

## **Sargon of Akkad: The Father of Empire Building**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the life of Sargon of Akkad, a man once forgotten and buried for over a millennium. Sargon laid the foundation for empire building through conquest of Mesopotamia and with the founding of the Akkadian Empire (2334 B.C. – 2154 B.C.). To explore the life of and role Sargon had upon ancient political thinking, this paper analyzes sources from Sargon's time period, later written documents from other ancient cultures, as well as modern archaeological evidence. Sargon's masterful manipulation of politics, religion, and military tactics pushed the ability of his empire to a point in which he conquered a dominating majority culture. Once he conquered Mesopotamia, Sargon instituted political and religious propaganda to ensure his domination. To guarantee the control of the empire, Sargon employed new military tactics, religious change, and engineering to build a strong infrastructure. Sargon's empire not only changed the culture in Mesopotamia, but also changed the view point of the world as to how a people can be conquered, held, and ruled over. The methodology Sargon employed can be seen copied until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus deserving him recognition for being the founding father of empire building.

**Keywords: Sargon, Mesopotamia, Akkadian Empire**

### **1. Introduction**

When thinking of great empires, certain world powers come to mind: the British, the Ottoman, the Roman, and the Hellenistic Empires. Empires shaped the world, but when did they start? When did this tradition of empire building begin? The answer is hidden in the history of the first Akkadian ruler, Sargon the Great. Sargon founded the first empire that stretched across Mesopotamia from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf during his rule from 2334-2278 BCE. His story is not widely known, but through examination of his life and his rule, his manipulation of politics and religion, and his new military tactics reveal how Sargon founded the world's first empire.

To understand Sargon's life, we must first view Mesopotamia before his rule. Both northern and southern Mesopotamia were dotted with city-states, which were essentially large farms that controlled a water source and large areas of desolate land. The best source for this information is the "Sumerian Kings List", an ancient manuscript that lists kings of Sumer, their kingdoms, their story, and their approximate reign dates. The list attaches importance to the four cities of Kish, Ur, Uruk, and Adab during the age before Sargon of Akkad (Postgate 29). These cities lived in relative peace, generally waging wars elsewhere although sometimes against each other. They had a certain peace as illustrated in archaeological finds of Leonard Woolley at the city of Ur. Seals were discovered that bore the symbol of other cities in different city-states showing cooperation in trade. Administrative texts discovered at the Surrupak site show a military cooperation between the cities. They list hundreds of soldiers from cities such as Nippur, Adab, Umma, Lagas, and Uruk. (Postgate 32)

## 2. Life

Sargon's birth like much of his life is up for debate. It parallels the biblical story of Moses in that he was abandoned along a riverside in a basket, to be retrieved and reared at court and ultimately to become leader of his people (Pollock 9). There are several different versions of his story that tell of different circumstances from his birth to his rule. The main parts of the story state that the Sargon was born into a poor life; his mother placed him in a reed basket and sat him in the Euphrates River whereupon he floated until he was found by a gardener and raised in that profession. The surviving inscriptions and stele that have survived vary upon the detail of this story. The Sumerian Kings List simply states that, "Sharru-kin, his father was a date grower" (Roaf 97). The older Akkadian texts simply state that his father was unknown, yet they retain that his mother was a High Priestess. This origin legend was also used as political propaganda to assure Sargon's rule. Before Sargon, the king was a representative of a God, therefore a man not of royal birth could not claim rightful kingship. However, in Sargon's case, this was fixed with the story of his mother as a High Priestess. Since his mother was a High Priestess, and she should not have yielded herself to a man, she bore him secretly. He was now fit to be a king since a High Priestess was usually of royal blood and always the wife of a God. (Saggs 44) Sargon's story also exists in a more humanizing version, as reported in Alfred A. Knopf's *The First Great Civilizations*:

He may have been the child of semi-nomadic pastoralists in the region where the Khabur joins the Euphrates. If so, like other ambitious young Semites, he must have travelled down the river to seek his fortune in the wealthy cities of the Plain. (Hawkes 69)

From this point, the story diverges into even more tales of how he rose to power.

The *Legend of Sargon* was published in 1870 by the archaeologist Sir Henry Rawlinson after he discovered the stele at the library of Ashurbanipal while excavating Nineveh in 1867. He gave a translation that stated "The water carried me to Akki, the drawer of water" (Mark). Akki would be the gardener, or date-grower, who worked for the king of Kish. After being accepted into the court of Kish, there are several different stories of how he usurped power in 2334 BCE, but the main points remain the same. He was a cup-bearer and rose to power; this remains absolute in all accounts. The details in between are up for debate. One such legend states that he simply became a high official for the King of Kish and in this capacity founded his own city, Akkad. The King of Kish was then eclipsed by an expansionist king of Uruk, who Sargon later overthrew (Saggs 40). Another text claims that Sargon had come to attain the intimate degree of cupbearer to the king of Kish, Ur-Zababa, who at this time commanded him to "change the drink-offering of E-sagila" (Edwards et al 419). This was very impious because the city of Kish was said to be under the god, Marduk. Therefore, the cup offering should have been poured for Marduk, not any other god. Sargon, evading this impiety and redoubling his own service to the god, gained the divine favor from his master, and Marduk made the servant lord of the land (and, it is added, the world) in place of Ur-Zababa (Edwards et al 419). Other sources state that he simply had the favor of Ishtar and that she helped him attain the kingship.

After any account, Sargon took the throne-name, Sharru-kin, which means "the king is legitimate" (Roaf 96). This title implies that he did in fact usurp power over the city. The only thing that the *Kings List* states is:

Sharrum-kin, his father was a date-grower, cupbearer of Ur-Zababa, king of Akkad, the one who built Akkad, became king and reigned for 56 years. (Roaf 97)

However, even though little is known of pre-reign Sargon, his career as king of the Akkadian empire, starting in 2334 BCE, is recorded.

It is known that Sargon moved the center of his rule to the new city of Akkad. This city has not been discovered archaeologically but is assumed to be situated near Kish. It is important, therefore, to look at the city of Kish before we can see how he built an empire. Kish resides in between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as well as in the middle of Mesopotamia. Since it is believed that Akkad was situated close to Kish, then Akkad would have been able to control the center of the Fertile Crescent between Sumer and Northern Mesopotamia. Kish served as an intermediate point between the two worlds of the larger, religious city-states and the southern, secular city-states. From this centrally located point, Sargon was able to start a campaign using his military that would change the Mesopotamian world from separately controlled city-states to a centrally controlled empire. (Edwards et al 419)

Our understanding and knowledge of Sargon's military career is preserved much better than other details of his life. The stories were inscribed onto stelae that were placed in each conquered city as a monument to Sargon's power and a reminder of his might. With this, we are able to see how he accomplished expanding and controlling the first empire the world had ever seen. Sargon was the first to have a professional army. Inscriptions say that Sargon boasted of

having 5,400 soldiers who ate before him in his palace. This would have just been his own guard which added to the armies his governors would have themselves (Hawkes 166). In addition to having a large professional army at his disposal, Sargon's army adopted a new fighting style. Instead of the Sumerian phalanx in which soldiers fought with spears from behind a wall of shields, the Akkadians gave battle in a more open formation, relying on javelins and above all on the tremendous penetrating power of arrows shot from composite bows (Hawkes 166). Like Alexander the Great's change to the phalanx, this new adoption of warfare allowed his armies to obtain victory over larger armies.

Sargon's campaign started with the march south into Sumer against Lugalzaggisi. Lugalzaggisi was the only member of the third dynasty which ruled at Uruk. During Lugalzaggisi's twenty-five year reign, he conquered Umma, Ur, Larsa, Nippur, and two other religious centers. He asserted that the supreme god had appointed him "king of the land." (Edwards et al 420) He had taken control of Sumer and all the trade routes to the Persian Gulf. These trade routes were what Sargon sought as he expanded his imperial trade empire. A later account states that there were a series of messages relayed between Sargon and Lugalzaggisi. This ended with Sargon resorting to arms and being the first in battle. Sargon quickly marched his troops to Uruk in a surprise attack on the city in which he "smote the city of Uruk and destroyed its wall." (Edwards et al 421) Some later inscriptions suggest it cost Sargon three campaigns and thirty-four battles to overthrow Lugalzaggisi and the fifty governors supporting him (Hawkes 69).

The inscription further says that after a few more battles, Sargon captured Lugalzaggisi; "he captured him and brought him in a yoke to the gate of Enlil." (Moscati 61) The gate of Enlil is the shrine to the god Enlil at Nippur. This allowed him, a Semitic-speaking Akkadian, to claim rightful kingship over Sumer by stating that the god Enlil gave him the victory, a claim with which the Nippur priesthood concurred (Saggs 41). Inscriptions of Sargon containing the name "great ensi of Enlil" (Moscati 61) ensi meaning city-governor, demonstrates this claim. After defeating Lugalzaggisi, Sargon continued his campaign towards the Persian Gulf. A surviving chronicle tells us:

Sargon, King of Akkad, overseer of Ishtar, king of Kish, appointed priest of Anu, king of the country, great ensi of Enlil; he defeated Uruk and tore down its wall; in the battle with the inhabitants of Uruk he was victorious. Lugalzaggisi, king of Uruk, he captured in battle, and brought by a halter to the gate of Enlil. Sargon, king of Akkad, was victorious in the battle with the inhabitants of Ur; he conquered the town and tore down its wall. He defeated E-Ninmar and tore down its wall and conquered its entire territory from Lagash to the sea; then he washed his weapons in the sea. In the battle with the inhabitants of Umma he was victorious, he conquered the town and tore down its wall. Enlil did not let anyone oppose Sargon, the king of the country. (Moscati 61).

After conquering these Sumerian city-states, Sargon placed Akkadian governors in charge of the city with a contingent of soldiers. From Sumer, he started a campaign into Elam, in present-day southwest Iran. He conquered several cities, but instead of setting Akkadian governors, he made the ruling kings his vassals. This new control of the northern Persian Gulf allowed for trade to flow north unhindered to the ports of Akkad. Sargon boasted that ships moored at the ports of Akkad "from Meluha, ships from Makan, and ships from Dilmun." (Hawkes 137) This trade from the Orient made Sargon's empire powerful and rich but he sought more.

Sargon started another campaign north into upper Mesopotamia. He pushed up the old trade routes on the Euphrates rivers to the cities of Mari that was situated in the middle of the Euphrates and then to Ebla that resides in northern Syria. Both of these cities were created because of their strategic importance on the trade routes out of Mesopotamia. He pushed all the way to the cedar forests of Lebanon and the Taurus Mountains of Turkey. Sargon was also able to capture land all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Later inscriptions tell that he even made it all the way to the island of Kapturu, or present-day Crete. (Moscati 60) Sargon now had the first imperialist trade empire from sea to shining sea that garnered vast amounts of wealth and power. However, with that came the logistics of holding it together.

The new Akkadian empire had the problem that all empires have: many people that don't really get along under one ruler. Sargon was able to hold his newly forged empire with many techniques. Some of these tactics are used in the much later Roman Empire such as roads, better irrigation, and his professional army showing that these tactics are known viscerally by smart commanders. Sargon had roads built for easier troop movement between his city-states. This allowed for military control of the important trade cities. However, this only worked in places that could be controlled. For example, trade routes across Iran started to wither away, which is seen in the archaeological excavations at Shahri-i-Sokhta, a town that had "remained a major site in the second half of the third millennium, its trade in lapis lazuli, so important earlier, had come to an end." (Saggs 139) This was remedied by an increase in trade in the Persian Gulf. A later poem about Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin's, rule further proves the existence of this trade route by stating "mighty elephants and apes, beasts from distant lands, jostling in the great square". (Saggs 139) Such exotic creatures can hardly have been imported except by sea from India.

Sargon's control is also seen in the arts through stelae that were placed in conquered towns as a reminder of his might. Although it is in fragments, Sargon does have a surviving victory stele. It shows his victory over an unknown

enemy. This stele further shows his propaganda in ancient Mesopotamia by almost exactly copying Eannatum's Vulture Stele, made 70 years before Sargon's reign. It shows Sargon conquering his enemies, vultures and dogs feasting on the dead, and him offering a net of enemies to an unidentifiable god. It has been proposed that the net contains Sumerians captured after the defeat of Lugalzaggisi and Sumer. ("What Battle is Depicted")

Sargon further strengthened his rule over Mesopotamia by controlling the religion. Before Sargon, the individual city-states were under an ideology of a "temple city", which meant that the city was the domain of a certain God. It was developed in an attempt to protect the privileges of the religious leaders and the autonomy of individual city-states at a time when other power factions were attempting to create an overarching political unit that would subsume the individual city-states; the model that Sargon succeeded in establishing (Pollock 193).

Now that he had imposed his theology, he had to find a way to gain control of their religion. Sargon sought to connect the cultic system of the region, with its shared pantheon, to his own family. (Mieroop 66) Sargon had already accomplished this by claiming he was protected and destined to rule by Enlil. However, this was not enough. To further gain control, Sargon appointed his daughter as the high priestess of the moon god, Nanna, at Ur. Like his own mother, Sargon's daughter became the wife of the god. Sargon even gave her a new Sumerian name to further establish a connection to the people: Enheduanna, meaning "priestess, fitting for heaven." (Mieroop 66) By making his daughter the high priestess, he was able to further his family's right to rule by placing an Akkadian in charge of one of the most important Sumerian centers. Another method of making Sargon ruler by divine right was in writing. The name of the king was often written with the determinative DINGIR ("god"), used normally for gods and objects intended for worship. (Oppenheim 99) Once the people saw Sargon as a representative of the gods, his rule as king was solidified for the rest of his reign as he ruled over a new multi-national empire.

Sargon now had control of all of Mesopotamia and parts of Syria, Iran and Anatolia. He continued to rule for 56 years in prosperity. However, Sargon had to deal with periodic uprisings from city-states within his empire. In one inscription, ostensibly autobiographical, he stated:

"In my old age of 55, all the lands revolted against me, and they besieged me in Akkad but the old lion still had teeth and claws, I went forth to battle and defeated them: I knocked them over and destroyed their vast army. Now, any king who wants to call himself my equal, wherever I went, let him go!" (Mark)

After a 56-year reign, from 2334-2278 BCE, Sargon the Great died of natural causes. He left behind a legacy through legends, art, and a royal lineage. His methods which kept him in control while maintaining power were copied for centuries. For example, several Assyrian kings moved the central power to their own city and made their daughter the high priestess of Ur. Sargon was placed on the list of great ancient rulers of Mesopotamia. Like the epic of Gilgamesh, Sargon had his own story known throughout the ancient world. His story was read in Hattusa in Anatolia and even translated into Hurrian and Hittite (Oppenheim 151). Even in Egypt people were reading of Sargon. At Amarna, in Egypt, within an archaeological find of Babylonian texts, an account of Sargon of Akkad was discovered. The arts also showed his power and were highly regarded for generations after his empire ended. Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire who reigned from 556-539 BCE, found a statue of Sargon of Akkad, set it up in a temple, and provided it with regular offerings. (Mieroop 284)

### 3. Conclusion

Sargon's final legacy can also be seen through his children and grand-children. His daughter, whom he made high priestess, was the author of several literary compositions in the Sumerian language, which makes her the first identifiable author in world literature. (Mieroop 66) The military legacy of Sargon is seen through his grand-son Naram-Sin. Naram-Sin was the last Akkadian ruler. He was very militaristic and had to retrace his grandfather's footsteps of campaigning after many revolts. However, he was still able to succeed and re-conquer the lands of the Akkadian Empire. Unfortunately he was an arrogant ruler. After sacking the city of Nippur, a rebellion and coincidental invasion caused the 150 year reign of the Akkadian Empire to crumble into the sands of time.

After the fall of the Akkadian Empire, the statues and monuments were spread throughout the ancient world as war loot. The modern world never knew about Sargon the Great until 1870, even though his name was known far and wide in the ancient world for being one of the greatest rulers to have ever lived. Sargon founded the first Empire in the world and in doing so set precedents that would allow future powers, such as Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire, to forge their own powerful Empires. By looking at this examination of his life and the history of the Fertile Crescent before his reign, his life during his rule as king, and the legacy he left behind, we see how a man of humble origins rose to power and founded a tradition that forever changed the world.

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