

DAILY LIFE IN

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

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Society, Part I: City Life, Country Life, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Life

CITY LIFE

The cities of Mesopotamia were sizable (100 acres or more) and well populated. They functioned as political, even imperial, capitals, trade centers, and principal shrines of a region.

**Definition
of a City**

Cities were not the same as city-states. A city was characterized socially by a complex economic structure and by allegiances based on the urban community rather than on the tribe; the city was distinguished physically by public buildings and a strong city wall. Because the city protected the people from invasion, its citizens were very loyal. A city-state was an administrative unit that could contain several cities.

The average Sumerian city, and, most probably, later cities, included three parts. First, the city itself referred to the walled area, which included the temple or temples, the palace with residences for royal officials, and the houses of the citizens. Second, the "suburb," called the "outer city" in Sumerian, consisted of houses, farms, cattle folds, fields, and gardens, all furnishing the city with food and raw materials. We do not know how the "outer city" extended or whether it was protected by secondary walls or by fortified outposts, the latter known from the Neo-Babylonian period. Third, the wharf section, functioned not only as a wharf, but also as the center of commercial activity. The wharf had administrative independence and separate legal status for the citizens transacting business there. Foreign traders had stores here, and their needs

were met by the tavern keeper of the wharf. Of course, not every city followed this three-part scheme. A few Mesopotamian cities were characterized by specific topographical features, as the following: Asshur was on a cliff, reached by a monumental stairway, and Borsippa straddled both sides of a lake.

During the fourth millennium BCE larger settlements, or "cities," can be distinguished from the smaller sites, or "villages." In their own languages neither the Sumerians nor the Akkadians distinguished between city and village; both languages used the same word to refer to permanent settlements. Manors and certain rural settlements were given specific names, distinct from "cities."¹

The cuneiform documents confirmed that a small number of old and important cities enjoyed privileges and exemptions; that is, their legal status differed in essential points from that of any other community. In Babylonia, these cities were Nippur, Babylon, and Sippar; in Assyria, the old capital Asshur and subsequently Haran in Upper Mesopotamia. The inhabitants of these "free cities" were exempt from conscripted labor, military service, and taxes. The privileges accorded the inhabitants of these cities were under divine protection. Their status, called *kidinnu*, had both legal and religious implications (see Chapter 11).

The standard of living for a typical city was only slightly above subsistence level. The city enjoyed real prosperity only when its king was victorious and brought back from his campaigns booty, tribute from subject cities, and gifts of intimidated neighbors. The spoils of war were added to the wealth of the ruler and redistributed among the military hierarchy and the bureaucracy, thereby raising the standard of living of the city. The temples grew rich and were elaborately decorated; temple personnel were allotted grants in land. Decorating the palace and temple drew traders, who brought typical imports (metals, timber, precious stones) as well as luxury items (certain spices, perfumes, wines, finery, rare animals). Only a few of the Babylonian cities prospered for more than one or two short periods, and most not at all. Affluence was soon replaced by a wretched existence, with people living among ruins, the sanctuaries dilapidated, and the city walls disintegrating. The citizens were debt-ridden under the authority of greedy administrators. The inhabitants soon fell prey to invading enemies and raids of people living in the open country. Once a city was destroyed, the remaining inhabitants continued to live in the ruins, preserving the city's name through the millennia.

In Babylonia, kings built either fortified seats of government or small fortresses against possible invasions. Fortresses were also constructed in outlying or rebellious areas. In Assyria, new cities were established by the king for political or military purposes. Occasionally an extensive wall

was built to seal off a threatening frontier, such as the wall erected against the invading Amorite tribes, and, much later, the Median wall built between the Tigris and Euphrates (see Chapter 3).

The policy of both Babylonian and Assyrian kings was to urbanize outlying sections of the country. In this way, the kings ensured the safe passage of caravans involved in overland trade and solidified nomadic or unsettled populations so that they could be controlled. Further colonization provided increased agricultural production, income from taxes, conscripted workers, and soldiers. Assyrian kings often founded cities on virgin soil as new capitals to be populated by their administrators, workers, and craftsmen captured in wars. They even claimed conquered cities, which they renamed and repopulated with prisoners of war or deported peoples to ensure Assyria's control.

The shapes of cities varied. Usually the wall of a Mesopotamian city was constructed in either wide curves or **City Planning** in rectangular, often symmetrical designs. Other shapes were found, such as ovals (Ur and Uruk), triangles (Der), diamonds (late Babylon), rectangles (Sippar), trapezoids (Nineveh), and squares (Dur-Sharrukin and Nimrud). In Zinjirli in northern Syria (second millennium BCE), the outer wall was almost a perfect circle, with one hundred wall towers; it enclosed a circular inner city, with a palace, a temple, barracks, and other structures. Often round cities were built after the collapse of the Babylonian and Seleucid empires. We even have a map of Nippur, drawn on clay; it is the only Mesopotamian city map found to date and is true to scale.

Both rectangular and round city plans have been traced to similar military encampments depicted on Assyrian reliefs. Such simple geometric figures were the conventional way for either migrating tribes or armies to arrange their camps. Assyrian military camps, whether rectangular or round, included the royal tent, with the sacred standards, consistently placed off center, near the stockade which surrounded the rows of tents.

Southern cities were similar to northern cities along the Euphrates in their dependence on agriculture. But as northern settlements were transformed from villages to cities in the third and second millennia BCE, the small mounds of the early settlements were used as raised platforms upon which to build their temples and palaces on a high citadel, sometimes separated from the rest of the city by their own fortifications. Whether the Assyrians occupied an old settlement or founded a new one, they separated parts of the city by elevation, whereas the southern cities used the maze of waterways for this purpose.

In the south the city was the primary settlement pattern, situated along canals; the rural population inhabited more temporary sites that shifted

as the waterways changed course. In the north permanent villages, some dating back to the Neolithic period, were distributed regularly across the fertile land.

In the south, land was divided by numerous canals into areas of intensive cultivation; southern marshes supplied reeds, fish, and birds; the wasteland could be used "as is" for seasonal grazing. In the north, land was ready for either tell-size agriculture or grazing. Northern cities were divided by elevation into upper and lower towns, that is, citadels and residential areas. In the south, land was more valuable in irrigated zones. But in the north, city and country property were of equal value. Such geographic differences suggest that no one concept of city planning could completely satisfy different needs.

The sites in the south were bare, showing the results of millennia of sandblasting by summer winds. But the sites located in the north were partially vegetated and bore signs of intense water erosion. Because of these regional variations, the southern sites preserved kilns, canals, and even entire buildings on the surface, thereby furnishing clues to the overall urban layout.

Urban centers often grew because of their temples, which served the religious needs of the people, and also because of their administrative and economic functions. By the beginning of the fourth millennium BCE, the cities operated as hubs for negotiating among different groups inhabiting Mesopotamia, such as the herders of the desert, the fishermen of the marshes, and the farmers of the plains. Later the cities became centers of communication and trade between Mesopotamians and the people of far-off mountain areas, which provided materials Mesopotamia lacked, such as stone, metal, and wood. A network of trade routes ran through the open country among commercial centers. However, there was little traffic on these routes. Traveling was dangerous due to marauders from the deserts, migrants, runaway slaves, and wild animals. Only army contingents, foreign ambassadors traveling under military protection, royal messengers, and donkey caravans, carrying loads from city to city, dared to travel these routes. In fact, there were few periods in the history of Mesopotamia when private persons could travel freely and private letters could be sent from city to city. The Assyrian kings, recognizing the need for safe travel and communication, built roads and maintained them by conscripting workers from nearby villages.

By 3500 BCE, in cities like Uruk, the temple organized Mesopotamian society. The temple was built on a raised platform and could be seen for miles around. The temple generated writing, government, a judicial system, fine art, architecture, and so on. For the first five hundred years of Mesopotamian history, the temples alone controlled most facets of society and the economy.

By approximately 2800 BCE, territorial disputes erupted in the south.

Monumental fortifications were built to maintain security and define boundaries between rural and urban areas. But these wars required leadership, and so another major urban institution emerged—the palace. Mesopotamian cities now had two centers of power: the palace, which controlled the political and military arena, and the temple, which regulated the economy and religious life. Monumental fortifications were built to maintain security and to define boundaries between rural and urban areas.

In the third and early second millennia BCE, some Assyrian villages became centers of political power and expanded, often abruptly, into cities. Temples were built on the mound of the old settlement, and new fortifications were constructed to enclose a larger, lower town. At some northern sites, the citadel mound was located at the edge of the new city, next to the city wall.

Residential areas were crowded with houses, workshops, shrines, and other structures. The cuneiform tablets provide a limited description of residential areas. Both textual and archaeological data confirm that neighborhoods were not based on wealth; the house of a prominent official could stand next to the house of a poor fisherman. Workshops have even been found in residential areas. We know that cities were divided into several residential neighborhoods, but we lack information on the exact size and organization of these neighborhoods. Some texts have acknowledged local leadership within these areas.

Residential Areas

In the third millennium BCE in the Diyala region, there were spacious houses with recognizable lavatories, consisting of a brick platform with a wide slit. However, the houses of ordinary peasants were very simple one-story buildings containing one or two rooms with little equipment. The building material depended upon what was available in the vicinity; in Mesopotamia mud brick was used to build a peasant hut, which survived as the *serifah*, common in Iraq until the 1950s.

Excavations at the city of Mashkan-shapir have provided the best picture of the layout of a southern Mesopotamian city to date. In the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BCE, Mashkan-shapir was the second capital of the kingdom of Larsa as well as an important trade center. The city was suddenly abandoned ca. 1720 BCE and was never reoccupied in any significant way. The main roads of Mashkan-shapir ran either parallel to canals or at right angles to them, with bridges or ferries to link neighborhoods. The residential areas were connected by a network of streets, and most homes were entered through narrow alleyways and culs-de-sac. The layout of the narrow streets was like a maze. The street surfaces were uneven, in part due to the constant rebuilding of homes on previous foundations that were never leveled, and in part because garbage was dumped into the streets. Dogs and other scavenging ani-

mals ate some rubbish, but the rest was dried by the sun and walked on. At Mashkan-shapir all residential areas included artisans; some areas even provided evidence of craft specialization, such as the production of pottery, copper-bronze smelting, and lapidary work.

Archaeology and texts have provided no evidence of either a central marketplace or a commercial quarter in Mesopotamian cities. Textual references to wine shops around squares have still not explained the role of these stores in the distribution of goods. Some small buildings in residential areas have been identified as shops, but the archaeological evidence is shaky; furthermore, the texts rarely mention shops. Perhaps the agriculture products and crafts were traded near the centers of production or importation, such as workshops, city gates, and wharves. The establishment of markets was a late development, stimulated by the extraordinary size of the cities, which led to the creation of supply markets. Thus, the markets served to link those who lived inside the city to those who lived outside.

Most archaeologists have calculated populations based on 200 persons per hectare (1 hectare \approx 2.5 acres) in southern irrigated areas. The resulting figure correlates with textual information. That is, the populations of major cities in southern Mesopotamia ranged from 10,000 to nearly 100,000 people. Such estimates should be regarded as maximum populations of cities in their heyday. The archaeological evidence, however, has suggested that the population density in the south was approximately 100 persons per hectare, similar to rural villages of today in southwestern Asia. The population of the cities changed as their political fortunes changed. Unfortunately, calculating the population of northern cities has been more difficult, because large residential areas have rarely been excavated.

With the advent of the Neo-Assyrian empire, the temple and palace became one complex built on high citadel mounds, which were walled off from the rest of the city. Stone replaced brick as the primary construction material. In this way, a city within a city was created from which ordinary citizens were excluded. This inner city has endured as a distinctive pattern of urbanism even today in Eurasia, namely, the Kremlin of Moscow and the "Forbidden City" of Beijing. The term *kirhu*, used to describe this characteristic of Mesopotamian urbanism, is neither Akkadian nor Semitic, thus implying that the citadel city was foreign to Mesopotamia.

Unlike older cities in which the citadel was in the center, new capital cities, particularly those built by Assyrian kings, were often raised above the plain on a terrace the same height as the city wall. The entrance to the citadel was located in the lower city, so the king had to pass through the city whenever he left the palace.

The Population

Excursus: Capital Cities of the Neo- Assyrian Empire

Cities used their watercourses to reinforce their fortifications. Archaeologists have excavated a number of bridges both within and outside the main walls. A fortified building was constructed near the city walls to house weapons and booty. The workshops of armorers, who made weapons, horse fittings, chariots, and other equipment, were located next to this complex. Large stone horse troughs also found near Nineveh (Nebi Yunus) were probably meant to provide water for the imperial cavalry. The citadels of both Nineveh and Nimrud (Calhu) used wharves for trade and river communication.

Sennacherib's own building inscriptions furnished a detailed description of Nineveh which coincides with the archaeological data. Nineveh had two settlement mounds: (1) Sennacherib's palace, covering one hectare, and (2) the "back palace" or imperial armory. The two mounds were about a kilometer apart and separated by the Khosr River. The two mounds united at the city wall, which enclosed an area of more than seven hundred hectares, making Nineveh the largest city in Middle Eastern history. Sennacherib described his city as filled with plazas, fields, gardens, and a large botanical and zoological park next to his palace. The park was irrigated, and the excess water from the canal system was fed into an area that created a man-made swamp for canebrakes, water birds, and wild pigs. Sennacherib also gave the citizens of Nineveh plots of two acres on which to plant orchards.

Sennacherib initiated his massive building program at the border of the earlier lower town. Here were the houses of the rich and powerful citizens of the seventh century BCE. On the east was Sennacherib's great Royal Road; traces remain of its stone pavement. Sennacherib, in describing the Royal Road, connected its construction with widening the roads through the artisan-market areas.

**Nebuchadnezzar's
Babylon, an
Architectural
Marvel in the
Ancient World**

According to Herodotus, Nebuchadnezzar enhanced the ancient capital of Babylon with his building and renovation projects. The topography of the ancient capital, described by Herodotus in detail, matched well with archaeological excavations of the city. The remarkable sights included the ziggurat, the famous Hanging Gardens (one of the Seven Wonders of the

Ancient World), and the museum next to Nebuchadnezzar's new palace. Babylon was more or less square, covering approximately 1,000 hectares, and bisected by the Euphrates. The Euphrates itself could be crossed by a bridge that rested on five piers.

The city walls of Babylon can be traced. According to Herodotus, the outer wall extended more than eight kilometers and had enough space on top for a four-horse chariot to turn around. The most detailed and best preserved gate was dedicated to Ishtar; its thirty-six-foot-high walls

are still standing. The walls were constructed of deep-blue-glazed bricks with molded figures of bulls and dragons in yellow and white.

Nebuchadnezzar's Southern Palace had five courtyards surrounded by offices, royal apartments, and reception rooms. In a corner of the palace, archaeologists found an underground crypt. There, a three-shafted well in one of the cellars appeared to have been some kind of hydraulic lifting system, perhaps the water source of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Farther south, the Processional Way came to the main temple complex, the dwelling place of Marduk. Here stood the ziggurat, the famous Tower of Babel. Today only 300 square feet of its foundations remain. Nearby was Esagila, Marduk's main temple, with a golden statue of Marduk, restored by Nebuchadnezzar II.

Before Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein had plans to restore the city of Babylon. In the tradition of Mesopotamian kings, he planned to put his name in one of the bricks. From September 22 through October 6, 1994, Hussein hosted a celebration billed as "From Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein: Babylon Invokes Its Glories on the Path of Jihad and Glorious Development." A poster featured his profile superimposed on that of Nebuchadnezzar II at the top and the famous glazed bricks with lion friezes and a turreted gate at the bottom.

The main institutions of each city were the temple and the palace (see above). The main temple was always located in the highest part of the city but not necessarily in the center. Ziggurats were often built near the temple. The other urban institution, the palace, was not as easy for archaeologists to find because it was not built on a platform like the temple. During times of political centralization, capitals were governed by kings, and cities were ruled by governors. Power lay with three groups: the temple, the king, and senior members of ancient or wealthy families.

City Institutions

No matter how powerful the central royal administration, there were still problems to deal with on a local level. For example, city authorities were held responsible for the security of goods and strangers and also for apprehending robbers or murderers. If city authorities were unable to find the criminals, the city was obligated to compensate the victim(s). Other cases handled locally included inheritance, family disputes, and conflicts between citizens that did not involve the prerogatives of the king or the temples. Local government also chose citizens for labor or military service for the state.

Thorkild Jacobsen compiled information from disparate sources to make a case for "primitive democracy" in the Early Dynastic period. The city assembly acted as a forum for public discussion and decision. Jacobsen used the models in later myths and epics in which the gods acted in their assembly to reach political and military decisions by consensus.

In the Sumerian myth of Gilgamesh and Akka, decisions in Early Dynastic Uruk were based on the advice of both the elders and the young men of the city. The cycle of Uruk myths suggested that there was a bicameral assembly including an "upper house" or "executive council" of city elders. One or more officials were designated to govern the proceedings in the assembly. Eventually, the assembly became little more than a local council, its powers appropriated by the ruler.

The assembly members, we assume, were citizens, the "sons" of the city, but we have no direct evidence on how assembly members qualified for their positions. We presume that originally the assembly included the heads of each household, with "the elders" playing a major role. These assemblies exchanged letters with the kings, arguing with the king for confirmation of their exemptions and privileges. "The city and the elders" survived into the Old Babylonian period, but only as a law court; the real seat of power moved to the palace. We are not sure where the assembly met.

During the Old Babylonian period, cities were further divided into administrative districts called "wards," which were governed by the heads of households and the mayor. The Akkadian word for "ward" is closely related to the word for (city) "gate." That is, the assembly of the ward may have met at the city gate, and the mayor performed his duties there. A tablet from Eshnunna lists Amorites "living in the city" according to their wards, each named after the first man of each group.

Unlike all other sites in the ancient Near East, southern Mesopotamian cities were comprised of many mounds.

Canals, Streets, and Walls

The depressions between these mounds were once canals, which separated the cities into component parts. For example, at Larsa the canals divided the administrative-

religious areas from residential (or artisan) neighborhoods. The canals divided the city internally and yet connected it with distant territories for communication and trade. The canals also provided water for the residents of the city. At Ur, for example, canals were associated with harbors. Cuneiform tablets indicated that trade activity was carried out near the harbors of all southern Mesopotamian cities. Because the canal system was also the primary means of communication between different villages or cities, offices were constructed on the riverbanks to control trade and regulate the rates of exchange. The Mesopotamians referred to these business administrative offices collectively as "the wharf."

Mesopotamian cities, both large and small, were divided as well as united by streets and canals. City streets were not paved until the Assyrian period of the first millennium BCE. Sennacherib enlarged Nineveh's squares, pulled down buildings to let light into alleys and narrow streets, and straightened and widened various streets to create a main ceremonial avenue. He had his Processional Way paved with lime-

stone blocks. Sennacherib, proud of his Processional Way, wanted to preserve it:

At that time I enlarged the site of Nineveh, my royal city, I made its "market streets" wide (enough to) run a royal road. . . . In days to come, that there might be no narrowing of the royal road, I had steles made which stand facing each other. Fifty-two great cubits I measured the width of the royal road. . . . If ever (anyone of) the people who dwell in that city tears down his old house and builds a new one, and the foundation of his house encroaches upon the royal road, they shall hang him upon a stake over his (own) house.²

The final sentence is Sennacherib's only reference to citizens' housing, but it demonstrates that citizens could build their homes where they wanted and according to whatever plan, as long as they kept away from the king's highway. Both inside and outside the city, major roads probably ran parallel to the canals and rivers, much like today. Other main streets were laid at right angles, demarcating blocks of approximately one hectare. Coincidentally, both the average size of a small Mesopotamian village and the size of a residential area were one hectare.

All major Mesopotamian cities were enclosed by fortifications, which separated the city itself from its surroundings. Walls were usually built at the edge of the settlement mound so that later they could be extended to include nonsettled areas. In Mashkan-shapir, a southern Mesopotamian city dated to the second millennium BCE, a fortification system surrounded the entire city. The city wall was pierced by gates for boat traffic and gates for land travel. Because the roads usually ran parallel to the canals, the two gates were close together.

Walls served both symbolic and practical purposes. Rulers celebrated building a new wall, and when a city was conquered, standard military practice was to demolish its fortifications. Sometimes city walls proved to be either too big or too small. For example, at Ur, the ancient Early Dynastic walls inhibited the growth of its population later in the Old Babylonian period. Suburbs could be built outside the city walls, but security would be sacrificed. Or, more practically, a wall could be built to enclose a larger space. Expansion usually reflected an increased population. Also, new political rulers needed new palaces and administrative buildings, which could not fit in already densely populated areas. The capital cities needed housing for visiting officials from other centers and accommodation for increased commercial activity.

The area of Sennacherib's capital city, Nimrud, increased from 72 hectares to 400 hectares. Sennacherib built a great inner wall which was forty bricks thick and 180 courses high, that is, 12 meters thick and 13.5 meters high. There were fifteen gates piercing the wall. North and south

of the city were more parks, and the cultivated land of the city probably extended eight to sixteen kilometers beyond a great outer wall.

A New Year's Chapel belonging to the city was located outside the city walls. Once each year, the statue of the main city god was carried in a procession and accompanied by its worshipers to this sanctuary. Sometimes a sacred road passed through a special gate to the outlying sanctuary to the temple.

Water Supply and Sewage Disposal

The sources of drinking water in Mesopotamia were the Twin Rivers and their canals; for many cities these remained the main sources of water down through the first millennium BCE. But some palaces, especially in Assyria, got their water supply from deep wells, safe from pollution. For the most part, large cities were built near water supplies. Smaller cities survived if they had many springs, wells, aqueducts, or cisterns.

In Nimrud many wells were dug to a depth of ninety feet to protect the city's water supply in times of siege. In 1952 excavators cleared one well and found it still able to provide five thousand gallons a day. In that well archaeologists found a wooden pulley wheel bearing the wear of rope marks, and many pots, some with rope still around their necks, which formed a chain of vessels operated by a windlass to draw water from the well. Sennacherib described a similar device when he rebuilt his capital, Nineveh: "In order to draw water daily, I had ropes, bronze cables and bronze chains made, and I had beams and cross-bars fixed over the wells instead of poles."³

King Sennacherib had an aqueduct constructed from Jerwan, a village 9.6 kilometers away, to supply Nineveh, his capital, with water for drinking and irrigation. This aqueduct, over 270 meters long, anticipated later architectural plans in every detail. The entire structure used about two million stones, each weighing a quarter of a ton. The water flowed over the aqueduct floor, which was hardened earth waterproofed with bitumen and lined with stone. The aqueduct extended over the valleys on arches and was fed by many small streams, thereby guaranteeing an adequate supply of water to the city.

Pure water was especially important in the ancient Near East. At the Hittite court, water for the king had to be strained; records noted that one time the king found a hair in his water jug and ordered the guilty water carrier put to death. Mesopotamian texts also referred to the risk of death from drinking contaminated water. For the Assyrians, cleanliness was essential, particularly for ritual purposes.

The health of a community was directly connected to its ability to eliminate human waste without contaminating its water supply. As early as the third millennium BCE, royal palaces and even the homes of the rich had indoor lavatories. Usually the lavatories were placed against

outside walls, with a seat over a terra-cotta drainage pipe. Human waste was often carried to a distant river through a complex system of drains and sewers beneath the streets. Manholes were used to keep the sewers clear. Of course, bathrooms were a luxury most could not afford. Archaeological excavation has demonstrated that the homes of ordinary workers and peasants had no lavatories, not even communal bathrooms. Instead, the poor would defecate outside in orchards, in fields within city walls, and in surrounding fields. In Mesopotamia having human waste outdoors was not necessarily a health hazard, since the hot sun dried and sterilized fecal matter within hours. But if human waste was too close to a water supply, the water could become contaminated. In King Sennacherib's palace, the throne room had a bathroom adjacent to it, a feature common in palaces.

A typical bathroom had a floor of burnt brick waterproofed with bitumen, which was plastered on the lower parts of the walls. A depressed part of the floor had one or two drainage holes with stone plugs. A seat could have been built over the drainage holes. At Nuzi, a provincial Mesopotamian town, a luxury toilet was unearthed in the residential section of the Government House. The "seat" was made of two marble slabs. Low platforms beside the toilet were probably stands for water jars, used for "flushing."

Garbage was usually thrown into the streets and empty lots with layers of ash, perhaps indicating incineration. There was no municipal rubbish collection. Animal teeth and bones at Mesopotamian sites show that both pigs and dogs were found in all parts of the city; they probably played a role in the disposal of garbage. Scavenging pigs and dogs roamed around Babylonian cities, and among the Hittites these scavengers even wandered inside the palace of the king. These animals were only prohibited from crossing the threshold of the place where the food for the king or the god was prepared. In time the scavenging pigs were eaten (except by people such as the Israelites, for whom the pig was taboo). However, if this meat was not thoroughly cooked, the flesh transmitted dangerous *Trichinella* worms. Rodents also thrived in the constant presence of garbage, with rats carrying fleas, an agent of the bubonic plague.

THE COUNTRYSIDE

The city served as a political center and military refuge to its surrounding villages. Cuneiform sources do not record any conflict between people living in the open countryside and city-dwellers. In fact, the residents of the city owned farms and estates in the countryside.

In the Old Babylonian period these villages governed their own territory, regardless of whether they were politically dependent or inde-

pendent. The Laws of Hammurabi (CH §23) stipulated that the village or city was responsible for crimes committed within its domain: "If the robber should not be seized, the man who has been robbed shall establish the extent of his lost property before the god; and the city and the governor in whose territory and district the robbery was committed shall replace his lost property to him."⁴

The elders and the mayor acted on behalf of the village, thus setting the pattern later adopted in the city wards. Consensus was required for the organization of water rights, fallow land, and other agricultural affairs. Old Babylonian correspondence documented the role of the village in local government. A letter states, "The village has given me 10 iku (= 3.6 hectares) of land, the holding of a soldier who campaigned with me and who has no heir (literally, whose "hearth is extinguished)."⁵

NOMADIC AND SEMI-NOMADIC LIFE

Nomads were shepherds who migrated with their herds through areas not suited for cultivation. Early nomads in the Near East were never more than one day's travel from a water hole. Nomadic groups also had bases to which they returned periodically. For example, both the Amorites and Aramaeans used Jebel Bishri as their headquarters, between the Euphrates and the main oasis of Tadmor (Palmyra).

Nomads belonged to social groups larger than the family, such as the tribe or clan. The political organization of nomads varied from small, decentralized "egalitarian" groups to large, hierarchical "chiefdoms." Many nomadic tribes or clans farmed and raised animals on the outskirts of settlements. These tribes have been termed semi-nomads or transhumants. Today we use the term "bedouin," borrowed from Arabic, to refer only to camel-nomads, who cross the desert by dromedary, an animal whose capabilities are superior to those of the ass.

Nomads did not leave written records; even archaeological remains are meager relative to those of the sedentary or settled people. Despite the progress of archaeologists in their field methods and scientific techniques, we have only a bare outline of nomadic life in ancient times. Because of this lack of information, archaeologists are forced to consider traditional peoples of the modern Near East for insights into the ancient nomadic way of life, a study called ethnoarchaeology. The tribal organization of modern nomads, as well as their techniques of farming and herding, is believed to simulate a way of life that began in prehistoric times.

Frank Hole, an archaeologist known for his use of the ethnographic study of nomads and archaeological fieldwork, joined a group of Luri nomads (in Iran), even migrating with them in the spring. En route in

southwestern Iran, he discovered a Neolithic site, which was part of a larger area that would soon be leveled to improve irrigation. After completing his ethnographic study of the Luri nomads, Hole returned. But the site had already been leveled, and remains of a nomadic tent site were exposed. He also learned that the Luri nomads with whom he traveled used to camp near this site before the Shah's government re-settled them.

Sayid Ali, one of the older nomads in the group, asked Hole why they were digging at this site, which he called "just a nomad camp."⁶ Sayid Ali examined each of the uncovered tent sites and their orientation to the prevailing wind. From his observations, Sayid Ali was able to determine the season of occupation, the size and layout of the campsite, and whether the tent belonged to a leader or to an average person. While cleaning out one of the tent sites, Ali was even able to show Hole where the fireplace was by using the back wall as a point of orientation. Then from the fireplace, Ali took several steps to the front of the tent and turned a number of steps to the left. Here he found the ash dump where the ash was deposited each day after the fireplace was cleaned. To Hole, the connections were apparent: the spatial layout of a tent and of its surroundings had remained the same over time. Unfortunately, today little remains for us to study, as the traditional ways of life throughout the region have almost disappeared.

The traditional view of scholars on nomadic-sedentary relations in the Near East stressed their mutual antagonism. This opinion was influenced by ancient Near Eastern textual sources, written by scribes who lived in the city: the authors stressed the uncivilized behavior of nomadic groups and their potential danger to sedentary society. For example, the Gutians were described in a derogatory manner:

not classed among people, not reckoned as part of the land,
 . . . people who know no inhibitions,
 With human instinct but canine intelligence and monkeys'
 features. (*The Curse of Agade: The Ekur Avenged*)⁷

In another text, the "Weidner Chronicle," the Gutians are described as people "who were never shown how to worship god, who did not know how to properly perform the rites and observances."⁸

Desert nomads were ever present, and their campsites were regarded as a threat to the city-dwellers, as found in descriptions of the Amorites:

a tent dweller . . . wind and rain . . . who digs up truffles from the hills, but does not know how to kneel; who eats raw meat; who has no house during the days of his life, and is not buried on the day of his death. (*Myth of the Wedding of Amurru*)⁹

Since that time the Amorites, a ravaging people, with the instincts of a beast . . . the sheepfolds like wolves; a people which does not know grain. (Inscription of Shu-Sin)¹⁰

The Amorites were well documented in early Mesopotamian sources. In Sumerian, the Amorites were called *MAR.TU* and in Akkadian *Amurru*, meaning “west,” that is, Semitic-speakers who originated in regions west of Sumer and Akkad. Mesopotamian sources regarded the Amorites as a threat. In fact, the kings of Ur built a defensive wall called “the wall that keeps Tidnum (an Amorite group) away” (see Chapter 3). However, many Amorite individuals were assimilated into Mesopotamian settlements and assumed various positions in society. When the Third Dynasty of Ur fell, Amorites became the rulers of many Mesopotamian cities. Most prominent among these rulers was Shamshi-Adad I (ca. 1830–1776 BCE), who created a state encompassing nearly all of upper Mesopotamia and whose ancestors were described as those “who lived in tents”—that is, nomads. His famous Amorite contemporary in the south, Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE) of Babylon, also derived his lineage from the same tent-dwelling ancestors. The Amorites sometimes split into “Sons of the North” and “Sons of the South,” but the two groups were basically the same. In a letter, Zimri-Lim (1782–1759 BCE) was portrayed as governing both the sedentary Akkadian population of Mari and the Khanaeans of his own Amorite origins: “If indeed they come to the banks of the Euphrates, is it not like beads in a necklace, distinguished because one is white and one black? Thus, they say: This village is Bin-Simal (‘Sons of the left = North’), this village is Bin-Yamina (‘Sons of the Right = South’). Is it not like the flood-waters of a river in which the upper confronts the lower?”¹¹ The royal archives of Mari (ca. 1810–1760 BCE) documented the relationship between sedentist central authority, also Amorite, and the migratory routes of the nomadic Amorites. The kingdom of Mari kept careful watch on the movements of these Amorites and even tried to control their migratory patterns. The Mari state frequently employed tribal members in *corvée* labor and military service.

Though nomadic invaders and uncivilized peoples from the Zagros Mountains were sometimes despised for lacking the basic qualities of civilized people, contact with Mesopotamians could “civilize” the “uncivilized.” A Sumerian poem composed in honor of Ur declared that even a native of Markhashi, a mountain region of Elam, became civilized once he resided in Ur.

Recent studies have shown that nomads were economically dependent on the sedentary population, particularly for grain. But nomads were difficult to govern because they lacked ties to the community. Most nomads were shepherds, which meant that they wandered far away to find

grazing land. When their relations with the villagers were friendly, the nomads were employed as shepherds in exchange for grazing rights. Sometimes nomads grazed their herds on sedentists' fallow fields, and their animals provided dung as fertilizer. Nomads were employed as agricultural workers, as laborers on public projects, and as soldiers. The state allotted plots of land to soldiers, so nomads could become sedentary in this way. The Amorites bred donkeys, used by farmers and soldiers as draft animals; also, donkeys were probably sold to merchants for their caravans. Nomads were involved in trade and at times controlled the trade routes between Mesopotamia and the west. The nomads also furnished animals and their local know-how for commercial ventures. By the end of the second millennium BCE, camels gave nomads the ability to move to desert areas far away from the sedentist zones of the Levant and Mesopotamia, while still retaining ties to these sedentary communities.

Near Eastern agriculture was always a risky business, at the mercy of severe environmental or climatic difficulties, greedy governmental authorities, and crop damage in times of war. Within this framework, domestic animals were "capital on the hoof."¹² As an economic strategy, herding predominated in pastoralism, but other activities were also performed, such as hunting, gathering, trading, and agriculture. The nomadic way of life may have served as an alternative when farming was no longer feasible.

The desert population renewed itself by absorbing other Semitic tribes; for example, the Amorites (ca. 2200–2000 BCE) preceded the Aramaeans (ca. 1200–1000 BCE) who, in turn, preceded the Arabs (800 BCE). Because they had no permanent territorial claims, these groups were identified by tribes. Descent from a common ancestor was of great importance to tribal affiliation. The genealogy of tribes was, perhaps, more theoretical than literal. Tribal affiliations changed, tribes constantly absorbed other tribes, and individuals even changed their tribal status.

Political upheavals brought the Amorites and later the Aramaeans on the scene due to widespread abandonment of rural settlements. According to the texts, the mobility of nomads was aided by domesticated horses (third millennium BCE), which gave them a distinct military advantage in raids against settlements. That is, nomadic raids succeeded during times of weakness in settled communities.

In time each nomadic group was absorbed into other populations or became sedentary. Traditionally, this process was viewed in terms of successive stages in which the tribes were transformed from nomadic barbarism to settled life. Passing through social strata, some nomads eventually became princes or kings and, as "town-dwellers," founded dynasties.

The nomads living closer to urban civilization gradually assimilated

into sedentary society. Part of the tribe established a winter home near the village, cultivating fields around the settlement; another part moved the flocks further north each summer in search of grazing. That is, nomads followed migratory routes which were carefully planned every year. The annual migration may have followed particular routes to known encampments, where the grazing rights were drawn between other nomads and the settled population.

The Aramaeans were first mentioned in twelfth century BCE texts of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I, who conducted a sequence of campaigns against Aramaean nomads. Ensuing Aramaean attacks on Assyria during Tiglath-Pileser I's reign corresponded with famines and crop failures. When Assyrian kings conducted a series of campaigns to the west in the late tenth century BCE, the Aramaeans had formed a nexus of petty states, many named after tribal ancestors, such as Bit-Adini ("House of Adini"), on the great bend of the Euphrates, and Bit-Bakhiani ("House of Bakhiani"), in the upper Khabur plains. Beginning in the ninth century, Aramaean rulers kept their own records, written in their own language, Aramaic.

Camels were first domesticated in the third millennium BCE in Arabia. By the end of the second millennium BCE, camel nomads from Arabia began a thriving trade in incense and spices from southern Arabia to the markets of the Levant and Mesopotamia. Since camels can survive on less water than sheep or goats, camel pastoralists were able to roam vast expanses of arid desert, while sheep-goat nomads could not.

CLASS AND SOCIETY

Hammurabi's law code furnished much information about class and society as corroborated by contemporary documents from the ancient Near East. Mesopotamia's social structure was based on economics; that is, Mesopotamian society was divided into two groups, those who owned property, especially land, and those who were dependent upon the wealthy—the "haves" and "have-nots." Mesopotamia did not have warrior or priestly classes. Hammurabi's law code named three basic social strata, the *awilum*, the *muškēnum* and the *wardum*; the latter means "slave," the only term which can easily be translated. Any legal distinction between *awilum* and *muškēnum* disappeared after the Old Babylonian period.

Awilum, "man," usually translated "freeman," that is, free from debt, also implied a "gentleman." Possibly the *awilum* was a landowner or head of a household. The *awilum* had obligations to the state to pay taxes and perform military service. Upon his death, his property was divided among his sons.

Muškēnum is an Amorite term, literally meaning "the one prostrating

himself." Whenever the *muškēnum* appeared in relation to the *awīlum*, the "freeman" or "citizen," the status of the *muškēnum* was inferior. The *muškēnum* often served at the palace in exchange for rations or land allotments. Numerous legal provisions may have been necessary in order to identify the *muškēnum* with the palace because he was not protected by customary law.

After 1500 BCE the word *muškēnum* appeared in texts with the connotation of "the poor." With this meaning, the *muškēnum* made its way into Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, and much later, into the Romance languages, namely, French (as *mesquin*) and Italian (as *meschino*).

The first slaves captured by Mesopotamia were men or women seized in raids on the mountains, so that the ideograms for "slave" and "slave-girl" were composed of the signs for "man" or "woman" plus the sign for "mountain." Initially the economy could not accommodate captives, so they were killed. Later the kings saved captives and organized them into gangs serving as laborers or soldiers; the king could still kill them since he "owned" them. The slaves worked with conscripted laborers and some hired workers to construct roads, dig canals, build military fortifications, erect temples, till the crown lands, and work in palace factories. State slaves lived in special barracks; their names, ages, and lands of origin were recorded. Temple slaves were drafted from both prisoners of war and the offerings of private citizens. Preclassical societies, however, were never economically dependent upon slave labor. These societies began increasingly to use slaves as domestics, as military conquests brought in more prisoners of war.

In the third millennium BCE, citizens went into debt slavery because they could not repay loans to the aristocracy. Penniless men and women sold themselves or their children into slavery or were seized by creditors. By the eighteenth century BCE, debt slavery was well established, with five of Hammurabi's laws regulating aspects of it.¹³ In fact, in the Old Babylonian period, Mesopotamian kings would issue, at the beginning of their reigns, a reform edict of "righteousness" or "justice," which included economic measures such as freeing citizens from debt slavery. In later times, children were often given to temples to save their lives in times of famine. In first millennium BCE Babylonia, these temple slaves represented an important economic class which was able to rise to important positions within the temple administration.

Babylonian merchants sold foreign slaves: Subarians from the north were much in demand. The cuneiform texts showed that slaves were frequently bought and sold, sometimes with an implied warranty; that is, if a slave suffered an epileptic attack within one hundred days of purchase, the seller was obligated to take back the slave.

During the Old Babylonian period the average price for a slave was approximately twenty shekels of silver, but sometimes as much as

ninety. The average wage paid to hired laborers was ten shekels a year. Therefore, landowners preferred to hire seasonal laborers, because it was cheaper than owning slaves for agricultural work.

The slave became the property of his owner. If he tried to escape, he was severely punished. Runaway slaves were rare, but according to one text, on their foreheads was marked "A runaway—seize him!" A slave was often distinguished by a characteristic lock of hair, though others wore tags or fetters. The authorities were responsible for capturing runaway slaves and returning them to their masters. The theft of slaves was punished severely, with special laws applied to palace slaves.

Private slaves were relatively uncommon and were employed largely in domestic service. Slaves born in the house had special status. In the Old Babylonian period, they were often adopted to care for their adoptive parents in their old age. Upon the death of their "parents," the slaves gained their freedom. Slaves had certain legal rights: they could take part in business, borrow money, and buy their freedom. If a slave, either male or female, married a free person, the children they had together would be free.

Social distinctions were not fixed. The slave could be freed, and the free man could be enslaved by debt. A man without land could become a landowner. There were several ways to become a landowner. Kings rewarded administrators with grants of land. A wealthy merchant could buy land. In fact, in regions where law customarily forbade the sale of ancestral land, the wealthy merchant could circumvent this prohibition by legal fiction; that is, he would be adopted by the seller and thus inherit his land. There was social mobility at the very top. For example, a man who was not of royal birth could become king (see Chapter 3). According to tradition, Sargon's father was unknown, which meant he was of humble birth. Since the king was the chief representative of the god on earth, the priests and scribes created the necessary divine link in *The Legend of Sargon*. The legend told that Sargon was the son of a high priestess who bore him secretly because she was prohibited from having sexual relations with a man. A high priestess was often of royal lineage and often the consort of a god. Therefore, the son of a high priestess was certainly worthy of being king. Hammurabi, an Amorite, explained his rise to kingship in the prologue to his laws: "At that time, the gods Anu and Enlil, for the enhancement of the well-being of the people, named me by name: Hammurabi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the sun-god Shamash, over all humankind, to illuminate the land."¹⁴

Ethnic divisions, with few exceptions, played no role in ancient Mesopotamia. Many ethnic groups entered Mesopotamia, and all eventually assimilated. Even former Assyrian enemies who resided in cities ruled

by their conquerors were treated as "equals"; they were never called barbarians, "Asiatics," or other derogatory names, as corroborated by Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions.

Fringe groups existed, particularly those whom the Assyrians deported as early as the thirteenth century BCE. Assyrian reliefs often depicted women and children in wagons, while the men were on foot. Only some of the deportees became slaves; many more worked on public projects, and others, if qualified, were incorporated into the army. Craftsmen were able to ply their trades, particularly when their skills were in great demand. In most cases, the assimilation of resettled peoples was encouraged. Of those deported and resettled, the Aramaeans were the largest group. However, because many Aramaeans had already invaded Babylonia and Assyria through the plains, these newly arrived Aramaeans were easily assimilated.

7

Society, Part II: Private Life

PRIVATE HOUSES

Houses in ancient Mesopotamia were built of the same materials as those in Iraq today: mud brick, mud plaster for the walls, mud and poplar for the roofs, and wood for doors and doorframes; all materials available around the city. The purpose of a house in southern Iraq was to provide shelter from the twelve hours of unrelenting heat—the climate from May to September. Bricks were made from a mixture of clay and chopped straw, packed into molds, and then left to dry in the sun, often in the first summer month (May–June), also called “the month of bricks.”¹ Baked bricks lasted longer but were expensive to manufacture; consequently, they were used only to construct luxurious buildings. In the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1900–1595 BCE) baked bricks, bitumen and lime plaster, were used to waterproof the lower parts of the wall, which were subject to deterioration from rising dampness.

Ancient houses, particularly those made of sun-dried brick, often collapsed. The Laws of Hammurabi devoted five sections to this problem (§§229–233), noting in particular the builder’s responsibility:

If a builder constructs a house for a man, but does not make his work sound, and the house that he constructs collapses and causes the death of the householder, that builder shall be killed.

If it should cause the death of a son of the householder, they shall kill a son of that builder.²

The roof was usually constructed from planks of palm tree wood, then a cover of reeds and palm leaves, and finally a layer of earth. Stairs of wood or brick led to the roof, where vegetables could be dried in the sun, a cool breeze enjoyed, and sometimes rituals performed.

In the third millennium BCE the average house was a thick-walled mud hut, usually without windows. When windows were present, they were made from clay or wooden grilles set in the wall. Artificial lighting was supplied by lamps, which were often shaped like small shoes filled with sesame seed oil and a wick made from wool, a reed, or some other plant. The rooms of these houses showed little evidence of architectural planning. Doors between rooms were so low that people had to stoop as they went through. Frequently, two adjacent houses shared a common wall. Under such circumstances, both neighbors were responsible for the wall.

Usually doors were made of wood; they were set in a wooden frame, which was painted red, the color that frightened evil spirits and kept them from entering. Occasionally, doors were made from ox hides—sometimes as many as ten ox hides. Small, crude statues meant to ward off evil were buried beneath the outer door or inside, along the walls, in lavatories, and, especially, in the bedroom.

Houses of the wealthy were often large, their rooms designed around a square courtyard. However, in cities, where space was limited, there might be rooms on only two or three sides of the courtyard. Poorer areas might not even have a courtyard. When present, second stories replicated the plan of the ground floor and were constructed on an extra thick foundation wall for support. In larger homes, the rooms and their uses have been easier to identify, such as reception rooms, kitchen and courtyard, fireplaces, and water installations. Some houses had storage rooms for valuables. These rooms could be sealed by a metal hook attached to a doorknob; clay covered the hook and knob, over which a cylinder seal was rolled to secure the premises (see Chapter 4). Sometimes, a room might be set aside as a sanctuary.

Lavatories were found from the third millennium BCE; they were designed as a platform above a pit or drain, sometimes with a seat of bitumen for comfort. The palace at Eshnunna (ca. 2300 BCE) had six lavatories with raised seats of baked brick. There were even five rooms for bathing. Bathing rooms were a feature of houses of the rich. Inventories of bathing room furnishings have supplied us with a list of their contents, namely, tubs, stools, jars, and mirrors. All lavatories and bathing rooms were connected with drains leading to a main sewer approximately one meter high and covered with baked bricks. Each lavatory had a large water pitcher, some found with a pottery dipper to help flush the waste. Assyrian palaces dated to the first millennium BCE had an elaborate drainage system, which emptied its waste into the river (see Chapter 6).

Based on available data, city houses changed in size over time. No single house should be regarded as typical. For example, in the third millennium BCE the houses at Uruk and Fara covered approximately four hundred square meters in surface area. However, during the second millennium the size of the average Old Babylonian house at Ur was less than one hundred square meters. We also have house models from various cities in ancient Mesopotamia.

The residences of ancient Mesopotamia housed creeping things such as scorpions; a group of omens referred to scorpions that fell from the ceiling onto a man or his bed. There were even magical and herbal treatments to treat scorpion stings. Snakes also crawled through the house in search of rodents in the branches and mud that formed the roof and ceiling. Here again omen texts referred to snakes falling out of the roof onto a man or his bed—sometimes this was considered a lucky omen. Even the walls of houses were decorated with different colored species of ants and cockroaches. A number of omen texts indicated the significance to be attached to animals that might be met both inside the house and on its walls—reptiles, lizards, scorpions, cockroaches, beetles, and others.

Household furnishings varied according to the time period, the location, and the wealth of the owners. The furniture of a typical private house was different from that found in palaces. Ancient furniture, like modern furniture, was most often made from wood and other organic materials which decayed over time. Consequently, archaeological finds of ancient furniture are rare, except for places such as Egypt, where the hot, dry climate inhibited decay.

Household Furnishings

The furniture designs from the third millennium BCE continued to be used in the second millennium BCE. Mari texts have provided a detailed description of how royal furniture was constructed and what it looked like. The texts recorded the use of cords, sinews, and glue in constructing furniture; leather was used for upholstery.³

The greatest variety of sources for furniture comes from the first millennium BCE, namely, texts, illustrations, and numerous archaeological finds from Assyria. The furniture was either made in Assyria, imported, or brought back as booty or tribute from neighboring countries. In fact, records of booty and tribute often listed furniture among the most valuable objects.

Stools were used for menial work at the beginning of the third millennium. They were usually made of reeds on a wooden frame. There were even folding stools with crossed legs as well as stools with carved legs and sides.

Chairs had legs, backs, and even arms. Their frames were made from various hardwoods; seventeen kinds of wood were listed. Sometimes

chair frames were inlaid with copper, bronze, silver, gold, or carved ivory. Chairs were often painted. Their seats were covered with leather, palm fiber, or rushes, or padded with felt. Loose linen slipcovers were even designed for the chairs.

Chairs came in many shapes and sizes: thrones, sedan chairs for transportation, and armchairs (from which Sennacherib is shown watching the siege of Lachish). Reliefs from Khorsabad showed Sargon II presented with two kinds of tables, a chair or throne, and a footstool with lion's paw feet set on conical bases. Assyrian furniture has been found with bronze panels of griffins and winged deities in addition to calf or bull head finials decorating the arms. Ivory fittings, the work of Phoenician and Syrian craftsmen to decorate furniture, were found at Nimrud (Calhu) and Fort Shalmaneser. The series included plaques depicting animals, sphinxes, griffins in floral settings, seated or standing figures holding branches beneath winged discs, and "women at the window" (perhaps prostitutes making themselves visible to potential clients).

Babylonian thrones were similar in style to Assyrian thrones. Literary evidence supports a connection between the furniture of the two kingdoms. Babylonian furniture was greatly prized by Assyrian monarchs. Assyrian kings were also portrayed relaxing on couches. The legs of the couches were decorated with small panels showing carved ivory moldings, women in a windowlike setting, and recumbent lions supported by tapered, conelike feet. These couches may have been imported from Phoenicia or Syria.

Meals were eaten at tables. Tables, tray tables, and offering stands were used throughout the third millennium, as confirmed by texts and art. Assyria has provided us with actual tables, models of tables, and illustrations of tables on reliefs. Like stools and chairs, tables were made of wood and sometimes decorated with metal. In first millennium BCE Assyria, the table was usually a small square on four ornamented legs, terminating at the bottom in either an ox hoof or a lion's foot. Tablecloths were mentioned in Babylonia, that is, "a linen cloth on the gold table of the god Shamash,"⁴ and illustrated in cylinder seals. Table napkins were held by a servant who offered them to those dining so that they could dry their hands after washing them at the end of the meal.

Beds were usually made of a frame and supporting base of wood, though sometimes rope, interwoven reeds, or crisscrosses of metal strips were used. The bed provided support for mattresses stuffed with wool, goat's hair, or palm fiber. Bedding included linen sheets, mattresses, cushions, and blankets. Medical texts often mentioned patients who "took to their bed." Of course, not everyone owned a bed; the poor slept on straw or reed mats.

We have few illustrations of beds from the third millennium; in fact, beds were often omitted from furniture inventory lists of this period. An

Old Akkadian source alluded to a wooden bed with fruit decoration and slender feet. However, by the end of the third millennium, a number of beds were described in texts as constructed from reed and wood and overlaid with gold, silver, or copper. Beds had legs that often terminated with an ox hoof or claw. But some beds looked like shallow wooden boxes.

Tablets refer to bedside mats, thereby raising the issue of floor coverings. The palace may have used carpets. Some floors at doorways were decorated by limestone slabs carved to imitate carpeting. Carpets were luxury goods that served two functions: they affirmed the wealth of their owners and decorated the wall or floor.

Household goods included containers for storing utensils and provisions. Baskets, skins, clay bins, and large wooden chests were used for storage. Crates were used for storing vegetables. Containers were waterproofed to hold liquids. Wine was stored in special jars of several gallons' capacity, which were sometimes marked with the volume.

The design of both eating and drinking vessels varied greatly through time. Platters, bowls, and cups were made of pottery, wood, stone, or metal in different sizes. Ladles were used for scooping up liquids. Ostrich eggs were used for fine vessels. As for cutlery, a large number of single-pronged bone forks have been found. Knives, their blades made from either bronze or iron, were common. Knives were sharpened on

small flat whetstones about the size of a finger. Spoons were manufactured from bitumen, metal, wood, terra-cotta, and occasionally ivory.

Food was prepared in an oven, found within the house or in the courtyard. Pots were made with small handles through which a rope could be passed to hang them out of the reach of rats and mice. Other cooking utensils included a copper frying pan, a sieve pot, and kettles for water. Neo-Babylonian dowries recorded that women received equipment for brewing date beer. Smaller jars were used for oil, clarified butter, or beer. A mortar and pestle, made of baked clay or stone, were used to pound some cereal foods and legumes, and hand mills, made from imported volcanic rock, were used for grinding barley, sesame seeds, and spices.

Household slaves were usually female, but male slaves could also reside with the family. Sometimes as many as ten male and ten female slaves resided in a single household.

The children of slaves belonged to their owners. When large estates were divided, the slaves were included in the division of property and could be sold.

Slave owners encouraged slaves to marry in order to increase their wealth. The children of such marriages belonged to the master, who was free to sell them individually. But separating members of a family was rather uncommon.

A slave could, upon the master's consent, marry a free woman. Even if she brought no dowry with her, both she and her children remained free. If she brought a dowry and invested it with her enslaved husband, who later died or abandoned her, the widow's dowry was returned to her, but only half the profits—the other half belonged to her husband's master.

Slave-girls could be considered concubines, whether supplied by a barren wife as a surrogate or owned by the husband (see CH §§170–74 and below). If, as a concubine, the slave bore her owner children, she still remained a slave and could be sold. After her owner's death, both she and her children were given their freedom.

If a female slave was purchased by a married woman to act both as her servant and as her husband's concubine, the slave was still the sole property of the wife. The law codes provided, but did not require, that the children of this union could inherit from the paternal estate.

FAMILY LIFE

The term "nuclear family" refers to a married couple and their children. In ancient Mesopotamia the nuclear family was called a "house," and a man was expected "to build a house."⁵ To achieve this goal, he married one woman. If she was unable to bear children, he could take a second wife or a concubine, or the couple could decide to adopt children

(see below, "Adoption"). On average, from two to four children survived early childhood; the initial number of children born remains unknown. An extended or expanded household refers to a group of people who resided together with one or more relatives besides children. In ancient Mesopotamia, the extended household might include unmarried sisters, widowed mothers, and underage brothers; it was called "the house of the father." These family members referred to each other as "brother" or "my [own] flesh and blood."⁶

In the ancient Near East the family was patriarchal. The father was head of the family and wielded authority over his wife and children. The Laws of Hammurabi (§195) reflected the cultural attitudes of the time, stating, "If a son strikes his father, they shall cut off his hand."⁷ The father was head of the family until he died. His rule was law. In case of debt, the father could offer slaves as well as any member of his family to his creditor to satisfy his obligation. The father had the right but not the obligation to redeem them. If he died and left unmarried children, the eldest son became head of the family and administrator of the estate. If the children were young, their mother might be given the authority of "fatherhood."⁸

Men were identified by their father's name. Therefore, having a son and heir was of great significance for the family; a son could support his parents in their old age and perform the proper rites after their death. In the first millennium BCE, free citizens were identified by their given name, followed by their father's name and that of an ancestor who lived centuries ago; that is, X, the son of Y, the descendant of Z. Slaves were not given a family name. Sons and daughters lived in their father's home until they left to establish their own household or to marry into another. An excerpt from a distribution list (rations as payment for services) portrayed family life in Kish, a northern Babylonian city:

- 30 liters—Ishtar-gamelat, his wife
- 20 liters—Ahassunu, his daughter
- 20 liters—Ikuppi-Adad, his son
- 15 liters—Shamash-andulli, his son
- House of Ishme-Adad
- 30 liters—Humusi, his wife
- 20 liters—Ibbi-Adad, his son
- 20 liters—Tabni-Ishtar, his daughter
- 15 liters—Rabi-sillashu, his son
- 20 liters—Munawwirtum, his slave-woman
- 10 liters—Ad-mat-ili, her son
- House of Sin-ishmeni⁹

An Assyrian census list from the first millennium BCE recorded the farmers and their holdings in the district of Haran. The census also listed the names of the family members, for example:

Adad-duri, farmer,
 Nashukh-dilini, his adolescent son,
 1 woman; total 3.
 30 units of land, 15 cultivated thereof;
 1 orchard,
 1 cow.
 Total of the estate Arrizu
 in the administrative district of Haran.¹⁰

This census list in its entirety showed that the Assyrian villager was usually monogamous. Some of the sons at home were reported to be adolescents, and some of the daughters "of marriageable age." According to this census list, there were 1.43 children per family; however, this statistic indicated families too small even to maintain the population and may have excluded some circumstances. For example, daughters may have left to set up their own households. Adult sons could have departed for military duty or other state service.

Childbirth, Infancy, and Infant Mortality Prenatal care involved the use of amulets, herbal potions, rituals, and incantations. Amulets were objects believed to have magical and protective power, bringing luck or averting evil. In order to produce the necessary magical effect, amulets were worn by a person or placed at a specific location.¹¹ A woman in labor wore an image of the demon Pazuzu or his head to counteract the evil of Lamashtu for herself, her unborn children, and her newborn child. Lamashtu also caused miscarriage and crib death. This female demon was known to slip into the house of a pregnant woman and touch the woman's stomach seven times to kill the baby. Lamashtu also kidnapped the child from the wet nurse.¹² Pazuzu was depicted with a canine face, extraordinarily bulging eyes, a scaly body, a snake-headed penis, talons, and sometimes wings.¹³ Metal or stone plaques against Lamashtu were engraved with an image of Lamashtu on one side and an incantation against the female demon on the other. Rows of demons and divine symbols were also engraved on these plaques.¹⁴ Lamashtu was depicted as having a lion's head, donkey's teeth, naked breasts, a hairy body, stained hands, long fingers and fingernails, and bird talons.¹⁵ She clutched snakes in her hands, while a piglet and puppy suckled at her breasts.

Texts described prescriptions for making a barren woman conceive and for giving birth easily: "Total: 21 stones to help a barren woman to

become pregnant; you string them on a linen thread and put them around her neck."¹⁶ If a woman became sick during pregnancy, the prescribed treatment involved plants mixed over a fire to which oil and beer were added. Woolen material was saturated with this mixture and then placed in the woman's vagina twice daily. The treatment was supplemented by anointing and bandaging.

To help a woman in labor, she was given the bark of a tree to chew. Her stomach was massaged with ointment and/or a rolling-pin of magic wood was rolled over her. Midwives or female relatives could be present at the birth. A myth called *The Cow of Sin* was recited; the story was about the Maid-of-the-Moon-god (the moon god's consort in the shape of a cow), who also had a difficult delivery until Anu, the head of the pantheon, anointed her with oil and "waters of labor pangs" (that is, amniotic fluid). The myth ended with the following incantation: "Just as Maid-of-the-Moon-god gave birth easily, so may the maid having a difficult delivery give birth."¹⁷

If these remedies proved unsuccessful, magic was invoked. The woman visited a mortuary and the following incantation was recited:

The woman [is] having a difficult delivery . . . The baby is held fast . . . She who is creating a child is shrouded in the dust of death. Her eyes fail, she cannot see; her lips are sealed, she cannot open them . . . [The woman is now represented as speaking:] "stand by me . . . O merciful Marduk! Now am I surrounded with trouble. Reach out to me! Bring forth that sealed-up one (that is, the unborn child), a creature of the gods, as a human creature; let him come forth! Let him see the light!"¹⁸

Some incantations portrayed the unborn child as a ship with unidentified cargo—boy or girl?—on a dark sea.

"Female problems" related to pregnancy and childbirth were often described in the medical texts. There were numerous prescriptions for a physician to treat a woman with complications after childbirth. One text provided a prescription to abort a fetus.

Death in childbirth and infant mortality were imminent dangers. Many texts referred to Lamashtu (alias Daughter of Anu), the female demon who threatened the life of both mother and child. A poignant elegy described the perils of childbirth in a series of dialogues between a husband and wife and prayers to the mother goddess:

"Why are you adrift, like a boat, in the midst of the river,
your rungs in pieces, your mooring rope cut?"

". . . The day I bore the fruit, how happy I was,
happy was I, happy my husband.

The day of my going into labor, my face became darkened,

the day of my giving birth, my eyes became clouded.
 With open hands I prayed to the Lady of the gods (the mother
 goddess)
 You are the mother of those who have borne a child, save my
 life!"

Hearing this, the Lady of the gods veiled her face (saying),
 "... why do you keep praying to me?"
 [My husband, who loved me], uttered a cry,
 "Why do you take from me the wife in whom I rejoice?"
 "... [All] those [many] days I was with my husband,
 I lived with him who was my lover.
 Death came creeping into my bedroom:
 it drove me from my house,
 it tore me from my husband."¹⁹

Lullabies, originating from incantations, were sung to stop babies from crying so that the gods would remain undisturbed. The ancient Mesopotamians believed that human "noise" enraged the gods and provoked them to do evil.

Soon after birth the baby was given a name. Akkadian proper names were unique in the Semitic world because many of them reflected the family's feelings about the newborn, such as "My god has had mercy on me" or "Sin has heard my prayer." The name of King Sennacherib means "the god Sin has replaced a brother," thus indicating that even the royal family was affected by infant mortality. Children were also named for their grandfathers. Names could be changed when adults assumed administrative positions; at that time they took a name praising their king's divine status.

Birth abnormalities were listed in the omen texts because of their significance in daily life. The texts reported a child born with only one foot, Siamese twins, and a hermaphrodite. Quadruplets were noted as a normal but unusual birth. Malformed babies were considered evil omens; a ritual was performed, and then the babies' bodies were tossed into the river. Also, the illnesses of infants and children were described in great detail in an omen collection and in magical texts. But infant and child ailments were not even mentioned in therapeutic medical texts.

A newborn baby was at risk if the mother failed to produce milk. The rich could hire a wet nurse, but the poor faced certain death of the child. Children were nursed for two or three years. Nursing also served as a means of birth control because women are relatively infertile while nursing. The infant slept in a basket. As the baby grew, his mother or nurse wore a sling to carry him around. The birth of boys was considered a blessing. Infant exposure was probably more common for daughters than sons.

We know little about how children were raised. The emotional bonds

between children and their parents were very strong. Many of the gods were referred to as either father or mother. Numerous terra-cotta figurines, mostly miniatures, portrayed a naked woman carrying a child on her arm. Parents sold their children only in times of dire circumstances (see Chapter 6). Babylonian and Assyrian lists described the life cycle as follows: a child at the breast, a weaned child, a child, an adolescent, an adult, and an elderly person. The height of the child was given in cubits.

Children were usually adopted when there was no male heir. The simplest form of adoption was that of a newborn, **Adoption** abandoned right after birth "to the dog" while still "in (its) water and blood."²⁰ Older children were adopted by reimbursing their parents for the expenses of feeding and raising them. These transactions were recorded as if they were sales. Adults could become part of another family by their own will, called "arrogation." Even slaves could be freed and adopted as sons. The reason for adoption and arrogation was to have a son to care for his parents in their old age. The adoptive parents agreed that the child would be their heir, regardless of how many natural children were born to them after the adoption. Breaking the agreement had severe consequences; if the parents did this, they were either fined

or lost their entire estate; if the son left them, he lost his freedom.²¹ One adoption contract has what one may call "boilerplate" to insure the immutability of the adopted heir's status:

Yahatti-II is the son of Hillalum and of Alittum. He shall enjoy their good times and suffer their bad times. If Hillalum, his (adoptive) father, and Alittum, his (adoptive) mother, say to Yahatti-II their son, "You are not our son," they shall forfeit house and property. If Yahatti-II says to Hillalum, his father, and Alittum, his mother, "You are not my father. You are not my mother," they shall shave him and sell him for silver. Even if Hillalum and Alittum have many sons, Yahatti-II is the heir, and he shall take two shares from the estate of Hillalum his father; his younger brothers shall divide the (remaining estate) in equal parts. A claimant who raises a claim against him infringes on the taboo of Shamash, Itur-Mer (god of Mari), Shamshi-Adad and Yasmah-Adad, and shall pay 31 minas of silver, (as reparation) in a capital case. 18 witnesses. Date.²²

In a letter between a son and his biological mother, the young man complained, "Though you bore me, and his mother adopted him, you do not love me as (much) as his mother loves him."²³ From this letter, we can conclude that the parties to an adoption could have emotional bonds as well as economic ones.

Adopted children were responsible for providing financial and physical security for adoptive parents in their old age. When the parents died, the adopted heirs were obligated to bury and mourn their parents (see "Death and Burial" below).

The laws concerning adoption differed from place to place. For example, in Nuzi, land could only be transferred to a family member. Therefore, in order to sell land to a nonfamily member, the buyer was "adopted" so that he could receive his share of the inheritance. In Elam, where the king and queen were brother and sister, adoption was into "brotherhood" or "sisterhood," the latter allowing a concubine to become a family member.²⁴

An unmarried woman could adopt a daughter. She had the right to permit her daughter to marry or to work as a prostitute. The adopted daughter was not a slave. Like an adopted son, she would take care of her mother in her old age.

Marriage and Sexual Relations Reconstructing marital relationships in the ancient Near East has proved a difficult task. Generally, marriage was monogamous, even among the gods. Happy marriages flourished in ancient times; a Sumerian proverb mentioned a husband boasting that his wife had borne eight sons and was still ready to make love. Like people the world over and throughout time, ancient Mesopotamians fell deeply in love. Texts re-

ferred to ensuing depression in the case of rejection. To remedy this situation, the man or woman prayed to a god or used a magic spell. Some magic rituals came with a guarantee, promising, if the man performed it: "this woman will speak to you whenever you meet her, she will be powerless to resist and you can make love to her." In the case of lovers' quarrels, the man might also resort to charms or spells with similar claims: "with this charm she will not sleep alone; she will be loved."²⁵

The law codes addressed various aspects of marriage. Legal documents were drawn to define property rights—a kind of ancient prenuptial agreement. A unique document from Ur recorded the expenses, gifts, and payments incurred by the father of the bride over a four-month period during the negotiations over the marriage of his daughter.

Customs varied over time and place, but the process of marriage included at least four stages: (1) the engagement, (2) payments by the families of both the bride (dowry) and the groom (bride-price), (3) the bride's move to her father-in-law's house, and (4) sexual intercourse.

The legal definition of marriage is found in the Laws of Eshnunna §§27–28, in which marriage included a contract as well as a feast:

If a man marries the daughter of another man without the consent of her father and mother, and moreover does not conclude the wedding feast and contract for her father and her mother, even if she lives in his house for a full year, she is not a wife.

If he concludes a wedding feast and a contract for her father and her mother, and he marries her, she is indeed his wife; the day she is caught lying with another man (literally, "in the lap of another man"), she shall die, she will not live.²⁶

The contract described in the Laws of Eshnunna was between the two families, commonly represented by the fathers. For the groom's family, the contract concerned payment of the bride-price, which was a considerable sum of silver in the Old Babylonian period. The bride-price was an act of good faith, insuring the groom's right to the bride.

Both the bride-price and the dowry could be paid in installments until the first child was born, at which time the balance of both payments was due. The marriage was legally finalized, and the mother assumed the legal rights of a "wife."

The bride-price was equal in value to the dowry provided by the bride's family. The dowry consisted of household utensils, silver rings (a form of ancient coinage), slaves, and even fields. In addition to these items, the dowry in later periods included other household goods such as furniture, textiles, and jewelry. The bride brought her dowry with her. A husband could use his wife's property and manage it with his own assets.

In Old Babylonian times the dowry was often itemized. A document was drawn to specify that the bride's father "sent it and her into the house of A, her father-in-law, for B, his son."²⁷ The document concluded with the payment to be made by the groom's family in the event of divorce. If the groom died or had a change of heart, his father could insist that the bride be given to one of the groom's brothers if one were

available and of age. That is, the bride married into her husband's family—she did not marry an individual.

The marriage contract was also an oral agreement, probably accompanied by formal or symbolic actions and marriage vows. The words recited at marriage can be reconstructed from the spoken formula of divorce, namely, "You are not my husband" and "You are not my wife"—that is, an annulment of words cited in a wedding described in a magical text: "I will fill your lap with silver and gold: You are my wife, I am your husband."²⁸

Not much is known about the wedding ceremonies. Among wealthy families, the wedding party lasted several days or even weeks. The groom and his family customarily gave gifts to the bride and her family at the wedding celebration. These gifts included food for the wedding feast and prenuptial celebrations leading up to it. Also, gifts of clothing, jewelry, and other valuables could be added. During the wedding celebration, the bride was covered with a veil that the groom removed. Once married, women were not veiled in Babylonia. Legal texts imply that married women were veiled in Assyria.

The next step in the marriage process varied. Since girls often married young, as teenagers, the young bride might either continue to live in her father's house or move to her father-in-law's house. Assyrian texts spoke of brides who were "four half cubits high (about three feet)." Under these circumstances, consummation occurred later. The groom was usually ten years older than his bride.

Even if the bride continued to reside in her parental home, the groom could visit his father-in-law's home in order to consummate the marriage. This event was accompanied by traditional ceremonies. The bridegroom might be accompanied by a male companion, and both would reside in the father-in-law's house for a period of time. Marriage was euphemistically alluded to as "calling at the house of the in-law." In the trial record a man from Ur was described as follows: "He called at the [father-in-law's house, he got a son and a daughter."²⁹ A bed, included in dowry lists, was used to consummate the marriage. There are extant terra-cotta models (some of which include a couple in the throes of passion), and royal hymns spoke of beds used for making love.

The virginity of the bride was a matter of concern. The "best men" of the bride were a group of "friends" who protected her against dangers and were responsible for her chastity.³⁰ After the wedding night, they displayed "the bloody sheet."

When virginity was disputed, the courts called on expert female witnesses to offer testimony. A letter from Mari described the situation of a betrothed girl: "The 'wife' of Sin-iddinam declared as follows: Before Sin-iddinam took me, I had agreed with [the wish of] father and son. When Sin-iddinam had departed from his house, the son of As-

qudum sent me the message 'I want to take you.' He kissed my lips, he touched my vagina—his penis did not enter my vagina. Thus I said, 'I will not sin against Sin-iddinam.'"³¹ In an earlier trial in Nippur, a man denied physical penetration using the same words. Obviously, penetration was the criterion to establish whether a woman—virgin, betrothed, married or slave—was raped or seduced, in order to determine culpability.

Incest was also addressed in the law codes. In the Laws of Hammurabi §§155–56, if a father-in-law had sex with his son's bride-to-be, the law demanded a fine of half a mina of silver, and the girl could return to her family home with her dowry and marry someone else. However, if his son had consummated the marriage and incest was committed, the father was sentenced to drowning. Other forms of incest were treated in the law codes, namely, cases of a man with his sister, his niece, his daughter, his mother-in-law, or his mother after his father's death. The last offense was considered particularly loathsome, and the punishment was to burn the mother and son.³²

With rare exceptions, a man could not have more than one formally recognized wife at a time. Both Babylonian law codes and court proceedings indicated that only under exceptional circumstances was a man permitted to have more than one wife at the same time. For example, the Laws of Hammurabi (CH §148) allowed the husband to take a second wife when his first wife was incapacitated by illness; however, he could not divorce his first wife, whom he was obliged to support until her death. The case of the married but celibate priestess was also addressed; in this case, the second wife was often her sister. Uru-inimgina included polyandry (a woman with more than one husband) among the social abuses he chose to reform.

In Assyria a man could raise a concubine to the status of wife. The Middle Assyrian laws explained the procedure: "If a man intends to veil his concubine, he shall have five or six of his comrades, and he shall veil her in their presence, he shall declare 'She is my wife.' She is (then) his wife."³³

The concubine was permitted to wear the veil only when she accompanied the legal wife outdoors. Her status remained secondary, and, in the event that the legal wife bore sons, the children of the concubine could not inherit. The concubine was chosen from among the slaves and was still expected to perform her duties for the legal wife, such as carrying her chair when she went to the temple and assisting her in her toiletries.

Assyrian laws detailed which classes of women must and must not be veiled. A married woman had to be veiled in public, but prostitutes were strictly forbidden from this practice. Should a prostitute be veiled, she

would be severely punished by being caned fifty times and having pitch poured over her head.

Both Mesopotamia and Syria demonstrated interest in erotic art. There were handmade or molded clay figurines of naked women, as well as cylinder seals and terra-cotta or pierced metal plaques depicting various positions for sexual intercourse. Erotic art was found in temples, tombs, and houses and may have reflected a genre somewhere between official and popular art. The art from the Amarna period (fourteenth century BCE) was rather graphic in depicting sexual intimacy and sensual pleasure. Cylinder seals with erotic scenes were not very common. Plaques illustrated a variety of subjects: squatting women spreading their legs apart with their hands; couples standing facing each other, with the woman guiding the man by holding his member with her hand; and couples having intercourse from behind. The omens also spoke of anal intercourse between a man and his wife, that is, a man "keeps saying to his wife: 'Bring your backside.'" ³⁴ However, the most common position for sexual intercourse was the "missionary position." Another position described was the woman on top of the man, perhaps alluded to in the Amorite saying, "You be the man, let me be the woman."³⁵

Sexual Practices

Anal intercourse may have been used as a means of contraception. The priestesses were said to have had anal intercourse to avoid pregnancy. Contraception was used, particularly by certain priestesses, "who by skillful ways keep their wombs intact,"³⁶ possibly by herbs or charms. Nevertheless, "accidents happened," and unwanted babies were left in the street to die or to be eaten by a dog. Occasionally, we learn of a passerby grabbing the child from a dog's mouth.

Some plaques depicted a woman leaning against a mud-brick tower, perhaps the town walls, where prostitutes usually lived and worked. In some tavern scenes one or more persons were shown drinking from vases or cups. The taverns, run by alewives, were houses of pleasure where men drank, listened to music, and had intercourse with prostitutes. The walls of the taproom were decorated with clay plaques of naked women or other erotic scenes. Ishtar, the goddess of love, was the patron of taverns.

There were also love lyrics and love charms, which are abundant for some periods and nonexistent for others. Love lyrics between human beings were formulated as a dialogue, often accompanied by a musical instrument. The poems were narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The songs were characterized by passionate love and sexual desire for the beloved. Themes related to marriage pervaded the poetry, such as the bridal sheets laid out on a marriage bed. The beauty of the bride was described by her natural attributes as well as her jewelry. The

love stories occurred at sunset or later, in the streets, squares, and homes. The poems incorporated all the senses: touch, smell, sight, taste, and hearing. The metaphors used, the apple tree and the pillar of alabaster, which may rise in a garden or stone, referred to the male and female sexual organs, respectively. Incantations praised the qualities of the genitals but demonstrated little interest in breasts.

Texts spoke of women menstruating for six days as "hit by the weapon."³⁷ During this time, women were considered unclean and released from work. A man who touched a menstruating woman was also regarded as unclean for six days.

Men sometimes suffered from sexual dysfunctions such as impotence and premature ejaculation. To help reverse impotence, a group of rituals was performed and various medicinal preparations, including ointments and aphrodisiacs, were used. Though alluded to, no treatment for premature ejaculation was mentioned; perhaps the ancients believed that time and practice would eventually provide a cure.

Male homosexuality was described from the third millennium BCE onward in Mesopotamia. Texts referred to sodomy between men as well as between men and boys. The Babylonians did not condemn this practice. But male prostitutes were either despised or considered laughable. Homosexual acts were never clearly depicted in visual art, with the possible exception of cylinder seals in which the gender of the protagonists is questionable. However, the Assyrians did not follow the Babylonian policy of "live-and-let-live" in regard to homosexual practices. During the Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1300–1100 BCE), homosexuality was severely punished. According to the Middle Assyrian laws: "If a man sodomizes his comrade and they prove the charges against him and find him guilty, they shall sodomize him and they shall turn him into a eunuch [that is, castrate him]."³⁸

Lesbianism was seldom mentioned. The women of ancient Mesopotamia seemed much more interested in taking male lovers. The Code of Hammurabi described a wife who took a lover, whom she encouraged to murder her husband so that the lovers would be free to marry. In this case, the wife was punished by impaling her.³⁹ If the cuckolded husband caught the lovers, he could bring them up on charges before either the king or judges. If the couple was found guilty, Middle Assyrian law provided for several courses of punishment: "If the woman's husband kills his wife, then he shall also kill the man; if he cuts off his wife's nose, he shall turn the man into a eunuch and they shall lacerate his entire face; but if [the husband wishes to release] his wife, he shall [release] the man."⁴⁰

Eunuchs ("those not having a beard") were quite common, but a man who became a eunuch as a punishment was exceptional. Eunuchs served at court, and many of them became high officials—an administrative

practice that continued up to the nineteenth century CE in the Turkish and Persian empires. However, not all Assyrian courtiers were eunuchs, a point emphasized by a list of courtiers that included both eunuchs and non-eunuchs. In Assyria, as elsewhere, a small proportion of males failed to develop normally and became natural eunuchs; many of them were possibly male prostitutes.

The Mesopotamians recognized that sex had a religious component. There were religious prostitutes—male, female, and neuter—associated with some temples. Reference to temple sexual activity was more common for Babylonia than for Assyria. Although male prostitutes were often eunuchs, this was not always the case. Certain priests in the cult of Ishtar were homosexuals; they were also accomplished in dancing and cross dressing. The ancient Mesopotamians' problem with homosexuals and prostitutes stemmed from the fact that they did not have children (prostitutes appear to have had an understanding of birth control).

Divorce usually was initiated by the husband. He could divorce his wife, but he had to return her property and sometimes pay a fine. The divorce was accompanied by the symbolic act of cutting the hem of the wife's robe—the reverse of knotting the original bride-payment in her robe.

Social stigma was attached to divorce, therefore, it was not undertaken without grave cause, such as adultery by the wife or a childless marriage. Many Old Babylonian marriage contracts forbade the wife to divorce her husband, often by threatening her with penalties customary for adultery: drowning in the river, being pushed from a tower, or impalement. The wife could even be sold into slavery. Also, at various times in ancient Mesopotamia, if a woman expressed the desire to divorce, she could be thrown out of her husband's home penniless and naked. The conditions of the divorce were influenced by whether or not the wife had sons. If the woman had no sons, the husband's family did not care if she returned to her father's house or went elsewhere. However, some agreements and Assyrian and Babylonian marriage contracts permitted either the husband or the wife to divorce; each was fined the same amount in silver. This arrangement contrasted markedly with the inferior position of women under Middle Assyrian law. It seems that the status and independence of specific women gave them equal rights in the marriage; possibly these women were independent widows or the daughters of rich families.

Since marriage was treated as a bond between families, its purpose was to secure sons to perpetuate the male line, but an infertile marriage did not result in an automatic divorce. Both law and custom allowed a barren wife to supply a slave-girl as her surrogate to bear children, who were legally considered the wife's children. Another arrangement permitted the childless wife to adopt a second woman as her sister and permit that woman to marry her husband. The exact same principles of

law were applied to a priestess, who was permitted to marry but not to have sexual relations with her husband; she, too, could provide a surrogate to bear sons.

In Assyria, if a woman's husband abandoned her, did not support her, or left no sons who could support her, she could take another husband after five years. Her first husband could not reclaim her. If a woman did not wait for the five-year period to elapse, but went to live with a man and bore him children, her husband could return and take her children on his return. However, if the first husband was absent for reasons beyond his control, such as being captured, he could reclaim his wife after the five-year period. He then had to provide the second husband with a replacement.

We know a great deal about beliefs concerning death and the afterlife in ancient Mesopotamia. Numerous sources described their funeral and mourning practices, the cult of the dead, burial practices, funerary offerings, visits from ghosts, the organization of the netherworld, and causes of death.

Death and Burial

Many literary texts struggled with the meaning of death and dealt with the fortunes of the dead in the netherworld. Surprisingly, creation myths generally excluded the institution of death. In a later version of *Gilgamesh*, Uta-napishtim (the Babylonian Noah) advised Gilgamesh about death:

No one can see death.
 No one can see the face of death.
 No one [can hear] the voice of death.
 But savage death snaps off mankind . . .
 Suddenly there is nothing.

They (the gods) established life and death.
 Death they fixed to have no ending.⁴¹

In both *Gilgamesh* (the epic of a hero-king) and *Atra-khasis* (the Babylonian Flood Story) the gods created death. The gods solved the problem of overpopulation through sterility, miscarriage, and religious celibacy.

Death was not the end. Man had a soul or ghost, which he inherited from the slain god whose body was used in creating man. When man was accorded traditional burial rites, he could descend to the kingdom of the dead below the earth, the lowest realm of the universe.

The ancient Mesopotamians did not speak of death for fear of summoning it. Instead, they referred to death by using a host of euphemisms: "to cross the Khubur"; "to go up to/toward heaven" (meant only for kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur); "to go to one's fate"; "to be invited by one's gods"; "to come to land on/reach/take refuge in one's mountain"; "to go on the road of one's forefathers."⁴² The Mesopotamians'

practice was not so different from our own; we refer to death by terms such as "passed away," "no longer with us," "may he/she rest in peace," and so on. All things said and done, the ancient Mesopotamians accepted death as a fact of life.

In ancient times (as today), a person preferred to die in his own bed, surrounded by his loved ones. The dying person was moved to a special funerary bed with a chair placed at the left. A specific formula was recited to release the soul from its body, and the chair served as a seat for the soul. The soul received its first funerary offerings on the chair.

In order to prepare it for burial, the body was washed and the mouth tied shut. The corpse was anointed with oil or perfume, clothed in clean garments, and accompanied by as many personal items as the family could afford—weapons, toiletries, jewelry, and other objects. Most bodies were simply buried without being preserved for eternity. The body and grave goods were laid out for public viewing (the Mesopotamian version of a wake) shortly before the funeral. Of course, members of the royal family were expected to provide lavish funeral displays.

The dead were buried in a coffin, sarcophagus, or tomb. The poor were wrapped in a cloth or reed mat and provided with a few simple pottery vessels, stone beads, a copper pin, or the like. Kings and wealthy commoners buried their dead in individual or communal vaulted chambers built below the floors of the palace or house. The sarcophagi of kings were often impressive. Family members and servants who died at home were interred in the family crypt, older bodies being pushed aside to make room for new bodies. Other families buried their dead in public cemeteries. Those who carried the body to its final resting place were paid. Burial officials were also compensated with first rights to the funerary bed and chair and the clothing in which the person died (which was removed when the body was washed). The edicts of reforming kings such as Uru-inimgina (ca. 2350 BCE) tried to ensure that the amounts charged for such services were not excessive.

After burial, mourning rites could last as long as seven days for a prominent person. Both relatives and close friends were supposed to display their grief openly. For the death of the king, queen, or queen mother, the subjects mourned publicly. Professional mourners, both male and female, were hired to increase the number of mourners and to lead the laments. Sometimes prostitutes were recruited for this service. Laments could be sung a cappella or accompanied by a musical instrument, or even the rhythmic beating of the breast. A few funeral laments have been found expressing grief and eulogizing the dead, as in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*:

Hear me, O Elders of Uruk, hear me, O men!
I mourn for Enkidu, my friend,

I cry out bitterly like a mourner . . .
 an evil demon appeared and took him away from me!
 My friend, the swift mule, fleet wild ass of the mountain, panther
 of the wilderness . . .
 Now what is this sleep which has seized you?
 You have turned dark and do not hear me.⁴³

Mourning rites were not meant to end prematurely. The so-called Babylonian Job complained, "The grave is open, my jewelry is ready (to be placed in the grave); before I had died, the wailing (for me) was finished."⁴⁴

Mourners also expressed their grief in the way they dressed. They were expected to remove their finery, tear their garments or clothe themselves in sackcloth, take off their turbans or cover their heads with their clothes, and move about unbathed and ungroomed. Fasting was another expression of grief. The ancient Mesopotamians accepted men openly displaying their sorrow, but only women tore out their hair or scratched their cheeks and breasts. Once the dead were interred, the official mourning period drew to a close, marked by purification ceremonies and a return to normal dress and grooming habits.

The ceremonial rites for mourning for Ishtar's spouse, Tammuz/Dumuzi (as for other dying and returning fertility gods), were described in detail in myths and cult songs meant to accompany rituals. During the ceremonial mourning for Dumuzi some vessels used for offerings to the deceased were broken, torches were carried around the funeral bed three times, and incense was burned.⁴⁵ These rites were performed in order to protect the living from contamination by the dead. Niches for funeral lamps were found in graves at various sites. The tombs of high-status individuals also contained a niche where an engraved funerary inscription was placed.

The dead depended on living relatives to provide them with funerary offerings. The eldest son of the deceased was primarily responsible for providing a continuous series of funerary offerings, perhaps an explanation of why he received an additional share of the inheritance. Offerings to kings corresponded to the deluxe menus they enjoyed on earth; these offerings were made at the new and full moon, and at an extended celebration during the month of Abu (July/August). War heroes received special offerings associated with the royal cult; they were portrayed as relaxing on couches while served by their family. Stillborn children were described as playing "on a table of gold and silver with honey and flowing beer."⁴⁶ Shrines were dedicated to their collective spirit.

In the royal cult, all ancestors of the reigning king received individual offerings regularly. But ordinary people provided individual offerings to

those relatives they knew personally, such as their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, grandfathers, and grandmothers. More distant relatives were lumped together as a common ancestor. A few legal texts, from Susa of the Old Babylonian period (1900–1595 BCE) and from Nippur of the Middle Babylonian period (1595–1000 BCE), specifically required a woman to perform rites of the ancestors' cult. The family ghosts of ordinary people received cold water, bread, hot broth, beer flavored with roasted grain, flour, oil, wine, honey, and occasionally the rib section of a sacrificed animal. The food was set at the place of burial, and liquids were poured through a pipe in the earth. To ensure that the intended ghosts received the offerings, the names of the dead were called. Sometimes a statue of the deceased housed his spirit for offerings. Ghosts were usually helpful, often intervening on behalf of family members. But if the deceased were neither buried nor accorded the proper funerary rites, their ghosts were considered dangerous.

Several times a year ghosts were permitted to leave their homes in the netherworld and return to earth for brief visits. At the end of *Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld*, Dumuzi was said to return during his festivities in Du'zu (June/July), and there was also a general return of the dead in Abu (July/August). During these celebrations, the ghosts were wined and dined. Then they returned by a special river road to the netherworld on boats, which floated down the river.

During life in the upper world, the gods were able to control population growth, but in the realm of the dead, the population always increased. The netherworld was called "earth," "great earth," and "extensive earth." It was also the "land of no return."⁴⁷ There were two traditions explaining how humans entered the netherworld. According to one tradition, the road to the netherworld passed through the demon-infested steppe land, across the Khubur River, and then through seven gates with seven gatekeepers. Another version described a road to the netherworld crossed by boat down one of the rivers of the upper earth and across the *apsû* (the sweet waters under the earth) to the lower earth, where Ereshkigal, queen of the dead, ruled. The latter road was taken by the dead returning home from their annual visits with their families, by babies about to be born, and by the occasional demon. Situated in the bowels of the earth, the netherworld was described as a dreary place:

To the gloomy house, seat of the netherworld,
 To the house which none leaves who enters,
 To the road whose journey has no return,
 To the house whose entrants are bereft of light,
 Where dust is their sustenance and clay their food.
 They see no light but dwell in darkness,
 They are clothed like birds in wings for garments,
 And dust has gathered on the door and bolt.⁴⁸

Despite this paradigm, the dead were not always gloomy, because Shamash (the sun god) visited daily on his travels through the sky. Also, the inhabitants were not reduced to eating mud; rather, they imitated life above: eating bread and drinking clear water. A complex bureaucracy similar to that of the upper world governed below. There was a royal court, presided over by King Nergal and Queen Ereshkigal, who were outfitted in royal regalia and lived in a lapis lazuli palace.

The bureaucracy of the netherworld was described in great detail, particularly in the dream of Kumma, in which he visited the netherworld, where he met many members of the bureaucracy, some described as half-man and half-animal. The Anunnaki, the court of the netherworld, welcomed each ghost, taught him the rules of the netherworld, and assigned him a place there. The female scribe of the netherworld checked the names of the newcomers against a master list so that no unexpected visitors from the upper world arrived.

Besides the court of the Anunnaki, there were two other courts of the netherworld. Gilgamesh, the legendary king of Uruk, presided over one court; however, we know little about it. The sun god Shamash presided over the other court in his daily rounds. In effect, the circuit of the sun god allowed him jurisdiction in both the upper and lower worlds. Shamash decided problems between the living and dead, such as punishing ghosts who harassed the living and ensuring that lonely and forgotten ghosts got their fair share of funerary offerings.

The netherworld courts did not render a Last Judgment as in the Christian tradition. In fact, neither the dead man's virtues nor sins on earth were considered when assigning him a place. The worst punishment dispensed to a sinner was denial of entry by the gods of the netherworld. In this way, the sinner was sentenced to sleeplessness and denied access to funerary offerings. Foreigners were permitted to enter the Mesopotamian netherworld. Lepers were allowed entrance, but they were kept safely apart from the rest of the dead.

The rate of death resulting from childbirth remains unknown. Infants were buried in jars beneath the living-room floor. At Nuzi a jar containing the remains of an infant burial was found under a private home; the jar was in the shape of a breast—a poignant memorial. Abnormal pregnancies, maldevelopment of the infant, and gross physical abnormalities of the fetus resulted in the death of mother and child. The live birth rate must have exceeded the death rate since enough children survived to maintain the population, and, in fact, from the fourth millennium BCE onward, the populations grew. In the third millennium BCE, Mesopotamia and Egypt each had a population of approximately one million; the life expectancy (with rare exceptions) was approximately forty years. Since death usually occurred at an early age in antiquity, diseases associated with old age were rare.

Those who survived the physical dangers of early childhood could

expect to enjoy a relatively long life. A late text reflected that for man the age of forty years was "prime"; of fifty, as "a short time" (in case he dies that young); sixty, as "manhood"; seventy, as "a long time"; eighty, as "old age"; and ninety, as "extreme old age." In a wisdom text from the Syrian city of Emar, the gods allotted man a maximum lifetime of 120 years.⁴⁹ To see one's family in the fourth generation was considered the ultimate blessing of extreme old age. Surprisingly, a number of people actually reached extreme old age. Several kings had long reigns, such as Shulgi of Ur (48 years), Hammurabi of Babylon (43 years), and Assurbanipal of Assyria (42 years). We know that the mother of King Nabonidus lived for 104 years—she told us so in her autobiography. Archives have shown that some individuals lived at least seventy years.

Battle casualties were the major cause of death among adult males. Those captured on military campaigns most probably died of exhaustion and maltreatment. Those who managed to escape from their victors died of exposure, hunger, and thirst. The people besieged within their cities suffered from disease and starvation, sometimes resorting to cannibalism.

"Acts of God," such as flood, drought, famine, or plagues of locusts, affected entire communities. Floods were generally local but extremely destructive, causing a high death rate. Locusts involved wider areas of land, starving both men and animals.

Several infectious diseases were so severe that clinical patterns were observed by the ancients. Diseases that caused a high mortality rate were (1) tuberculosis (ca. second millennium BCE); (2) pneumonic and bubonic plague, the most lethal diseases to infect man; (3) typhus, particularly the human louse-borne type of disease, often associated with famine, filth, and other disabling conditions in war; (4) smallpox, probably a mutant of cowpox virus affecting domestic cattle; and (5) leprosy, which was rarer and less infective but more chronic.

Southern Mesopotamia was the most heavily populated area of Mesopotamia, and therefore more conducive to the outbreak of epidemics, such as bubonic plague. The word for epidemic disease in Akkadian literally meant "certain death" and could be applied equally to animal as well as human epidemics. An omen reported plague gods marching with the troops, most likely a reference to typhus, which often afflicted armies. Tablets reported cities and even whole countries which were struck by some fatal epidemic, sometimes lasting years. An Akkadian myth, *Erra*, was written as a result of a plague at Babylon; the myth was believed to ward off further attacks when hung on the wall of the house. Old Babylonian letters described performing rituals, avoiding crowds, and purifying cities once the god had "calmed down."

The diseases caused by viruses were first reported in the second mil-

lennium BCE. These viruses may have infected their animal hosts earlier; however, in the second millennium, the increasing density of urban populations and the close contact between domestic animals and man gave rise to two strains of diseases, one in man and one in animals.

PROPERTY AND SUCCESSION

Each city followed different customs concerning inheritance. Generally, the eldest son was favored in the following ways: (1) he might receive two shares instead of one; (2) he might be allocated an extra agreed-upon proportion of the total estate, at least 10 percent; and (3) he might be allowed to choose his share, while the others drew lots.⁵⁰ The estate was physically divided after the father's death so that the married brothers would be able to set up independent households.

The eldest son may also have inherited the family home because of his duties, since in some places and periods the building housed ancestral tombs beneath it. From Early Dynastic times through the Old Babylonian period, the dead were commonly buried within the house. Separate cemeteries existed both inside and outside the city. An Old Babylonian document described the division of household property, the eldest son receiving "a share, together with the shrine." Some inheritance documents have informed us that the eldest son regularly received the "offering-table of the shrine." At Ur houses had separate rooms designed as shrines, identified with the baked brick family vault.

Though the eldest son often received a larger share of the inheritance, often real estate was not divided in order to conserve the revenue. In ancient Sumer, the custom was to leave the estate undivided; all became the property of the eldest son, who was the designated heir and leader of the family. The eldest son was obligated to support all of his siblings.

Usually the eldest son inherited certain entitlements. For example, at Nippur, the heir received temple offices, and he usually had first claim on the family residence. In later periods all of the brothers divided the estate equally, but the eldest son received an additional share. In Old Babylonian times, documents described in detail how property rights remained within the nuclear family. When the head of the household died, the brothers divided the estate. Family members could remain in the house after the father's death, but the actual division of the rooms might be postponed until much later, sometimes until the grandchildren divided the house among their families.

If the house was large enough to accommodate the brothers separately, it was divided. Mesopotamian inheritance laws often resulted in subdividing a single home into many smaller units. Mud brick was used to block old doorways, and new doorways were cut where necessary. When a house was inherited (or sold), the rooms were counted and their area

measured ("roofed floor space").⁵¹ Beams and doors were considered a valuable part of the house; specific doors have been listed in sale or inheritance texts.

The custom of giving a preferred share to the eldest son was prevalent in southern Babylonia; elsewhere, the brothers divided equally. Many house-sale documents of Old Babylonian times were merely "paper transactions" in order to provide compensation for the transfer of ownership of very small parts of the family home which could not in practice be occupied. Elizabeth Stone, a historical archaeologist, working with textual, architectural, and ethnographic data, established residential patterns in Old Babylonian Nippur.⁵² She correlated information in the cuneiform texts with actual houses and rooms that had been excavated.

The division of the paternal estates among the heirs was recorded in inheritance documents. Land, houses, furniture, slaves, animals, and also religious and military duties were divided. An Old Babylonian document from Nippur itemized the division of goods and duties, ending with the following clause: "The heirs of Imgua of their free will divided by lot and swore by the name of the king not to raise claims against one another in future."⁵³ In some cases, daughters could inherit, and then daughters were treated legally as sons. However, this practice has been attested in fringe areas, such as Nuzi and Emar, not in Babylonia and Assyria.

According to the patrilinear system, property was divided among sons or the surviving male line. The children of a dead brother also inherited. Nasty uncles were sometimes libelous in casting slurs on the paternity of a baby born posthumously. In the following case, the boy's uncles questioned his paternity once he was old enough to lay claim to his inheritance:

Ninurta-ra'im-zerim, the son of Enlil-bani, approached the (court) and faced the court officials and judges of Nippur, (and testified): "When I was still in the womb of Sin-na'id, my mother, Enlil-bani my father, the son of Ahi-shagish, died. Before (my mother) gave birth Khabannatum, my paternal grandmother, informed Luga, the herdsman, and Sin-gamil, the judge, (and) she sent a midwife and (the midwife) delivered me. When I grew up, in 20th year of Samsu-iluna . . . (his uncles attempt to question his paternity) . . ." The court officials and the judges investigated the case. They read the earlier tablet with the oath. They questioned their witnesses, and discussed their testimony . . . The witnesses who knew the paternity of Ninurta-ra'im-zerim, affirmed (it) by oath and they (the judges) ordered the case brought back to the assembly.

(Witnesses testified:) "Until she (Sin-nada) gave birth, they (the mother-in-law, the herdsman, the midwife and the judge) looked after her. We know that Ninurta-ra'im-zerim is the offspring of Enlil-bani."⁵⁴

Such procedures suggested that the birth of important people was witnessed. There were also tablets with baby footprints, indicating their paternity, and the seal of the witness.

Wills were written prior to the father's death, a practice found in Old Assyrian documents and outlying areas. These wills preserved the rights of the eldest son but also made allowances for separate bequests. A father could disinherit either an adopted or a natural son; the mother could have the same paternal authority upon the death of her husband. Disinheritance was a unilateral act, but the court had to ratify this action for legal purposes. The court could moderate or rescind a father's action if the father acted either in haste or unfairly. If a child said to his parents, "You are not my father" or "not my mother," he could be thrown out of his family home and disinherited.

The head of the household could also present gifts during his lifetime which were not included in the division of the estate. This provision was important for daughters who needed an appropriate dowry. If the father died before the dowry was arranged, the sons were obligated to allocate part of the estate for their sisters. A widow did not inherit from her husband's estate if there were sons. However, her husband could separate some of his property to provide for his wife when he died.

The widow gained access to her dowry once her husband died. If she had no children, her dowry would become the property of her brothers and their descendants. A widow could continue her husband's business by herself. But if she remarried, she lost this right. Contracts from Emar described a woman leaving to remarry, by performing a symbolic act, "to place her clothes on a stool"; then she left without her possessions. When a woman died, her dowry was inherited by her biological children, both male and female. If she had no children, her dowry was returned to the estate of her brothers and their descendants.

The dowry a woman brought increased the estate of her husband, particularly in land or slaves. However, her marriage reduced the estate of her own family. This situation could be remedied by marrying within the family or by other manipulations, as in the case of Lurindu. She married a much older man, a childless widower. Because she could potentially bear children, her family was able to give a smaller dowry. Sometimes a man married his brother's widow in order to keep her dowry in the family.

When a girl became a priestess, the brothers had to support her. Her

brothers managed her property, and, upon her death, her brothers or descendants would inherit it. In this way, estates could be conserved. However, sometimes priestesses adopted another priestess or slave and chose to leave their property to their adopted daughters—a situation that led to much litigation.

The extended family was more involved in joint ventures the further back we go in time. The family cultivated the land jointly rather than dividing and fragmenting their property—a practice still maintained today in rural communities throughout the world, so that successive generations do not inherit impractically small plots of land.

The hereditary system functioned in another way. Usually a son learned his father's trade or profession by observing and helping at an early age. He was able to take over his father's position in due time, as a scribe, an artisan, and so on. Current research has shown that the Old Babylonian buildings where the school texts were discovered were actually private houses. The schoolmaster lived there with his family and taught his sons his art at home. Some scribal families can be traced through several generations. Children were also apprenticed to craftsmen; apprenticeship contracts stipulate the responsibilities of both parties. An artisan would take a boy (often a slave) into his house and teach him his profession: cook, carpenter, singer, or seal cutter, for example.

WOMEN'S ROLES

Women's social status was similar to men's. But women were never the legal equal to men. The position of women was generally higher in the early Sumerian city-state because of the importance of goddesses in the Sumerian religion. Later, in Mesopotamia, when Sargon (2334–2279 BCE), the Akkadian king, rose to power, the Akkadians took part in Sumerian religious observances. To ensure religious legitimacy, Sargon was the first king in a long line of monarchs to appoint his daughter, Enkheduanna, as high priestess of the moon god, Nanna, at Ur. Enkheduanna was a highly accomplished poet.

The kings of the Ur III Dynasty (2112–2004 BCE) were praised by the songs of their royal women. Female scribes have been identified as the authors of lullabies for the crown prince, long songs to the king, and even laments. Though scribes were usually men, there were women scribes in Old Babylonian Sippar and Mari. Some were even the daughters of scribes. At Sippar, female scribes worked at the cloister, which also functioned as an economic institution of that city. These women scribes recorded the transactions of the members of the cloister. From Mari, we know the names of at least ten female scribes. Nine of them were slaves; they received small rations, indicating the low regard in

which they were held. Slaves with scribal skills were sometimes given to princesses as part of their dowries.

Only one fragment of an Old Babylonian vocabulary text lists female scribes as scholars. There were female counterparts to diviners, physicians, performers, and artists. But, once again, their activities were eclipsed by males in the same jobs.

In the second millennium BCE free women at Nuzi, a Mesopotamian provincial town, played an active role in the economy and in the courts. Though women were not always allowed to participate in the economic spheres, once they participated, they took part in the same range of business transactions as men, ensuring their legal equality with men. Women could acquire land by purchase, inheritance, and royal grant. The real estate ranged in size from simple rural structures to complex urban structures to extensive agricultural estates. In one instance, a free woman owned land in at least six towns. Women sued and were sued regarding the title and ownership of land. The inclusion of free women at Nuzi in real estate transactions was particularly important because ownership of property at Nuzi was the path to power and wealth.

Women had less control of commercial life despite their legal parity with men. A woman could take part in business with her husband's permission. Women also became involved in economic activities when men were not available. That is, widows, particularly those responsible for minor children, could inherit, become head of the surviving family, and administer the family estate. Though loans could be given interest-free, women usually charged interest when they lent silver.

Women had little control over the management of either real estate or slaves. A woman's dowry became part of the estate of her in-laws and was managed by the head of the house, that is, the father or the eldest son. Therefore women used loans as an opportunity for financial gain. Women from wealthy families received additional sums of silver or precious metal as part of their dowry; they then made a profit for themselves on this capital by separate investments. The property a woman accumulated on her own was referred to as in her "hand," "tied in the corner of her garment," or "in her basket"—different expressions used through time.⁵⁵ The surviving wife was called "wife of So-and-so." The term "widow" in Mesopotamia was reserved for destitute women and their children, called "orphans."⁵⁶

Women could serve in various temple jobs, such as priestesses. These were mostly very wealthy young women, including even a princess! They lived in cloisters and were forbidden to marry. Only priestesses of Shamash (the sun god) were permitted to marry, but they did not have children. Some women became temple prostitutes. Orphans and illegitimate children, both boys and girls, wound up in the temples, possibly

exploited by the practice of temple prostitution, described in graphic terms by Herodotus. The cloister was also staffed by managers, officials, scribes, laborers, and personal female slaves. The most famous cloister was in Sippar.

Cloisters were an Old Babylonian institution. When the priestess entered the cloister, she received her dowry, which consisted of real estate and movable property, notably "ring money," which included a coil of silver and other jewelry. Wealthy families sent one daughter with a sizable dowry (typically including houses, fields, orchards, and household slaves) to a cloister to pray on behalf of her family, as a young priestess explained in a letter to her family: "At morning and evening offering I always pray before my Lord and my Mistress for your health. I have heard of your illness, and I am worried. May my Lord and my Mistress not fail to protect you on the right hand and on the left! Every day, at the light, I pray for you before the Queen of Sippar."⁵⁷

The priestesses were supported in part by contributions from their brothers. The brothers managed the property, and, upon the priestess' death, her property reverted to the brothers or their descendants. In this way, estates were conserved. Only the priestesses of Marduk (the patron god of Babylon) were permitted to keep their dowries, and their brothers could not lay claim to their estates. Priestesses took part in a variety of business activities, such as buying, selling, and leasing fields. These business ventures were funded by their "ring money." The profits might be willed either to the brothers of the priestess or to a faithful slave, who might be emancipated with the proviso that the slave take care of the priestess in her old age and perform the proper burial rites. Many tablets recorded the business activities of the priestesses, who proved to be excellent businesswomen.

In a hymn, the goddess Gula (the patron goddess of doctors and healing) described the stages of a woman's life: "I am a daughter, I am a bride, I am a spouse, I am a housekeeper."⁵⁸ In other words, women were never completely independent from men in the roles they played in their lifetime.

In ancient Mesopotamia the most important role of a woman in marriage was to bear children, particularly sons, who were preferred as heirs. Women who bore no children were in a difficult position. When the husband predeceased his wife and left no will, the widow was permitted to continue to live in his house and to be supported by his children. However, if she had children with a previous husband, the children of her second marriage could return the widow to the children of her first marriage. The lack of regard for the widow's situation was stated in the Middle Assyrian law: "She shall go wherever she pleases."⁵⁹ The Middle Assyrian law code allowed widows the freedom to cohabit with a man without a marriage contract; however, after two years, the

widow would legally become a wife despite the lack of a marriage contract. At Asshur a long tablet of Middle Assyrian laws has fifty-nine clauses concerned with matters related to women.

Few references have been found to women outside the patrilinear household. Widows and orphans were protected by the charity of a righteous ruler. Prostitution was an option, and prostitutes were found in public places in the city—the tavern, the harbor, or under the city wall. Prostitutes dressed to attract business, wearing a special type of leather jacket. They were forbidden by law to wear a veil outdoors, as respectable married women did. An Assyrian text described a prostitute having to untie her undergarment to prepare herself for clients. As in the classical world, the whore was often pictured as leaning out of a window. Alewives were also a part of city life, but whether these women were considered “respectable” remains unclear.

SERVICE TO THE GODS

Ancient Mesopotamians believed that man was created to serve the gods. This principle was interpreted literally, so the image of the god was cared for, fed, and clothed. The temple administration included the chief priest, various kinds of exorcists, singers, musicians, scribes, and the staff who supervised the temple businesses. The temple staff purified the temple.

According to a detailed text from the Seleucid period, the divine statues in the temple of Uruk were served two meals daily. The first meal was served in the morning when the temple opened, and the other was served at night, immediately before the doors of the sanctuary were closed. Each meal included two courses, called "main" and "second."¹⁹ From descriptions of divine meals, the following sequence can be reconstructed. First, a table was placed before the image. Water for washing was offered in a bowl (even the gods had to wash up before eating!). Then a variety of beverages, special cuts of meat, and fruits were brought to the table.

When the gods ate, they were hidden from both priests and human

beings by linen curtains drawn around the statue and table. Music was played during the meal, and ritual fumigation was performed. At the end of the meal, the table was cleared. The curtains were opened and then drawn shut so the gods could wash their fingers. Clearly, the statues of the gods did not and could not eat. In reality, the meal of the god was scaled to feed the temple staff and their families. Also, the food from the divine meal was sent to the king for consumption, perhaps daily or only on special occasions.

In order to serve the god, the temple was designed like a royal palace, with well-equipped kitchens, a reception suite to receive visitors, bedrooms, additional suites for the god's family and servants, a courtyard, and stables. Many temples featured a wharf where the god's boat was moored so that he could visit other deities or his country home in spring and summer.

Enormous amounts of food were provided to temple administrators and craftsmen. For example, one text listed a daily total of more than 500 kilograms of bread, forty sheep, two bulls, one bullock, eight lambs, seventy birds and ducks, four wild boars, three ostrich eggs, dates, figs, raisins, and fifty-four containers of beer and wine, in addition to other offerings.²⁰

The best agricultural products and the best animals (cattle, sheep, and goats) were sent to the temple, to be used in three different ways: (1) as daily food served to the divine image, (2) as income or rations for the temple staff who supervised and prepared the divine meals, and (3) to be accumulated for future use or trade. The temple also relied on funds supplied by the royals, wealthy citizens, and, occasionally, booty.

PLACES OF WORSHIP AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

The temple represented the communal identity of each city. The temple was usually located in the center of the city. It was both the largest and tallest building in the city. At each temple worshipers could meet one or more gods to make requests of them. Most gods had a dual function; they both served as the god of a particular place and were the patrons of some particular aspect of life.

The temple was built mostly of mud bricks, but the facades and walls were elaborately decorated. Mud brick columns and half-columns graced the temple, sometimes imitating palm trunks. The most important temples had several courtyards and principal entrances, which led to the temple cella. There was even an ante-cella in front of the cella. The architecture of the temple was carefully planned. Miniature bricks were found at one ancient temple—they were probably used to construct a scale model! Throughout the history of ancient Mesopotamia there was

continuity in religious architecture. In the third millennium BCE, temples became the symbolic focus of the city and its surrounding countryside as well as of the state and its rulers.

Stone statues were commonly placed inside temples to act as substitutes for the worshiper, standing before the gods in a state of continuous prayer. Ritual texts described parts of the temple forbidden to outsiders and ritual actions "at a place which is not public." The immense enclosure surrounding the ziggurat at Babylon allowed the people to observe ceremonies, but only from a distance.

Architects designed stepped towers called ziggurats. The ziggurat had a rectangular base and three staircases, which met at right angles and led up to the high temple. The first proper ziggurat was built by Ur-Nammu (2112–2095 BCE), the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur. Ur-Nammu's piety and attention to building and restoring shrines led to his posthumous deification.

Sanctuaries were considered public places of worship, though, in reality, only the "clergy" visited them. According to texts from the Old Babylonian period, individuals sometimes donated small chapels to the temple. There were also wayside shrines containing numerous votive objects.

The temple was regarded as the god's "house" or "estate," and managed like a secular institution. The temple could own property in more than one place and take part in various productive and commercial activities. The range of the temple's economic activities included cultivation of cereals, vegetables, and fruit trees; management of sheep, goats, and cows; manufacture of textiles, leather, and wooden items; and promotion of trading links with foreign lands. These enterprises necessitated storerooms, granaries, and workshops within the temple enclosure. Some temples lacked sufficient space for expansion in the crowded quarters of the old shrine. In these cases, additional buildings were spread throughout the city and countryside.

Though the temple accumulated capital, rural estates, and craft industries, it was not only a capitalist institution. Evidence of the social conscience of the temples could be found in loans of barley made interest-free to individuals in time of famine. A few sale documents recorded the purchase of children for an unspecified price by the high priest of the temple—transactions which implied the temple's practice of taking in poor children, illegitimate children, and orphans.

The temple also served as a forum for various judicial proceedings, particularly the taking of solemn oaths (possibly for a fee). The gods or their symbols even left the temple to go on location in order to settle human affairs such as boundary disputes or the distribution of shares in a harvest.

Regular offerings were distinguished from those for special occasions

such as the great feasts, emergencies, or celebration of joyous events. Enormous offerings were presented at annual festivals. Sacrifices included animals, incense, oil, and butter.

Human sacrifice was occasionally practiced in ancient Mesopotamia. The most striking case was found at the sixteen Royal Tombs of Ur. The principal body was interred in a large pit more than thirty feet deep, lined with stone or brick. In a ritual ceremony, the king's staff was killed or drank poison; in one case as many as seventy-four people, mainly women.

Another form of human sacrifice was practiced in Assyria through the first millennium BCE. When omens foretold grave danger to the king, a substitute king was appointed to rule during this perilous time. Thus, any evil fated for the king befell his substitute. At the end of the substitute king's reign of one hundred days, he and his spouse were ritually killed. An Old Babylonian chronicle reported that Erra-imitti of Isin had Enlil-bani installed as the substitute king; however, Erra-imitti was scalded with hot broth and died, so that Enlil-bani now was his successor.

WORSHIPERS

Hymns and prayers have provided us with a window into the religious beliefs of the ancient Mesopotamians. Individual prayers followed a fixed pattern: (1) at the beginning there was an invocation praising the deity; (2) the middle section, which varied in length, was devoted to the complaints or petitions of the worshiper; and (3) the end included anticipatory expressions of appreciation and praised the god again.²¹ The style of these prayers was not very interesting. They used stock phrases, epithets, and hymnal quotations. Many examples of liturgical poems have been found; they expressed feelings of respect, fear, and spirituality. These liturgical poems were addressed to a particular god, before whom the worshiper bowed and appealed for mercy, sometimes through flattery. Only poems composed outside the cult showed more sincere feelings and poetic style—personal requests referring to a specific and very personal experience. Prayer was used for a variety of purposes, such as imparting magical effectiveness to sacred paraphernalia and warding off the evil effects of eclipses and bad dreams. Special prayers expressed laments or complaints; others conveyed blessings. Thus, when man enjoyed economic prosperity and spiritual peace, he attributed his situation to the presence of supernatural powers that either filled his body or guarded him. Conversely, a man blamed his misfortunes, illnesses, and failures on the absence of such protection.

Obedience to the gods was a cornerstone of religious behavior; these obligations included a large number of positive and especially negative

prescriptions (taboos). A few examples taken from a list contained the following: one could not invoke the god's name while brandishing an axe, nor drink from a cup of unbaked clay, nor tear out twigs from the steppe or break reeds in the canebrake, nor urinate or vomit in a waterway, nor take away a clod of earth from a field, and so on.²² The gods inevitably punished humans for their transgressions through accidents, sudden disgraces or illnesses, or unexpected catastrophes.

Prayers were mostly linked with rituals. The rituals were carefully described in a section at the end of the prayer to regulate the actions of the worshiper or priest. The ritual section included the details of sacrifice and the precise time of the offering. The links between the acts and offerings of the prayer were fixed. For example, the merchants who sailed down the Gulf to trade in Bahrain brought "thank offerings" upon their safe return home. They paid a proportion of their cargo to the Temple of Nanna at Ur, which capitalized their venture. Sometimes they added a silver boat, which the scribes recorded as a gift coming "from the prompting of his heart."²³

RELIGIOUS PERSONNEL AND SERVANTS

Lists of temple personnel have given us a clearer picture of how the temple operated. The staff included cultic, administrative, and domestic staff (such as craftsmen). For instance, the staff at Ninurta's temple at Lagash consisted of the following:

- The High-Priest
- The lamentation-priest
- The purification-priest
- The high priestess
- The *naditum*-priestess
- The chief *qadištum*-priestess
- The diviner
- The snake-charmer
- The miller
- The guard
- The fuller
- The fuel-carrier
- The water-carrier
- The oil-presser
- The cow herder

- The (copper-)smith
- The steward
- The boatman
- The boat-tower
- The weaver
- The courtyard-sweeper
- The barber
- The water-pourer
- The mat-maker
- The runner
- The stone carver
- The king's butler
- The palace guard
- The house supervisor
- The accountant
- The treasurer
- The cupbearer
- The overseer of the oil-pressers
- The scribe²⁴

Cultic personnel took care of the gods' needs, placing offerings before them, keeping them clothed and sheltered, and performing rituals. According to Sumerian religious practices, priestesses served as the chief attendants to gods, and priests similarly served goddesses. However, most of the temple staff performed routine tasks such as sweeping the courtyard, guarding the doors, and managing the temple staff and property. From the Akkadian period on the priest's head was shaved, so the barber was part of the temple staff. Another Ur III text provided a list of 180 "musicians" (both vocal and instrumental) and 62 "lamentation-priests" (who chanted) in the temples of Lagash. Music played an important part in both temple and state rituals. Musicians and lamentation-priests were often mentioned together in temple rituals.

The responsibility for arranging the songs of the rituals belonged to the lamentation-priests. The lamentation-priests had to be able to read and sing difficult rituals. They were literate and sometimes acted as scribes. A well-connected lamentation-priest could collect a variety of appointments at different temples.

The duties of the musicians were to sing the songs properly and accompany them with musical instruments. Musicians, both male and fe-

male, were often mentioned in large numbers in connection with palaces, escorting the Assyrian kings on their campaigns. The Assyrian kings also captured musicians in their campaigns and brought them back as part of their booty. They included among their ranks snake-charmers and bear wardens as part of a ritual circus performance.

Religious personnel received bread "returned from the sanctuary."²⁵ That is, the temple staff received regular allotments from the temple income, namely, food, drinks, textiles, wool, and silver goods. Temple personnel always included "live-in" staff. In the Old Babylonian period the regular staff was reduced, perhaps reflecting the separation of temple and palace. Both priestly and domestic offices were treated as prebends (temple offices). Though many prebends became unnecessary, they continued to be inherited, sold, or even rented. The practice of prebends began in the Ur III period and became an elaborate institution during the Old Babylonian period, when temple offices were gradually converted into commercial shares. Certain offices changed hands every few days, but others required specialists, such as craftsmen, scribes, and permanent administrators. Temple offices were usually inherited by the eldest son upon division of the estate. But in time the prebend was subdivided so that individuals might execute their duties only one day a year. During the Seleucid period the prebends were calculated by scribes, who divided the offices into a long and complex total of fractions to convince the purchaser that he was buying a large fraction of the day. Prebends were lucrative, so that their holders wanted the sanctuary to function according to the old rites, which gave them a guaranteed income.

Female religious personnel consisted of various types of priestesses. The high priestesses (Akkadian, *entum*) were cloistered to offer prayers on behalf of their male (and female) relatives (see Chapter 7). They also took part in the Sacred Marriage as attested by cloisters containing a bedroom within the shrine at various excavated sites.

The cloister at Sippar, a large walled enclosure, served as the residence of a whole community of *naditum*-priestesses. Their cultic role was unclear. The word *naditum*, "fallow," referred to the women's unmarried or virginal status. At Sippar the *naditum*-priestesses did not marry. In other communities, such as Babylon, *naditum*-priestesses could marry but remained celibate.²⁶ The priestess did not enter the household of her husband but was able to leave an inheritance to her adopted sons or daughters (see Chapter 7). She was given a dowry to set her up in her new home. The Laws of Hammurabi (§§178–180) allowed the *naditum* a life interest in any property given to her by her father, or, if bequeathed in writing to her, an absolute right to it.²⁷ The *naditum* was not reclusive—she was active in business and family life. The priestesses were from wealthy families, and some were even royalty. The cloister staff

also included managers, officials, scribes, laborers, and personal female slaves.

Other female religious personnel, mostly in temples of Ishtar, took part in cultic prostitution as part of fertility ceremonies. Greek authors reported that every woman had to offer her body to a stranger in the temple of the goddess of love. Herodotus described temple prostitution as follows:

The most shameful of the customs of the Babylonians is this: every woman must sit in the shrine of Aphrodite once in her life to have intercourse with a strange man. Many women who scorn to mix with the others, because they are rich and proud, drive to the temple in covered carriages drawn by teams of horses and stand there with their retinue. But most sit in the precinct of Aphrodite, wearing a wreath of string round their heads. . . . And through all the women are passages marked off running in all directions, along which the strangers walk to make their choice. Once a woman has taken her seat, she does not go home until one of the strangers has thrown money into her lap and had intercourse with her outside the shrine; and when he throws the money, he has to say, "I call you by Mylitta," because the Assyrians call Aphrodite Mylitta. The amount of the money does not matter; for the woman will never refuse, because that is against the law, as this money has thus become sacred. She follows the first man who throws money and refuses no one. After the intercourse, she has discharged her duty to the goddess and goes home, and it is then impossible to seduce her, however large the offer. So handsome, tall women can leave soon, but the ugly ones have to wait a long time because they cannot fulfill the law; and some of them stay there for three or four years. There is a similar custom in Cyprus.²⁸ (Herodotus 1.195–200)

Another group, the "sacred women," were dedicated to the god Adad; they were expected to bear or nurse children, and were probably not prostitutes.

Orphans, children of the poor, and children of insolvent debtors were dedicated as temple slaves. In times of famine, widows gave children to be temple slaves to save them from starvation, but the children stayed with their mothers until they were able to work. Marriage of temple slaves replenished the slave personnel. Privately owned slaves were sent to the temples by their devout masters. During the Neo-Babylonian period, prisoners of war were offered as slaves to the temple.

Most slaves dedicated to the temple were branded, but sometimes the slave mark was a wooden or metal tag on the slave's wrist. The status of a branded slave was passed down at least to the third generation.

Temple slaves were marked on the wrist or the back of the hand with symbols of the gods to whom they were dedicated; for example, a star tattoo was Ishtar's symbol; a spade, Marduk's; and a stylus, Nabu's. Temple slaves were further identified by their own name plus their father's.

When slaves or workers ran away, they were branded or marked, placed in shackles, and returned to work. Also, when slaves refused to work, they were placed in shackles. The demand for shackles was so great that the temples regularly placed orders for their manufacture. Rebellious slaves were sometimes confined to temple prisons.

Temple slaves worked under strict supervision and lived in city districts specially set aside for them, though some owned their own houses or lived in rented lodgings. Numerous texts involving judgments about temple slaves note their harsh treatment. Temple slaves often attacked their overseers and even high temple officials.

Slaves who worked for the temple year round were placed on a permanent allowance, receiving barley in the form of grain or flour, dates, and vegetable oil. Some slaves even received beer, salt, and occasionally meat. The temples also supplied clothing and footwear to their slaves, though slaves often received wool to weave their own garments instead of clothing.

Some slaves, who led an independent economic existence or did not work under the direct, regular supervision of temple officials, were obliged either to pay monetary remuneration or to provide the temple with finished products such as bricks and garments.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

The cultic relationship between the city and its god was formalized at cyclical festivals, such as the New Year's Festival and the festival of each temple and its god. The festivals were usually centered around a cult drama which was reenacted to institute the necessary function. A ritual text specified that "the people of the land will light fires in their homes and will offer banquets to all the gods. They will speak the recitations."²⁹

The common man was only able to communicate with the deity through communal religious events such as cyclical festivals and mourning ceremonies. The role the general public played in these elaborate ceremonies remains uncertain. But at the very least the public could observe the great processions as the divine image was carried in a procession through the spacious yards of the temple compound or through certain streets of the city.

When deities left the temple, they showed themselves to the public, took stock of their city, visited their country home, and met with the gods of other cities to determine the fate of the nation or to receive the

blessings of major gods. Outdoor rituals involving the god-statues of more than one city helped to maintain theological unity on a national level. With the collapse of the Ur III dynasty, these visits were seldom mentioned, although the gods continued to leave their temples to go on local journeys to settle legal disputes.

Myths spoke of gods and goddesses leaving their homes to visit their friends and relatives. These visits reflected actual ceremonies in which the divine statue was transported for both regular calendar festivals and for special occasions. There were many regular festivals in Babylonia, including festivals of thanksgiving and sheep-shearing. Various cities had their own calendar of seasonal feasts. For example, there were special calendar days for the delivery of first fruits and the offering of the first dairy products of the year. This ritual act was recognized both as a religious celebration and as an exchange of products between the cattlemen in the south and the farmers in the north of Mesopotamia.

The most common festivals were connected with certain days of the month which corresponded to the phases of the moon. The concept of self-generation was usually associated with the moon, which waxed, waned, and finally vanished during each (lunar) month. The ancients believed that the moon actually died at the end of each month, went down to the netherworld, and then came to life again by its own efforts. Special offerings were made on the day the moon was invisible and believed to be dead, "the day of lying down." On this day Nanna descended to the netherworld to render judgment and make administrative decisions there with other deities.³⁰ When Nanna had completed his duties in the netherworld, he reappeared in the skies as the new moon. A partial or total eclipse of the moon was considered an ominous event. The great gods asked Sin (the moon god) how to avoid the evil omen portended by the eclipse. Purification rites were a general feature of the Mesopotamian cult in order to keep the moon free of defilement during eclipses.

The greatest festival of all was celebrated at the New Year. In Neo-Babylonian times the New Year's Festival took place during the first eleven days of Nisan, the month of the spring equinox. For the first few days, ceremonial ablutions and prayers were performed, but on the evening of the fourth day the whole of the *Epic of Creation* was recited in public, or perhaps reenacted like a medieval mystery play. The *Epic of Creation* told how the universe was created through Marduk's victory, thereby providing assurance to the Babylonians that the world as they knew it would continue unchanged. The fifth day included more ritual purification. The god Nabu arrived from Borsippa to participate in the festival, and so did the king. The king was permitted to enter the inner sanctuary but only after the high priest had removed the royal insignia. The king was humiliated by having his cheek slapped and his ears

pulled. Then he knelt before Marduk and assured the god that during the year he had not committed any sins or neglected Esagila and Babylon. After a speech by the priest, the king's insignia were returned to him, and once again he was slapped on the cheek. The more painful his slap, the better, because the tears in the king's eyes signified that Marduk was well pleased. In the evening the king participated in a ceremony in which a white bull was sacrificed. The rest of the ritual text is lost, but from other sources we know that later ceremonies included the famous procession to the New Year's house outside the city. During the parade, the king "took the hand of Marduk," leading him from his shrine along the Processional Way and through the Ishtar Gate. Then the king took part in the so-called Sacred Marriage.

The Sacred Marriage was a fertility drama celebrated in select cities. The date-growers in Uruk celebrated the Sacred Marriage as the power in the date palm to grow and bear fruit, and the herders, dependent on pasture and breeding, believed that consummation resulted in fertility in nature. In this rite the ruler, the priest-king (EN), or king (LUGAL) represented the god. His sexual union with the goddess, Inanna, played by a high priestess or perhaps even the queen, resulted in all of nature being fertilized. The Sacred Marriage was based on the myth "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi" (see Chapter 7). The Sacred Marriage was celebrated at the New Year's Festival when offerings associated with "setting up the bed" were recorded.³¹

SORCERERS, EXORCISTS, AND DIVINERS

Human existence depended on pleasing the gods, but the gods also relied on their human servants to do their work. The gods were easily provoked and ready to destroy man for the most minor offenses, particularly for disturbing their sleep. But since the gods did not want to labor, they also rescued human beings in several myths.

Unjust punishment was expected by the citizens of a totalitarian state. Throughout Mesopotamian history, men complained about the capricious and unfair treatment of the gods in their prayers. "Fate" and "Evil Day," demons of death, brought men and women to the netherworld. Numerous "Evil Days" represented the god's decision to end an empire—that is, collective death.

Magic and sorcery were widespread; they were part of experience and faith in ancient Mesopotamia. There were spells and counter-spells ("releases") for every facet of life. There were no boundaries separating "magic" from "cult" and "religion."

"Magic" included religious behavior that tried to influence man's success, well-being, health, and wealth. There were two major forms of

magic: black magic, which brought harm to people, and white magic, which tried to turn away evil caused by demons, malevolent powers, and humans. Since black magic was dreaded, sorcerers were summoned to cancel spells that brought trouble or misfortune to an individual. Most tablets described white magical activities.

The ancient Mesopotamians lived in a world of supernatural forces that constantly threatened their lives and well-being. So, the ancient peoples had a philosophy of life controlled by permanent fear of something negative prowling in the dark—an unknown power lying in wait to harm them. Both evil demons and human sorcerers could strike a person at any time.

Sometimes a specific demon or sorcerer could not be held responsible for the decline of the victim's well-being. Rather, the afflicted person had committed a sin unknowingly, resulting in a "ban" or "curse," which alienated him from the favor of the god(s). Once the individual became aware of his "sin," the situation could be remedied. However, if the reason for divine anger remained unclear, magic was used.

Two compendia, called *Šurpu* and *Maqlû* (both meaning "burning"), were consulted; they contained spells addressed either to deities known for their exorcistic powers or to fire, which was used to destroy figures representing the enemies of the sufferer. The prayers varied greatly in style, content, and literary merit. They contained mythological allusions, folkloric imagery, hackneyed phrases, and abracadabra-like sequences of words.

Šurpu and *Maqlû* were used for different purposes. *Šurpu* contained a collection of spells and rituals that described all possible types of misbehavior, such as cultic negligence, domestic trouble, uncharitable conduct, cruelty to animals, and unintentional contact with ritually unclean people or places. *Šurpu* was concerned with the purification rites for the offender-victim. Objects carrying the sufferer's misdeeds were burned or discarded. As a result the patient was released from the evil effects of his previous actions. *Maqlû* was concerned with burning the image of the witch by fire.

The texts noted the importance of identifying the perpetrator, who, in all surviving witchcraft texts, was unknown to the victim. Several law codes referred to procedures to be followed in cases of sorcery. Because an accusation of sorcery was hard to prove, the accuser himself could face death. For this reason, "witchcraft trials" were avoided whenever possible. Only a fragment of a single letter reported that certain women were accused of witchcraft, but again, we hear nothing of witch trials.³² In cases in which evidence and testimony were not easily refutable, the standard procedure was to bring the case before the divine judges of the river. Immersion in the "Divine River" brought a verdict of guilt (drowning) or innocence (survival). For example:

If a man charges another man with practicing witchcraft but cannot bring proof against him, he who is charged with witchcraft shall go to the divine River Ordeal, he shall indeed submit to the divine River Ordeal; if the divine River Ordeal should overwhelm him (that is, he drowns), his accuser shall take full legal possession of his estate; if the divine River Ordeal should clear that man and should he survive, he who made the charge of witchcraft against him shall be killed; he who submitted to the divine River Ordeal shall take full legal possession of his accuser's estate.³³ (Laws of Hammurabi §2)

Omens A large group of omens revealed a predetermined situation, which was avoided by magical means. Omens involved two types of divine revelation given to individuals: (1) a warning about a specific danger predicted by an observable fact, or (2) a notification of a propitious development in the future. Omens were the main way in which Mesopotamian gods communicated their intentions and decisions. That is, the Babylonians believed that the gods disclosed their intentions to humans by signs in natural phenomena and world events. These signs could be interpreted through prolonged observation and deep study. The most common forms of divination were examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals (extispicy) and observation of the stars and planets (astrology). Other forms of communication, though rarely used, were oracles, prophecy, necromancy, or incubation (that is, spending the night in a sanctuary in order to receive a dream message).

Omens were either solicited or unsolicited. In the case of a solicited omen a specialist examined or observed a situation he deliberately induced. The gods could then be asked for advice in a specific situation. Omens predicting disaster for an individual called for the speedy performance of a specific rite to prevent the threat from becoming reality. Rituals were as diverse as the divine signs prompting their use—such rituals were often recorded on individual tablets, each designed for a specific situation.

Unsolicited omens, such as a solar eclipse, the birth of a baby with two heads, or the appearance of a wild animal in the city, could be seen by anybody, and even the casual observer could be affected. If the sign foretold evil, the observer could ward off its evil effect by preventive rites. Signs observed at an individual's house related primarily to that particular person; events that happened in the community (for instance, a wolf seen in town or an untimely regional thunderstorm) affected a city or district. Events in the capital could have consequences for the state administration. Terrestrial or celestial omens, such as earthquakes or eclipses, affected the whole country and its representatives, the king, the court, and their politics or warfare. Preventive rituals were recorded

in various ways. Sometimes they were written on individual tablets, each designed for a specific occurrence. At other times, the ritual instructions and incantations were part of an omen series, so the specialist had easy access to all information necessary.

The common man, upon seeing an omen, probably contacted the nearest literate person, a priest, a scribe, a diviner, an exorcist, or even the local authorities. There was no one specialist to deal with unsolicited omens. If none of these people had access to the necessary manuals, they could contact a more erudite specialist or a higher authority, as in the following case:

To my lord, from your servant Sumkhurabi: In Great Zarrum, among the flocks of sheikh Zazum, a malformed lamb was born, but while I was staying with my lord in Mari, nobody informed me. As soon as I arrived in my district, they brought it to me, telling me the following: "It had one head, (and) its face looked like a ram's face; it (also) had just one breast, heart and (set of) entrails. From its umbilical cord (down) to its loin there were two bodies, but during birth one of its shoulders was ripped off, and (later on?) somebody crushed its head." Now I had it sent immediately to my lord. My lord should inspect it! (Letter from a governor to the king of Mari, Old Babylonian period)³⁴

Diviners were specialists who solicited omens from the gods and interpreted the signs. A diviner (literally, "examiner") communicated with divine forces through extispicy, hepatoscopy, lecanomancy, and libanomancy. Diviners also used a variety of procedures to avoid evil events, such as oral formulas, manual rituals, and prayers. The Mesopotamian diviner's most important tool was a copper kettledrum covered with the hide of a black bull. There were rituals describing the ceremonies to provide a new drumhead. The process involved the ritual preparation of a bull chosen to be slaughtered, tanning its skin, and then installing its hide on the drum. After the bull had been slaughtered and its heart burned, they prepared the animal's skin and mourned its death. The bull was given a ritual burial, but its meat supplied food for the priests—as was done with any other sacrificial animal. Unlike exorcists, diviners did not belong to the priesthood of a particular temple. Most diviners known to us by name worked directly for the crown; they were either palace scholars or were attached to local governments or the army. The diviner could have no physical defects and had to be of free descent.³⁵

Both private individuals and state officials consulted diviners on all important matters. Diviners usually received communications from the gods through extispicy; the diviner requested the gods to "write" their messages on the entrails, especially the liver, which the diviner "read"

by examining the organs. Sometimes the diviners used liver models, interpreting the signs in order to locate or record unusual features. The diviners had extensive handbooks that listed every conceivable deformation, mark, or discoloration, often further defined by location and significance.

Hepatoscopy, the type of divination in which the liver of a sacrificed animal was examined, continued to be the main way of consulting the will of the gods, even when astral divination gained in importance. In fact, portents from celestial omens were verified by the questions sub-

mitted to the liver diviner or haruspex. A "letter of recommendation" addressed to the king named twenty-three well-trained scholars and described the haruspex in glowing terms—"he is expert in divination."³⁶

Extispicy, the form of divination based on examination of the intestines of slaughtered animals, was used to foretell future events. Extispicy involved at least one animal for each inquiry, so private citizens probably resorted to this technique only in extraordinary circumstances. The diviner was also able to perform cheaper, though less precise, methods for soliciting a divine message, such as lecanomancy (observing the pattern of oil poured onto water, or vice versa) and libanomancy (observing smoke generated by a censer). Also, prayers to the stars, particularly to Ursa Major, the Wagon of the Babylonian sky, were employed by the fortune teller to obtain a reliable omen through a dream. There is a compendium of such information in the Assyrian Dream-book.³⁷ During first millennium BCE Assyria, there were professional "observers of birds" in the king's service. They furnished reports on omens derived from the movement of birds. The observers of birds were also interpreters of dreams.

The methods of divination described above sought answers on a binary level. The client, king or citizen, through the medium of the diviner, asked for a "yes" or "no" from the gods for a specific problem or situation.

In the case of an ambiguous reading, the signs were counted, and a mathematical majority of positive or negative aspects were totaled to determine the final verdict. If the totals were the same for positive and negative answers, the process was repeated. There was no immediate danger in a negative sign, as long as the situation under investigation was properly postponed or even canceled in due time. Because of this, no follow-up rituals were required. The handbooks used for interpreting the divine signs were organized by topic and followed a format: the omen was listed in the conditional clause (the protasis), "If such-and-such is seen (or happens)," followed by an apodosis that described the portended event in a declarative clause. The list could be expanded indefinitely by variations on the protasis. For example, multiple births were enumerated from two up to eight or nine. Some omens were traced back to historical events of the past, when the occurrences were observed for the first time. Thousands of different signs were collected, and the resulting texts were expanded into purely theoretical "science" by adding scores of conceivable or inconceivable possibilities.

Astral magic is the art of harnessing the power of the stars through prayers and rituals. Professional diviners and exorcists practiced astral magic to foretell the future, avoid evil portents (apotropaic rituals), and find the most auspicious

moment to undertake a task. An extensive collection of celestial omens described the influence of astral deities on man. Eventually the art of celestial divination became a scholarly discipline.

Prayers to stars were just a few lines or a few words that briefly stated the petitioner's appeal. The reason for turning to the particular god or celestial body was not usually stated. In dire circumstances, divine favor was requested by enumerating the names of stars, the names of gods, natural forces, various rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates, and so on.

In the *Prayer to the Gods of the Night* the stars and constellations of the night sky were present during the diviner's lonely vigil before dawn when he examined the liver. The night was calm and dark, and the moon and Venus were not visible. The fire on the roof and the constellations provided the only sources of light.

They have retired, the great ones.
The bolts are drawn, the locks in place.
The noisy crowds are still and quiet,
the open doors have now been closed.

The gods and goddesses of the land—the Sun, the Moon, the
Storm, the Morning-Star—
have gone to where they sleep in heaven,
leaving aside judgement and decree.³⁸

The diviner stood on the roof of the temple and regarded the world below. He concluded his prayer to the celestial bodies for a successful reading:

May the great gods of the night:
shining Fire-star,
heroic Erra,
Bow-star, Yoke-star,
Orion, Dragon-star,
Wagon, Goat-star,
Bison-star, Serpent-star
stand by and
put a propitious sign
in the lamb I am blessing now
for the haruspicy I will perform (at dawn).³⁹

"Lifting-of-the-hand," a type of prayer named for the accompanying gesture, was offered collectively to "stars" or to "all stars," often called "gods of the night."⁴⁰ These prayers were also addressed to constella-

tions, such as the Wagon (Ursa Major), the True Shepherd of Anu (Orion), the Pleiades, the Scorpion (Scorpius), and the Arrow Star (Sirius).

During the first millennium BCE gods were identified with stars. Divine powers became consolidated in a single god. The three highest gods, Anu, Enlil, and Ea, were not equated with individual stars, constellations, or planets. Instead, they represented the entire sky. The major planetary gods were the sun, the moon, and Venus. The sun was the god of justice, and the Scales (the constellation Libra) were called "Shamash's star of justice."⁴¹ The moon was the most important to the ancient Mesopotamians, because it was used to fix their calendar, which was based on lunar months. Sin, the moon god, was the father of both Shamash (the sun god) and Ishtar (Venus). Sin was partial to sorceresses, who could "draw down the Moon." The two celestial appearances of Venus and Mercury were known from early times.

The descriptive names the ancient Mesopotamians ascribed to their planets confirmed their astronomical knowledge. For example, Mercury was called the Leaping One; Saturn (the slowest), the Steady One; and Mars, the Red Planet or the Enemy. Observational astronomy and recognition of the periodicities of heavenly phenomena began in the Old Babylonian period, but mathematical astronomy did not emerge until the fifth century BCE. Babylonian constellations were named after the shapes of their configurations, specifically, human figures, animals, or common objects. These names were either similar or identical to the names of constellations in Classical Greek antiquity.

Hemerologies from Mesopotamia enumerated auspicious days for undertaking a particular kind of business or activity, such as building a house, marrying, or offering prayers and sacrifices to the god or goddess. One of the most common taboos referred to eating fish and leeks on the seventh day of the seventh month.⁴² Hemerologies, even in abbreviated form, always included the "evil" days (7, 14, 19, 21, 28). Particular days were named for fasting and sexual abstinence.

There was no clear distinction between the two types of celestial observation, "astronomy" and "astrology." The specialists in these fields either worked together or were experts in both fields. In the case of celestial omens pertaining directly to the king or state, the divinatory science of astrology was generally restricted to specialized scholars associated with the palace or the main temples of the land.

The astronomer was the "expert in celestial matters."⁴³ The astronomers made regular reports to the king on the monthly sighting of the new moon as well as special reports on various celestial and meteorological phenomena.⁴⁴ The meanings of lunar and solar eclipses, other stellar occurrences, and meteorological phenomena were collected and standardized in an omen collection called *When Anu, Enlil*. The astronomer was even called the "scribe of *When Anu, Enlil*," referring to

that same celestial omen series. The series included seventy tablets of omens referring to the welfare of the king and the country.

The stars influenced human actions and acted as mediators, like saints, between man and god. In their role of communicating with gods, the stars were the supplicant's messengers, as in the following prayer:

may the star itself take to you (goddess) my misery;
let the ecstatic tell you, the dream-interpretter repeat to you,
let the (three) watches of the night speak to you.⁴⁵

Mesopotamian life harnessed the powers of the stars (1) to cause harm or protect from harm; (2) for amulets and charms; (3) for confirming favorable or unfavorable times; and (4) for medicine, from acquiring the herbs or other medicinal substances, through preparing and administering the medications. Moonless nights were particularly appropriate for gathering herbs. The stars transformed ordinary substances into potent ones, effective in magic, medicine, or ritual. Stars also provided reliable answers to the queries of the diviner.

The most influential area of Mesopotamian divination was astrology. The ancient Mesopotamians combined here their belief in omens with observational astronomy, mathematical calculation, and eventually the prediction of the movements of heavenly bodies. Western astronomy was later founded on these early records.

There was no clear distinction between medicine based on "rational science" and medicine based on magico-religious techniques. Two professions provided health care to the population, the "magical expert" (*āšipū*) and the "physician" (*asû*; see Chapter 5).

Mesopotamians used the native term for a "dead person" interchangeably with the word for a "ghost." A corpse was fully human in appearance (though sometimes skeletal), but a ghost was not. Old souls were recycled as new human beings; otherwise, the dead would have dangerously outnumbered the living.

Unfriendly ghosts pursued, seized, bound, and even physically abused their victims; they even entered their victims through their ears. Ghosts bothered people by appearing uninvited at their homes, assaulting them in city streets, or haunting their dreams. Persons who traveled through uninhabited areas were particularly susceptible to attack by ghosts, sometimes conjured up by sorcerers. The gods sent ghosts to haunt sinners, in particular, murderers. Also, the sorcerers and sorceresses used black magic "to seize a ghost and tie him to a man" and "to hand over an image of the man to death."

Even the most unhappy ghosts could be rendered harmless by performing the correct magical procedure. Methods of dealing with annoying ghosts included tying of magic knots, manufacturing amulets,

smearing on magical salves, drinking magic potions, pouring out libations while reciting incantations, and burying a surrogate figurine representing the ghost. Other ghost rituals were similar to those used against demons, demonstrating that the souls of the human dead were immortal and possessed demonic powers.

As long as offerings were made without interruption, a ghost would remain more or less peaceful. Ghosts of the dead returned to haunt the living because they had not received the proper burial rites or their share of the funerary offerings. In order to put a stop to their roaming the earth and perpetrating acts of vengeance, the ghosts were appeased with offerings, the same as those regularly given to the dead. Offerings usually consisted of various types of water, vinegar, watered beer, ashes, and breads or flour made from roasted grain.

The preferred method for consulting ghosts involved the preparation of an ointment. Incantations included instructions for preparing the salve, which was composed of a variety of ingredients, some unusual, as centipede dust, frog intestines, lion fat, and goose-bone marrow. The preparation was smeared on the practitioner's face in order to enable him to see and speak with the ghost. Alternatively, the salve could be rubbed on a figurine or skull that housed the ghost. If the application of ointments failed, the practitioner tried another ritual, an apotropaic ritual of "undoing," called *namburbû*, for which professional ghost raisers could be hired.

Demons were shapeless forms of evil. The names of many Mesopotamian demons are known to us, but few have been **Demons** individually described. Often they appeared in groups of seven, for which a generic incantation such as the following could be used:

They are seven, they are seven,
 They are seven in the depth of the primeval water,
 They are seven adorned in heaven.
 They are not male, they are not female,
 They are drifting phantoms.
 They have no spouse, never bore a child,
 They do not know the result of their actions,
 They do not pay attention to prayers and offerings.
 They roam about the streets to cause trouble on the highway.
 They are seven, they are seven.⁴⁶ (From a Sumerian spell against
 the *utukku*-demons)

A few demonic figures were described in detail, such as Lamashtu and Pazuzu. Lamashtu, Anu's daughter, brought evil on her own initiative, attacking pregnant women, young mothers, and babies. Many incantations against her recount her ugliness and evildoings:

She comes up from the swamp,
is fierce, terrible, forceful, destructive, powerful:
(and still) she is a goddess, is awe-inspiring.
Her feet are those of an eagle, her hands mean decay.
Her fingernails are long, her armpits unshaven . . .
The daughter of Anu counts the pregnant women daily,
follows on the heels of those about to give birth.
She counts their months, marks their days on the wall.
Against those just giving birth she casts a spell:
"Bring me your sons, let me nurse them.

In the mouth of your daughters I want to place my breast!"
 She loves to drink bubbling human blood,
 (eats) flesh not to be eaten, (picks) bones not to
 be picked.⁴⁷ (From *Lamashtu* series, tablet 1)

Lamashtu was depicted on many amulets, which were meant to discourage her by having the demon view her own image. The ritual texts accompanying the incantations used various magical techniques, most commonly effigies of Lamashtu being killed, destroyed, buried, dispatched downstream, or sent to the desert.

Another well-known demon was Pazuzu, who was often called upon to neutralize Lamashtu. *Ardat-lilî*, the "Maid of the Storm" (or "*lilû's* girl"), was the prototype of the Biblical Lilith, a frustrated bride, incapable of normal sexual activity, love, and childbearing. Her frustration was transformed into vengeance against young adults—causing impotence in men and sterility in women.

Those who died unmarried joined a special class of demons called *lilû* (female *lilîtu*). *Lilû* and *lilîtu* entered people's homes by slipping through the windows. They looked for victims to fulfill the role of the husbands and wives they had never had. If proper precautions were not taken, the victim was carried off to an early death to become part of the next generation of *lilû* and *lilîtu* demons.

Demons had no cult, received no offerings, and exploited humans mercilessly. The demons who preyed upon people were called the "Seven Evil Spirits," each one given a name such as "Evil Fate," "Evil Constable," or "Disorder." The evil spirits brought diseases on their own initiative. The counterparts to the "Evil Spirits" were the "Evil Ghosts," that is, the souls of the dead that returned to earth for food and drink. Many evil spirits were believed to be the children of two senior gods, Anu and Enlil, who were not always friendly to mankind.

Not all demons and spirits were ill disposed; some were protective spirits, such as the human-headed winged lions and bulls that guarded the gates of Assyrian palaces. The Assyrian king Esarhaddon explained how the guardians fulfilled their duty: they were made of stone "repelling the evil one according to their form."⁴⁸ In an inscription Sennacherib boasted that the protective spirits were made from "the *pindû* stone which at the time of my forefathers was (considered) too precious to be (worn) around the neck."⁴⁹

Rituals of "Undoing of Such-and-Such an Evil" (Akkadian, *namburbû*) were inserted immediately after the evil omen. Usually *namburbû* rituals included an incantation accompanied by actions to transfer the evil portent to a disposable object. At the first sighting of the new moon, a male or female figurine, called a "doll," was fashioned. The

**Other Rituals
and
Incantations**

exorcist was instructed to "throw the doll behind you into the river, and the evil will be loosed."⁵⁰ Offerings and purification rites were added "for safety's sake"—to ensure the benevolence of the god who sent the ominous warning. Incantation-prayers, similar to *šu-ila* ("Lifting-of-the-Hand"), appeared next to, and sometimes in place of, magical spells. An incantation was actually addressed to the respective god or goddess directly, as in the following example:

Shamash, king of heaven and earth, judge above and below,
 Light of the gods, guide of mankind,
 Who judges the cases of the great gods!
 I turn to you, seek you out.
 Command among the gods life (for me),
 May the gods who are with you speak favorably of me.
 On account of this dog that has urinated on me,
 I am afraid, anxious, frightened.
 Deliver me from the evils of this dog,
 Let me sound your praises!⁵¹ (*namburbû* prayer from the Neo-Assyrian period)

Some *namburbû* rituals were used in contexts unrelated to ominous portents, to seek help and protection from a specific god. The main characteristic of all *namburbû* texts was personal divine involvement, which was reflected in the ritual.

Rituals for building temples were extremely important; they accompanied the construction through all its major stages, from selecting the site to the final consecration. The rites of "Opening/Washing of the Mouth" were used to purify and introduce the divine images of worship into the temple. These rituals were repeated whenever the cult statue came into contact with something impure, for example, through repair work or illegitimate intrusions by noncultic personnel (see "Representations of the Gods," above).

In nocturnal rituals the moon and sun could combine their influences for healing. Thus, two dates, two regularly occurring planetary events (a lunar and solar eclipse), were specifically designated for dispensing potions and for performing rituals (see "Religious Festivals," above).

Some rituals required that both the sun and the moon be present on the fifteenth day of the month, against a spirit of the dead, a "persecuting ghost," who haunted a man. This ceremony was performed at dawn, when the full moon set and the sun rose. The exorcist was instructed to clothe the patient and draw blood by making cuts on his forehead with an obsidian (knife). The patient then sat in a reed hut, facing north. The exorcist made an incense offering of juniper and libated cow's milk to

Sin at sunset in addition to an offering of cypress and libated fine beer to Shamash at sunrise. Then the patient recited the following incantation seven times: "To my left is Sin, the crescent of the great heavens, to my right the father of mankind, Shamash the judge, the two gods, ancestors of the great gods, who determine the lots for the far-flung people. An evil wind has blown at me, the persecuting ghost persecutes me, so that I am worried, I am troubled, disturbed as I face your verdict. Save me so that I not come to grief." Then the patient left the reed hut to change his clothes, put on a pure garment, and uttered another incantation three times, asking Sin to remove his illness.⁵²

Many situations in everyday life required, or at least benefited from, the use of magico-religious techniques. "Potency" rituals provide the clearest example for manipulative magic. These spells and instructions were used to seduce, to rekindle passion, and particularly to enable the male partner to sustain an erection. A little magic could go a long way by inducing sexual desire that may have not existed previously. Lovers addressed prayers to Venus, the planet of Ishtar, the goddess of love. The accompanying ritual instructed the supplicant as follows: "you set up a reed altar before Ishtar-of-the-Stars, you make offerings" and, having prepared six times two figurines, "you burn (them) before Ishtar-of-the-Stars." A "woman whose husband is angry with her" prayed to Ishtar, calling to her "in the midst of the sky";⁵³ this was one of the few love charms women recited to seduce their lovers to return. The ritual activities prescribed in these texts employed certain objects which were magically "enriched" with the power of love, often derived from the sexual organs of certain animals. These objects were brought into physical contact with the desired partner. The spells usually referred to the strong sexual potency of animals, accompanied by vivid descriptions of sexual techniques, desires, and fantasies—all directed at stimulation and arousal before intercourse:

Let the wind blow, let the orchard sway,
 Let the clouds gather together, and raindrops fall!
 Let my potency flow like running river water!
 Let my penis be (as taut as) a harp string,
 Let it not slip out of her!⁵⁴ (Potency incantation, Neo-Assyrian period)

Many other genres and uses of magico-religious rituals were available to the ancient Mesopotamians, such as the generic incantation for "reconciling a man's god or goddess with him" or incantations for calming a baby—"Let Mother Get Her Chores Done." The baby incantations revealed the themes and style of earlier lullabies.

Magical Paraphernalia Magical protection was necessary for both palaces and private residences. Protective spirits were placed near windows, drainpipes, and doorways—that is, places through which demons might enter. The manufacture and use of prophylactic figurines, many of which have been found throughout Mesopotamia, were described in great detail. The statues were buried beside the threshold. Some of these were dogs with names such as “Don’t stop to think, bite!” and “Loud of bark.”⁵⁵

A compendium called “the nature of the stone is” listed numerous stones used for appeasing divine anger, preventing migraine, and being received favorably by the king. The power of the stone was defined by its material and its nature. For example, magnetite was of special interest, and its epithet described its magnetic attraction. The epithet “capturing” may refer to magnetite’s being captured with other rebellious stones by Ninurta in the Sumerian myth “Lugal-e.” The popular etymology of hematite was explained as “the stone of truthfulness, he who wears it will speak the truth, only a pious man may wear it.”⁵⁶

Besides handbooks, there were shorter lists of herbs, stones, or a combination of herbs, stones, shells, and various other magical paraphernalia. The list of enumerated “stones” included beads of metal (namely, silver, gold, copper, iron, or tin) and beads of various minerals such as antimony. The stones were rarely qualified except as being “male” or “female” (the same as herbs). Male and female stones were listed in magical texts, stone lists, and “glass texts,” which explained how to make glass.⁵⁷ There were even references to natural markings, such as “which shows a (moon?) crescent,” and some shells were specified as having seven spots.⁵⁸

Amulets were widely used; they were found in every possible location from royal palaces to poor neighborhoods. That is, magico-religious thinking crossed social and economic classes. Various stones were strung on a cord of wool and worn as charms around the neck, on the right or left wrist, or the right or left ankle. A small tablet listed “eleven stones for blurred vision, to string on red wool . . . while you recite a charm, and tie it on his left hand.”⁵⁹ Other amulet stones were placed on the chest or the abdomen. Prescriptions for various illnesses included long lists of beads, enumerated in groups for each string. The string or the individual drew its power by being exposed to the stars.

PROPHETS

Male and female prophets, literally “ecstatics” or “frenzied persons,” were believed to be selected by the gods for a specific occasion or time period to convey information to an individual or group. The deity usu-

ally initiated the communication, but the recipient could also induce communication. The prophet received his information from visions, dreams, auditions, and more mechanical media such as divinatory techniques. Once the prophet received the message, he would repeat or rephrase it in oral or written form—often poetically—to provide inspired insight into the situation. Prophetic activity was widespread throughout the ancient Near East, although only a small number of prophetic texts has survived. After the eighth century, prophecy became a cultic activity in Assyria—the sayings of both male and female prophets were recorded in tablet series.

Akkadian prophecies usually contained “predictions” of events that had already happened, although some were genuine forecasts.⁶⁰ The language of these prophecies drew heavily on predictive statements (or apodoses) of omens. The accounts used formulaic expressions that re-

vealed the identity of the recipient and the place where the revelation occurred. The largest number of Mesopotamian prophetic texts was discovered in excavations at Mari.

Oracles were sometimes similar to prophecies and communicated by priests. An Assyrian oracular message was sent by Ishtar to a priest, which he, in turn, reported to Assurbanipal as follows:

The goddess Ishtar who lives in Arbela entered. Right and left quivers were suspended from her. In her hand she was holding a bow and (her) sharp sword was drawn ready for battle. You were standing before her and she spoke to you like a real mother. Ishtar, most exalted among the gods, called to you, instructing you as follows: "Wait to the attack; wherever you plan to go, I am also ready to go" . . . She repeated her command to you as follows: "You will stay here where you belong. Eat, drink wine, enjoy yourself, praise my divinity, while I go and accomplish that work to help you achieve your heart's desire. Your face will not be pale; your feet will not be shaky; and you will not need to wipe off sweat at the height of battle" . . . Then she went out in a fearsome way to defeat your enemies, (namely) against Te'umman, king of Elam, with whom she was angry.⁶¹

This Assyrian oracular text referred to a historical event. According to Elamite records, Te'umman and Assurbanipal were constantly at war. When Assurbanipal was at Arbela, he was told of the mobilization of Te'umman's army against him. Ishtar of Arbela, the goddess of war, provided Assurbanipal with a favorable oracle. Assurbanipal's army entered Elam, and Te'umman was caught and beheaded. The oracle clearly combined politics with religion. That is, the gods of political enemies became enemies of each other; the gods were credited with brutality toward their human enemies.

Kings did not always believe the predictions of diviners, as shown in a letter addressed to King Esarhaddon, who was known for being superstitious: "This is what it (the text) says about that eclipse that occurred in the month of Nisan: 'If the planet Jupiter is present during an eclipse, it is good for the king because in his stead an important person at court will die,' but the king closed his ears—and see, a full month has not yet elapsed and the chief justice is dead!"⁶² At times the professional honesty of the diviners was doubted. In diviners' reports to Assyrian kings, the diviners go to great lengths to interpret bad omens to have a favorable meaning. In order to obtain a true report, King Sennacherib of Assyria separated his diviners into two groups—much as today's scientists use a control group.