribes and the cities.

Despite the commonly used terminology "governor" for these offices, we are dealing with a system that should really be described as vassalage rather than as imperial provincial government. The local elites provided the candidates for leadership, they suggested to the Assyrians who would be acceptable

to them, and they were directly involved in determining such matters as political allegiance.

We must of course reckon with the possibility that there were strong fluctuations in the relative power of "governors" and tribal leaders on one side, and the king in Babylon on the other, whether a local man or an Assyrian; in the eighth century this balance was heavily weighted in the various local rulers' favour, but at a certain point the Assyrians were able to establish a relatively firm hold on Babylonia. The governors' archive from Nippur, belonging to the earlier phase, shows a situation when these officials were the *de facto* rulers of the city and even of some considerable tracts of land around it. They had a staff of men around them, they conducted wars far afield, they corresponded on equal terms with the king in Babylon and with tribal chieftains, and they entered into treaty arrangements with smaller rulers in the area under their political influence.

The City and the Elders. The examples cited above clearly show the existence of municipal institutions such as elders, judges and assemblies, a socio-political organisation that was typical of the Babylonian cities (and probably borrowed by the tribes), but which was quite different from the Assyrian traditions. Elders, assemblies, etc. existed only in the old city of Assur, where they had their roots deep in the earliest history of the city, as discussed in another paper (*supra* 84). Otherwise the Assyrian state was so completely concentrated on the institution of kingship, that these other features had no place. In that light it becomes particularly interesting to observe the importance they enjoyed in Babylonia.

An indication of a degree of self-government that persisted here, even in the period when Assyrian rule was most strongly established in the region, may be found in the quite numerous letters exchanged between the Assyrian king and the people of tribes and cities in Babylonia. We have ca. twenty letters sent to or from a city or a tribe or a district in exchanges with the Assyrian king. Most of these make it clear in the introductory address that it is the entire community who is either speaking or being addressed, the formula being "the city NN, great and small". Some passages leave no doubt, however, that the letters were in fact exchanged with the elders of the community, and in some cases it is this group together with the chief Assyrian official in the city or the region who wrote or received a letter.⁸

A large part of these texts stem from the turbulent political period between 652 and 648 B.C., when the

entire south was engaged in the civil war. This was obviously a time when both sides attempted to rally support from as many of the main cities and tribes in the south as possible, and the letters do indeed reflect a fluid situation where some cities were being courted by Babylon, Elam and Nineveh, and where the local authorities had to make up their minds about the right policy to pursue.

An example is the letters sent to the Rashayu tribe whose lands were on the border with Elam, one of the allies of the rebellious king in Babylon (ABL 295 and perhaps 1260). These letters present the Assyrian case in an attempt to convince the Rashayu to stick with Assyria. The Assyrian tried to convince the tribe that the Elamites were untrustworthy, having received nothing but kindness from the Assyrians, but repaying this with open treachery. Such letters are highly colloquial in style, and they sometimes refer to popular proverbs and sayings, and one cannot avoid the impression that they were shrewd attempts to influence popular opinion, not simply a chieftain, that in other words they must have been read aloud to a large group of people.

Even the people of Babylon itself were addressed by the king in Assyria by way of a famous letter found at Nineveh, in which Assurbanipal tried to persuade the citizens of the Babylonian capital to drop their support of their rebel king.

Message of the king (Assurbanipal) to the inhabitants of Babylon:

I am well. May you be in good spirits.

I have heard all these empty words which that unbrotherly brother of mine has told you, everything he has been saying I have heard. They are but wind; do not believe him! I swear by Assur and Marduk, my gods, that I have not conceived in my heart nor spoken out all these evil plans with which he has charged me. It is only a trick he has devised: "I will make the good name of the people of Babylon, who love the king, as bad as my own." Yet I have not been listening to all this. Up to now, my thoughts have been solely about your brotherly relations with the people of Assyria, and about your privileges, which I have confirmed. Now by all means, do not listen to his empty words, do not spoil your reputation which is so good in my own eyes and in the eyes of all the countries, and do not sin against the god!

And I know of another matter which you are worrying about: "Now the very fact that we have rebelled against him will be a charge against us."

No! This is no charge; nothing matters but an excellent reputation. The fact that you have sided with my enemy should be only for yourselves like a charge against you, and a sin against an oath sworn before the god.

Now I am writing to you that you should not sully yourselves through this affair. Let me have a quick answer to my letter. This man, rejected by Marduk, should not make me break the agreement which I have made before the god Bel!

In the month of Ayaru, the twenty-third day, eponym: Assur-dura-usur (652 B.C.). Shamash-balassu-iqbi brought the letter.⁹

This letter, dated shortly after the start of the Babylonian revolt, obviously formed part of the propaganda effort of the Assyrians, but the exact form of this offensive is surely significant. One wonders how such a letter could ever be delivered, or to whom? Under normal circumstances it would certainly have been delivered to the elders of the city, who may have communicated its contents to a wider circle, but at this moment the city was in open rebellion, the gates had been closed to the Assyrians, and in the palace in Babylon sat the rebellious king. In that situation it is in fact hard to envisage the circumstances surrounding the delivery of the letter. At one extreme is the unlikely scenario of an Assyrian envoy arriving at Babylon, where he read the letter aloud to the assembly of elders, while the local king sat passively by in his palace, anxiously awaiting the response of the elders to the Assyrian offers. At the other, in my view equally unlikely extreme is the possibility that we are simply faced with a purely literary effort – which leaves unexplained the fact that the letter mentions the name of the envoy. This implies that the message was somehow put across to the Babylonians, but we are not in a position to say how.

However, a somewhat earlier letter from the time of Tiglath-pileser III gives us information about negotiations that actually took place in a very similar situation. This happened when the Assyrian king was faced with Mukin-zeri's rebellion in 732 B.C.; his first response was to send some of his military officials to Babylon in order to attempt to negotiate a kind of settlement with the citizens. As in 652 the idea was obviously to convince the Babylonians that they should throw out the rebel and instead accept an alliance with Assyria. The ensuing negotiations, which took several days, are referred to in a letter to the king from his envoys, and in this text we get a graphic description of a really quite bizarre diplomatic situation. The Assy-

rian officials report that they had to conduct their interview with the Babylonians outside the main city-gate, not being invited into the city; Babylonians, presumably members of the council of elders, came out of the gate to talk to the Assyrians, and we are told that people representing the Chaldean king were present during the talks. They are not reported to have uttered a word, though, and the Assyrians addressed only the Babylonians:

Why do you act in a hostile manner towards us for their sake? They [presumably pointing to Mukinzeri's men] belong among the Chaldeans! It is the Assyrian king who can show favours towards Babylon, maintaining your civic privileges!

Later in the text we are informed that a group of ten and another group of five, although present in the city, refused to come out to take part in the negotiations. These groups may even point back to traditions mentioned in the Old Assyrian texts, where we hear of such groups, probably formed as committees under the Assembly, being charged with administrative-political duties (cf. Larsen [1976] 269-273).

The situation is in several respects similar to the one described in the Hebrew Bible, when Assyrian officers at the time of Sennacherib's campaign in the region came to Jerusalem and tried to persuade first the king's representative and then the populace sitting on the walls to surrender peacefully (2 Kings 18). No doubt this was a normal procedure used by the Assyrians in their diplomatic contacts with rebels: much easier to persuade them than to have to call in the army. And they must have been skilled at this game, for when Hezekiah's envoy proved to be stubborn, they turned to the people, addressing them in their own tongue to the horror of the royal envoy, for this meant that the common people of the city somehow became involved in the negotiations.

This may in fact be precisely what happened at Babylon, where the Assyrians were addressing a group of citizens who appear to have represented the interests of the city – presumably elders or men acting on behalf of the elders – and completely neglecting the Chaldean representatives, who were after all the men who were supposed to take care of the interests of the king of the city. This situation therefore surely indicates that the citizens of a city such as Babylon had civic institutions by way of which they could undertake negotiations and in other manners represent the interests of the community, i.e. an assembly which could even function to some extent independently of the local king.

Such an institution, known either with the traditional Babylonian term *puhru*, or with a West Semitic word *kenishtu* (as in Knesset), is attested a number of times, and there were clearly several such assemblies in at least some cities. The governors' archive from Nippur contains a single reference to a temple assembly, apparently the body that ran the affairs of the central sanctuary at Nippur, but there is otherwise no mention of an assembly for the city, nor for that matter any reference to the elders.¹⁰

As mentioned, many letters written to or from cities specify that the correspondents are the people of the city, "great and small", a phrase that seems to point to a popular assembly, but we have no real knowledge of how such an institution might have functioned. However, the "great ones" or "elders" appear in contexts where there can be no doubt about their actual role in negotiations of various kinds. I assume therefore that as in the case of the Old Assyrian texts the elders and the city-assembly normally refer to the same institution. This group would regularly appear together with the "governor", both in letters and in records of verdicts handed down by them.

We are presumably dealing with institutions that had always existed in the Babylonian cities, but which may have acquired a special importance in this period. The men who functioned as elders were clearly influential and powerful and not to be trifled with. One of the letters addressed to the citizens of Nippur from Assurbanipal, ABL 287, first expresses the king's delight to hear that they have detained three Arameans wanted by the Assyrians; after that we read that the king has to explain that when fifteen elders from Nippur recently had been at Nineveh, and only half of them had been admitted to an audience with Assurbanipal, this was not due to ill will on his part: "It is the fault of the *shandabakku*, who is your governor, and secondly of the palace overseer who did not allow you to enter into my presence." Even the Assyrian king had to be polite towards these men, and their role as representatives of the city was clearly taken very seriously.

Citizenship. A text from the Assyrian royal archives, purporting to represent statements made by the people of Babylon to the king, contains powerful expressions of the feeling of civic pride and identity. This text, ABL 878, tells us that anyone entering Babylon, even persons as low on the social scale as foreign women, enjoy full civic rights in the city, in fact, "a dog that comes in here will not be killed!"

In the governors' archive from Nippur there was a

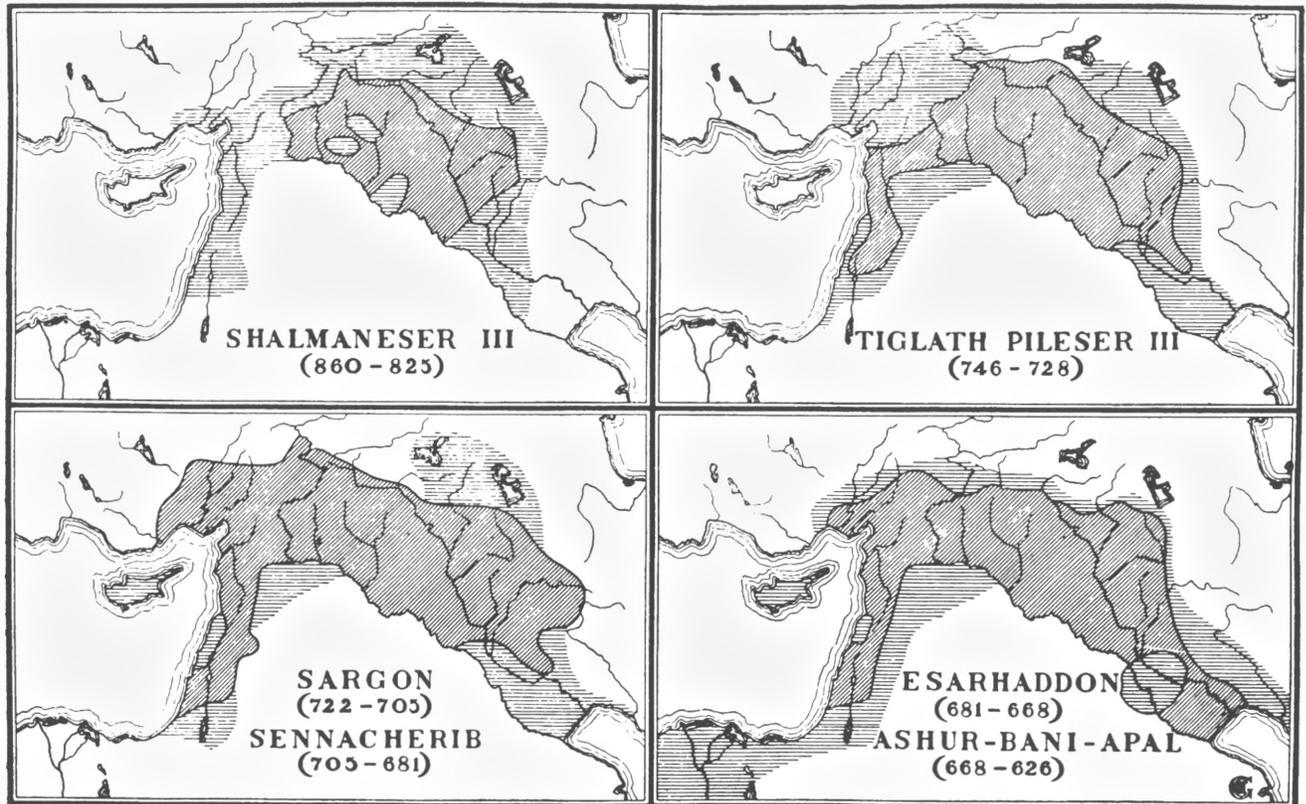


Fig. 1. Maps showing the development of the Assyrian empire, from Olmstead (1923), giving an attempt to differentiate between areas under direct and indirect rule.

copy of a well-known Babylonian literary composition, known generally as the “Babylonian Fürstenspiegel”, sometimes as “Advice to a Prince”. This text is concerned with the disasters that will fall upon a king who does not honour the civic privileges enjoyed in particular by the north-Babylonian cities Sippar, Babylon and Nippur.

If he harasses a citizen of Sippar but hears the case of an outsider, the god Shamash, judge of heaven and earth, will set up foreign justice in his land, and princes and judges will not heed a rightful verdict. If they bring citizens of Nippur to him for judgment, and he takes a bribe and harasses them, Enlil, lord of the land, will mobilise a foreign enemy against him and turn his men into corpses. ...¹¹

Conclusion

At the moment it is hardly possible to provide decisive proof for my thesis, but perhaps this case can be of interest also as an indication of the difficulty of understanding concrete historical situations as well as of providing theoretical definitions that can be simply

and unproblematically applied to a given historical material.

Since by far the greater part of evidence adduced here refers to a period when Babylonia was under the thumb of the Assyrian empire, i.e. from about 730 until the breakdown of Assyrian power a century later, the central part of my argument necessarily has to rely heavily on the governors’ archive from Nippur, where one gets the clear impression of a very high degree of internal self-government. Certainly, as argued by Grant Frame in his examination of the political history of Babylonia in the seventh century, at this later time Nippur’s governor was simply an Assyrian official; still, he is willing to believe that in the southern cities, especially at Ur where the gubernatorial office belonged to one ruling family, who made use of a different set of titles, the situation may have been different:

Possibly the use of these titles at Ur reflects greater authority or independence of the governors of this city. Because of Ur’s somewhat isolated position in an area dominated by tribal groups, its governors may have needed, or found it easy to acquire extra

authority and power to maintain their position and that of Assyria (Frame [1992] 226).

In fact, the titles claimed by the governors vary from city to city, a fact that could be taken as an indication of the wish to establish links with ancient traditions. Perhaps the clearest example is the consistent reference to the Nippur governor as *shandabakku*, a title that can be traced back to the third millennium B.C. (Cole [1996a] 46-50). At Ur the governors made use of a similarly ancient and grandiose title, *shakkanakku*.

It seems to me an attractive hypothesis that political fragmentation coupled with an intense pressure from the surrounding world in the ninth and eighth centuries led to a resurgence of traditions which were certainly known and cherished in this most conservative of cultures. The evidence does not allow us to provide adequate analyses of the crucial question of the degree of self-government enjoyed by the cities, but more evidence is bound to appear. We can only hope it will answer our question.

Notes

1. See Algaze (1993) for an interpretation of the developments.
2. The conclusions reached in this paper must of necessity be somewhat preliminary in character; the available sources are, as explained below, not very rich, and the problem addressed here has never been the topic of any sustained research effort. This situation is bound to improve soon, since Karen Radner is starting a new project in Vienna that aims at an analysis of what she refers to as the "early democracy" in the neo-Babylonian city-states. I have benefited greatly from a reading of her project proposal.
3. Oates (1991) for a general overview; see also Glassner (1993) 179-197.
4. Cole (1996a and b); for an overview of sources, see Brinkman (1968) 7. Cole's interpretation of the Nippur texts may be somewhat enthusiastic, as pointed out by Driel (1998), and we may in fact not be dealing with an archive that belonged to the political leaders of the city. Van Driel also questions the conclusions concerning the virtual independence of Nippur at this time, but while it is true that other interpretations are possible, Cole's overall reconstruction is at least plausible.

5. See e.g. ABL 815, discussed by Dietrich (1970) 90-91.
6. Frame (1992) 166; see Brinkman (1984) 98, who regards the interpretation of the damaged letter as "uncertain".
7. ABL 576; see Dietrich (1970) 24.
8. ABL 210, 287, 289, 295, 296, 297, 301, 518, 571, 576, 736, 771, 926, 942, 1146, 1260, 1274, 1386; these letters were sent to or from Babylon, Nippur, Ur, Uruk, Kisik, Shat-iddina, the Elders of the Sealand, the people of Gambulu, the people of Rashayu.
9. ABL 301; translation from Oppenheim (1967) 169-170.
10. Cole (1996b) 224-225. Discussion of assemblies and references in Nicolò (1951) 146-7, cf. Frame (1992) 231 n. 116.
11. Cole (1996b) text #128; see also Foster (1993) 760-762.

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