

### 3

## Competing City-States: The Early Dynastic Period

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| 3000          | 2500                               | 2000 | 1500 | 1000 | 500 |
|---------------|------------------------------------|------|------|------|-----|
| <hr/>         |                                    |      |      |      |     |
| ca. 2800      | Archaic Ur                         |      |      |      |     |
| ca. 2500      | Tablets from Fara and Abu Salabikh |      |      |      |     |
| ca. 2500–2350 | Lagash–Umma border conflict        |      |      |      |     |
| ca. 2400      | Uru'inimgina of Lagash             |      |      |      |     |
| ca. 2400–2350 | Bau-temple archive at Girsu        |      |      |      |     |
| ca. 2350      | Ebla archives                      |      |      |      |     |

At the end of the Uruk period, around the year 3100, Babylonia's far-reaching cultural influence over the Near East waned and people throughout the region reverted to local traditions and stopped writing to record transactions. In southern Mesopotamia, however, written sources vastly increased in number, enabling us to study political and cultural developments in much greater detail than before. They show that a network of city-states, constantly interacting and competing with one another, characterized the political situation there. After several centuries, cultural contacts between Babylonia and the rest of the Near East reemerged, which allows us to broaden the geographical focus of historical study once more and shows that elsewhere, too, small states formed the predominant political organization.

Babylonia thus becomes our focus of attention in the 550-year era that is usually referred to as the “Early Dynastic period.” This period is often subdivided into

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*A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*, Third Edition. Marc Van De Mieroop.  
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Early Dynastic I (ca. 2900–2750), II (ca. 2750–2600), IIIa (ca. 2600–2450), and IIIb (ca. 2450–2350), but these are archaeological distinctions based on stylistic changes in the material remains that have little historical value. The period should be regarded as a unit in political terms, displaying the same basic characteristics for its entire duration.

### 3.1 The Written Sources and Their Historical Uses

The written sources for the study of this period cover a variety of genres. Administrative documents continue to dominate in number, but we also have political narratives written for some rulers of the period, and later literary tales about others. Administrative archives appear in different sites in increasingly large quantities. The information they contain becomes more wide-ranging, and we understand the texts themselves better because they reflect the spoken language more closely through writing out phonetic and grammatical elements. At Ur, some 280 tablets were excavated dating to around 2800. The administrative tablets from Fara (ancient Shuruppak; ca. 1,000 tablets) and Abu Salabikh (ancient name uncertain; ca. 500 tablets) date to around 2500 and were mixed together with lexical material. The largest number of texts comes from the very end of the period, with Girsu yielding some 1,500 tablets. For most of the Early Dynastic period the inhabitants of Babylonia alone seem to have used writing and it was only later on that the technology appeared in Syria, where archives were excavated at Mari (ca. 40 tablets), at Nabada (modern Tell Beydar; ca. 250 tablets), and especially in the west at Ebla (ca. 3,600 tablets), all dating to around 2350.

For the study of political history a new type of text, the royal inscription, provides the most useful information. At first it was a simple writing of a royal name and title on a votive object, indicating what individual dedicated it, for instance, “Mebaragesi, king of Kish,” on a stone vessel dating to around 2650. Soon royal inscriptions included short statements, such as that the ruler commissioned the building of a temple, and over time they became lengthier, giving accounts of military feats associated with the event commemorated. The genre culminated in the first millennium with long and detailed year-by-year reports of campaigns and descriptions of buildings constructed. These records provide important data on the activities of the ruler both as builder and as warrior. From the Early Dynastic period, a handful of texts each were found in the Babylonian sites of Adab, Kish, Nippur, Umma, Ur, and Uruk. Mari on the Euphrates is the only Syrian city where royal inscriptions were excavated. But the largest group by far comes from the southern state of Lagash, where nine members of the local dynasty left a total of 120 of them. These give an explicit description of the wars between that state and its neighbor, Umma, clearly biased toward the Lagashite point of view since its kings wrote the inscriptions. This group of texts allows us for the first time in Near Eastern history to narrate an event based on contemporary sources.

In later Mesopotamian literature from the late third and early second millennia several compositions deal with kings from the Early Dynastic period. They are often quite detailed and thus feature prominently in modern historical reconstructions, but their reliability as historical sources is suspect. Most influential among these has been the so-called *Sumerian King List*, which includes a long sequence of city-dynasties and kings of the Early Dynastic period (see box 3.1 and figure 3.1). The earlier portions record fantastically long reigns – 3,600 years, for example – and royal names such as Dog, Scorpion, and Gazelle, and are clearly

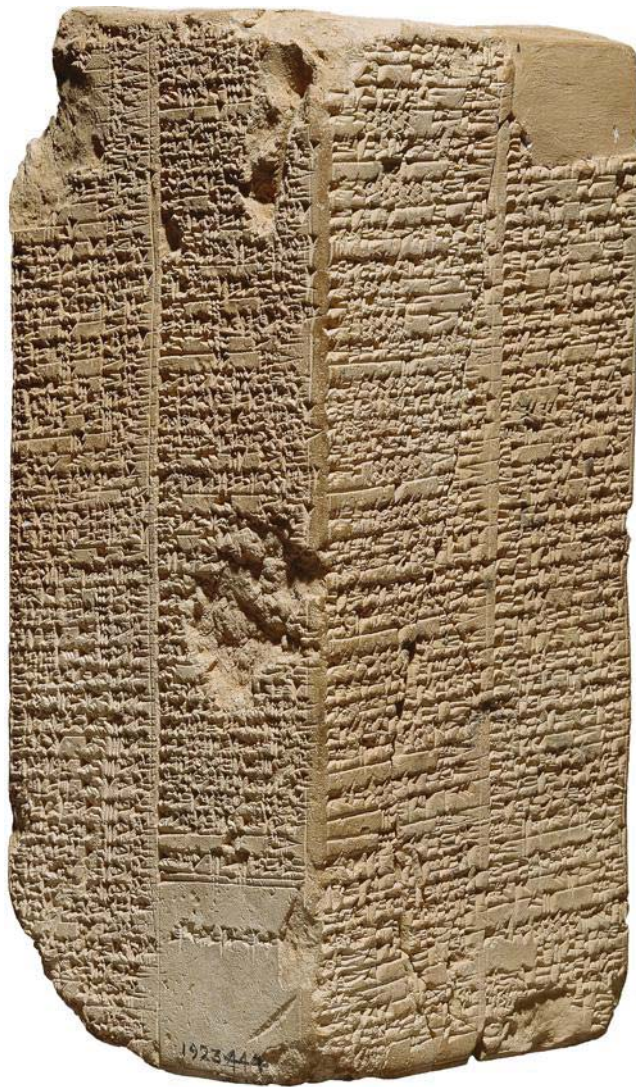
### Box 3.1 *The Sumerian King List*

Among the later Mesopotamian texts that deal with the Early Dynastic period, the *Sumerian King List* has been the most influential in modern historical reconstructions. The text is known from one manuscript of the twenty-first century and seventeen from the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, including from two sites outside Babylonia: Susa in western Iran and Shehna in northern Syria. It depicts a world in which kingship “descended from heaven” and was passed on from city to city whose local dynasties held temporary hegemony over the entire region. The number of dynasties included increased over time. A typical segment reads as follows:

At Ur, Mesannepada was king; he ruled 80 years; Meski’agnuna, son of Mesannepada, was king; he ruled 36 years; Elulu ruled 25 years; Balulu ruled 36 years; four kings ruled 177 years. Ur was defeated in battle and its kingship was taken to Awan.<sup>1</sup>

Chronologically, the text in its latest edition addresses the period from the moment kingship first appeared, before the flood, to the end of the reign of Sin-magir of the Isin dynasty (1817). In the segment that covers the Early Dynastic period, the city-states mentioned are primarily located in Babylonia, giving special prominence to Ur, Uruk, and Kish. Also included are three non-Babylonian cities, Awan in the east, Hamazi in the north, and Mari in the west. From other evidence we know that some of the kings listed consecutively ruled concurrently. The text enumerates them sequentially because the main ideological elements expressed in this text are that there is only one divinely legitimized ruler at a time, and that hegemonic kingship circulated among a restricted number of cities. Incorporated in it were dynastic lists of kings from different cities and the number of years they ruled. The accuracy of the later parts can be checked against information from dated economic documents. The earlier parts of the *Sumerian King List* are legendary, however, assigning impossibly long reigns of 3,600 years, for instance, to mythological figures such as Dumuzi, who was known as the husband of the goddess Inanna and was probably purely fictional. In its final version, kings of the Isin dynasty used the text to legitimize their claim to supreme power in Babylonia, even though they did not politically control the entire area covered by the King List.

<sup>1</sup>Translation after Glassner 2004: 120–1.



**Figure 3.1** The Weld-Blundell prism inscribed with the Sumerian King List. This is the most complete manuscript of the Sumerian King List known to us, perhaps from Larsa in Babylonia. Each of its four sides has two columns that list a sequence of cities in which kingship was held and the rulers of the dynasties with the number of years they ruled. The list begins with rulers from before the flood and ends with Sin-magir of the Isin dynasty (r. 1827–1817) and was probably written in that king's final year or soon thereafter. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Baked clay; four equal sides, each about 20 cm (7.9 in) high and 9 cm (3.5 in) wide. Credit: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford/Bridgeman Images.

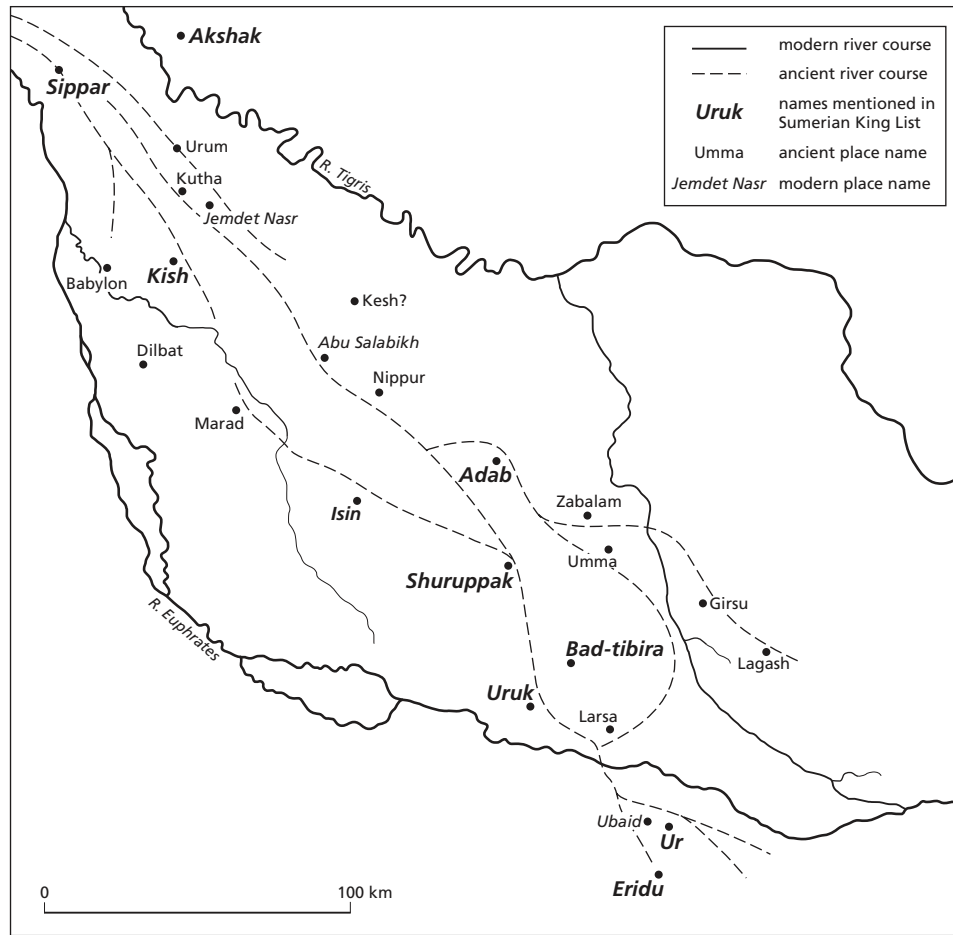
unreliable. Although later sections seem more realistic and can sometimes be confirmed from other sources, the overall work was undoubtedly a later construct to legitimize the political situation then. Consequently, the list loses much of its value as a historical source, although its concept of city-dynasties remains our primary means of structuring Early Dynastic history. Other Sumerian literary texts, again known from much later manuscripts only, tell stories about three kings of the city of Uruk (Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh), and involve far-flung military adventures and local conflicts. These texts are more important for the view they provide on the Sumerians' sense of the past than as sources on the Early Dynastic period.

A study of Early Dynastic Babylonia should be based first on the textual remains of the period itself, and by 2400 certain places provide us with a mixture of writings that enable us to investigate questions from various angles simultaneously. From the state of Lagash, for instance, we have royal inscriptions relating military and political events, and a large number of administrative documents that record the activities of an important public institution. These allow us to reconstruct the royal administration and compare the official rhetoric to records of actual day-to-day affairs. One problem is that some of the words found in these sources are only understood because they appear in more extensive later documentation. We have to allow for the possibility that their sense became different over time owing to new circumstances, and we cannot simply apply a meaning of the twenty-first century to explain a term used in a record from the twenty-fifth. For example, the title *énsi*, well known later as a provincial governor in the service of the king, appears in the Early Dynastic period to refer to a ruler who acts autonomously. Changes in the political situation and other circumstances had an effect on the meaning of such terms.

The increasing number of written sources and the subjects they discuss is a great asset to the historian, but we have to be conscious of a major bias in them. They are the products only of the leaders of state organizations – kings, temple administrators, and so on – and they reveal their interests alone. This is true as well for the works of visual arts produced at this time. Not only is their purview centered on the city-states, mostly ignoring what lay outside them, but also they may express more the ambitions of their authors than reality. Kings may have wished that they had crushed an opponent's army rather than have done so. This bias of the written documentation remains a challenge throughout the entire history of the Near East, but is especially acute in this early period when the voices of non-state actors are fully absent.

### 3.2 Political Developments in Southern Mesopotamia

The basic element of the political organization of Babylonia in the Early Dynastic period was the city-state: an urban center that directly controlled a hinterland with a radius of some 15 kilometers (10 miles), where people lived in villages.



**Map 3.1** The city-states of Babylonia in the Early Dynastic period. After Joan Oates, *Babylon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 13.

Because agriculture in the region was wholly dependent on irrigation water for its crops, settlements had to be near rivers, primarily the multiple branches of the Euphrates, or canals dug alongside them. Throughout Babylonia about thirty-five city-states existed, more or less evenly spread through the region (map 3.1). Some of them contained several urban centers, most importantly Lagash, which incorporated three cities, Girsu, Lagash, and Nina. The steppe lay between the cultivated and permanently inhabited zones and was used for seasonal animal herding and hunting. These areas and their inhabitants were only indirectly controlled by the urban powers.

In the early third millennium Babylonia saw a general population growth, possibly accelerated by immigration or the settling down of semi-nomadic groups.

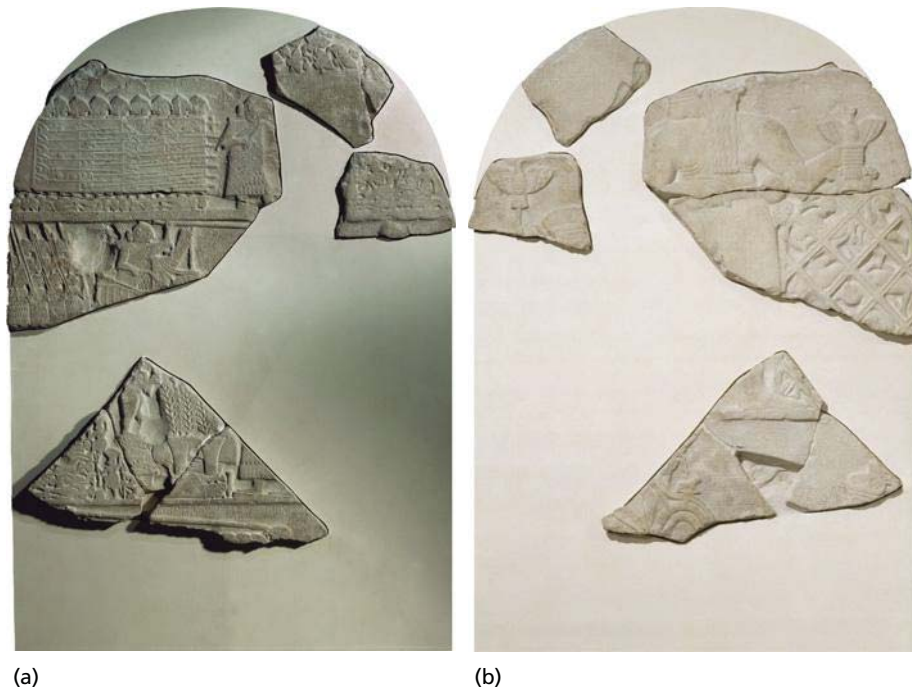
Throughout the region there was a general increase in the number of cities, their size, and the density of their population. Each one of them constituted a small state with a political hierarchy under a single ruler. These city-states at first were located at sufficient distance from one another so as to be separated by steppe and land that was not part of their agricultural zones. But the continued increase in the population necessitated an extension of the cultivated areas, so the borders of the city-states, especially in the south, became contiguous or even overlapped. A drying of the climate may have aggravated this process, as it caused a lowering of the sea level and a retrenchment of the rivers into fewer branches. The disappearance of interstitial zones had important repercussions both within the states themselves and throughout the region. Among the changes were a secularization of power within the city-states and its centralization in regional terms.

A fundamental element in Mesopotamian ideology was the concept that each city was the dwelling of a particular god or goddess. People thought that cities had been constructed in primordial times as residences for the gods, who acted as their patron deities. Thus Ur was the house of Nanna, Uruk of Inanna, Nippur of Enlil, etcetera. This concept was linked to the role of the temple, or god's household (see below), in cities. The temple's function as collector and distributor of agricultural resources was founded in the ideology that the god received them as gifts and redistributed them to the people. Thus the head of the temple administration served as leader in the city, and from the Uruk period on the primary ideological support for the city-ruler was his function in the temple household. The temple was, in fact, the dominant institution in the early city and the largest structure within its walls, sometimes built on an earthen platform towering over the other buildings. The gods were imagined as living in a world parallel to that of humans, so each god had a household, a spouse, children, and servants. The dependent deities also had smaller temples and shrines in the cities, sized according to their status, and every city had a multitude of temples.

With the expansion of the city-states' zones of influence, competition for the remaining open areas grew and soon led to intercity wars over agricultural land. A leader's military rather than his cultic role became of primary importance in such situations. In the later Sumerian stories looking back on this period, the people granted a war leader authority on a temporary basis in moments of crisis. The popular assembly elected a physically strong man as war leader and that body controlled his movements. Modern historians often call this practice evidence of a "primitive democracy" that unraveled into a dynastic system under which rule was passed on from father to son over several generations. The dynastic ideal of war leader was not compatible with that of chief temple administrator chosen by the gods for his managerial competence. They had different bases of authority, one deriving from prominence in warfare, the other from a perception of divine favor. We associate the new military class with the palace and kingship. In the Early Dynastic period, we see the first appearance of a new type of monumental building, the palace, identifiable as such by its residential plan. Moreover,

documents of the time mention a new central institution, the *é-gal*, literally the “great house,” which in later periods clearly refers to the royal household. This is distinct from the *é*, “house,” of the city-god, the temple. These two sources of authority need not be regarded as inherently antagonistic to each other, but merging them into one was not a simple task.

The evidence from Lagash, the best-documented state of the period, shows how the two bases of power became harmonized. Around 2450, its ruler Eannatum set up a large flat stone stele carved with an inscription and visual images on both sides to commemorate a victory in his war against Umma. Its modern name is “Stele of the Vultures” (figure 3.2). One side shows the patron deity Ningirsu capturing enemies in a net and subduing them with his mace. On the other side the king leads his troops in battle. God and king are like two sides of the same coin: together they succeed but they are distinct. The last independent ruler of



**Figure 3.2** Stele of the Vultures, front and back. Excavated at Girsu, the stele shows an episode in the war between Umma and Lagash visually and describes it in the text. On one side, the king of Lagash, Eannatum, appears leading his troops on foot and by chariot, on the other the large figure of Lagash’s god Ningirsu is portrayed holding a net filled with the bodies of enemies. The name “stele of the vultures” derives from a small scene of vultures hovering over the human troops. Louvre Museum Paris, ca. 2450 BC. Limestone; H. 180 cm; W. 130 cm; Th. 11 cm (70.8 × 51.2 × 4.3 in). Credit: (a) akg images/Erich Lessing; (b) © RMN-Grand Palais/Hervé Lewandowski.

Lagash seems to have erased this distinction, however. He was a usurper called Uru'inimgina. Early in his reign he proclaimed a reorganization of the state, ostensibly removing control over the agricultural land from himself and his family and granting it to the city-god Ningirsu and his family. Moreover, he abolished several duties and taxes and canceled certain obligations of indebted families. At the same time, we see a fundamental change in the administration of the best-documented institution in the state of Lagash. What had been called the *é-mí*, the household of the wife (of the city-ruler), was renamed *é-Bau*, the household of the goddess Bau, Ningirsu's wife. But, first Uru'inimgina himself and later his wife appeared as chief administrators, although the estate's holdings allegedly belonged to Bau. The name-change of the institution coincided with a substantial increase in its activities, doubling the number of its dependents and agricultural areas through a transfer of resources from other temples. These moves seem to indicate an attempt to merge the various households of the city under the ruler's family. As king and war leader, Uru'inimgina ostensibly transferred the ownership of land and estates to the city-god and his family, while in practice he and his family members took control of the gods' estates. The king ruled by divine favor, but he had total command over the gods' earthly possessions, so any prior distinction between secular and divine authority had disappeared. This idea found its fullest expression in the subsequent period under the Akkad dynasty. As we will see, its fourth king, Naram-Sin, declared himself a god and when he depicted a military victory on his stele (figure 4.1), he merged the two sides of the "Stele of the Vultures" into one: as god king Naram-Sin led his troops in battle.

The increased competition over land among city-states is most explicit in a series of inscriptions found in the southern state of Lagash (see document 3.1). Over a period of 150 years, from about 2500 to 2350, kings there wrote accounts of a border conflict with their northern neighbor Umma. They described the war in terms of a dispute between Ningirsu, patron deity of Lagash, and Shara, god of Umma, over a field called Gu'edena, that means "edge of the plain." The kings portrayed themselves as deputies acting on behalf of the gods. On the Stele of the Vultures, Eannatum even described himself as the giant son of Ningirsu, who engendered him to fight for his cause. According to the Lagash accounts, the chief god Enlil in the distant past had demarcated the border between the two states running through the Gu'edena. The inscriptions acknowledge that historically a king of Kish called Mesalim, who would have lived around 2600, had performed the act. Thus already at that early time the two city-states had competing claims and sought recourse to outside arbitration. The sequence of events is difficult to establish, as only the Lagashite point of view is documented. Whenever the state was strong, it tried to enforce its claims over the land, whether justified or not. Successive kings stated that Umma had illegally occupied the land and that the army of Lagash repeatedly pushed back the enemy. Yet the conflict persisted over several centuries, which shows how inconclusive these battles were as well as the importance of the agricultural area to both states. We may assume that other states similarly attempted to extend their farming zones by annexing the fields of neighbors.

### Document 3.1 *The Umma–Lagash border conflict*

*The war between the southern city-states of Umma and Lagash over an agricultural area that they both claimed is the best-documented event of the Early Dynastic period. Over a period of 150 years five rulers of Lagash and one of Umma devoted royal inscriptions to it, including large monuments like the Stele of the Vultures (figure 3.2). They placed their own participation within the historical context of the entire war. Enmetena in this inscription, for example, states that the original border was set in the time of Mesalim, king of Kish, around 2600. King Ush of Umma first violated the border shortly after 2500 and the god of Lagash, Ningirsu, drove him back. (Akurgal, not mentioned, was king of Lagash at that time.) He then recounts how his uncle, Eannatum, reestablished the border when Enakale ruled Umma. In a passage not quoted here, he states that his father, Enanatum, waged war with Ur-lumma, a war Enmetena continued. The final opponent was Il, who had usurped Umma's throne around 2425. Remarkably, this type of historical depth disappears from Assyrian and Babylonian royal inscriptions later on.*

#### *Excerpts of the account by King Enmetena*

Enlil, king of the lands, father of the gods, upon his firm command drew the border between Ningirsu and Shara.<sup>1</sup> Mesalim, king of Kish, at the command of the god Ishtaran, measured the field and placed a stele. Ush, ruler of Umma, acted arrogantly. He ripped out the stele and marched unto the plain of Lagash. Ningirsu, the hero of Enlil, at the latter's command did battle with Umma. Upon Enlil's command he cast the great battle-net upon it. Its great burial mound was set up for him in the plain. Eannatum, ruler of Lagash, the uncle of Enmetena ruler of Lagash, with Enakale, ruler of Umma, drew the border. He extended the channel of the Inun-canal into the Gu'edena, giving up 2,105 nindan (ca. 12.5 kilometers or 7.8 miles) of the field of Ningirsu to the side of Umma. As a field without an owner he established it. At the canal he inscribed a stele, and the stele of Mesalim he returned to its place. He did not cross into the steppe of Umma. . . .

At that time Il, who was the head of the temple of Zabalam, made a retreat from Girsu to Umma. Il received the rulership of Umma there. Into the boundary channel of Ningirsu and the boundary channel of Nanshe, the levee of Ningirsu – being at the edge of the Tigris and on the boundary of Girsu – the Namnundakigara of Enlil, Enki, and Ninhursag, its water was diverted. Of the barley of Lagash he repaid only 3,600 gur<sub>7</sub>. When Enmetena, ruler of Lagash, because of these channels sent men to Il, Il the ruler of Umma, the one who steals fields, said in a hostile way: "The boundary channel of Ningirsu and the boundary channel of Nanshe are mine. From the Antasura to the Edingalabzu I will shift the levee," he said. But Enlil and Ninhursag did not give that to him. Enmetena, ruler of Lagash, named by Ningirsu, at the just command of Enlil, at the just command of Ningirsu, at the just command of Nanshe, constructed that channel from the Tigris to the Inun-canal. He built the foundation of the Namnundakigara in stone. For the lord who loves him, Ningirsu, for the lady who loves him, Nanshe, he restored it. Enmetena, ruler of Lagash, given the scepter by Enlil, given wisdom by Enki, chosen in the heart of Nanshe, chief administrator of Ningirsu, the one who grasps the commands of the gods, may his personal god Shuturul stand before Ningirsu and Nanshe forever for the life of Enmetena. If the man of Umma, in order to carry off the fields

crosses the boundary channel of Ningirsu and the boundary channel of Nanshe, be he a man from Umma or a foreigner, may Enlil destroy him, may Ningirsu after casting his great battle-net, place his hands and feet upon him. May the people of his own city, after rising up against him, kill him in the midst of his city!

Translation after Cooper 1986: 54–7.

<sup>1</sup>i.e., between Lagash and Umma.

Not all interactions between states were hostile, however. The royal houses communicated with one another as equals and had diplomatic relations. The exchange of gifts strengthened these ties. In a hoard of precious items found at Mari, there was a bead inscribed with the name of Mesannepada, king of Ur: the group of objects was likely given by one king to the other. The ruler's wife at Lagash, Baranamtara, is known to have exchanged presents with her counterpart at Adab, and this was probably common practice.

Although the city-state characterized the political situation of the period, various processes of the centralization of power into larger territorial units were at work, due both to hostile and peaceful interactions between states. Wars between neighbors could lead to territorial occupations. Around 2400, for example, a king of Uruk, Lugalkiginedudu, claimed kingship over Ur, a city 50 kilometers (31 miles) to the south. The process of conquest and unification culminated at the end of the Early Dynastic period when the king of Umma, Lugalzagesi, conquered Ur and Uruk and then defeated Uru'inimgina of Lagash, thus governing the entire south of Babylonia. True, he may have overstated his accomplishment in his own inscriptions, in which he claimed control from the Upper to the Lower Sea, that is the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. But certainly the extent of his power reached beyond the traditional borders of a single city-state.

Political alliances whose participants agreed to accept the authority of an outsider are documented from ca. 2600 on. One example of such a regional superstructure can be inferred from the title "King of Kish." When the god Enlil demarcated the border between Umma and Lagash, it was Mesalim, "King of Kish," who measured it out and set up a boundary marker. That Mesalim had some sort of power in Lagash is borne out by a ceremonial mace-head inscribed with his name found there; but the text ends by mentioning that Lugalsha'engur was the city-ruler (Sumerian *énsi*) of Lagash at the time. Similarly, an inscription of Mesalim from the central Babylonian city of Adab acknowledges the existence of its local ruler, one Ninkisalsi. The title "King of Kish" appears repeatedly in the royal inscriptions of the late Early Dynastic period, and cannot be considered to indicate only kings who controlled the northern Babylonian city of Kish. Eannatum of Lagash, for instance, after defeating a number of southern cities was granted kingship of Kish by the goddess Inanna. Why did the kingship of Kish carry this prestige? It is highly unlikely that the title conferred full control over Babylonia and that the other city-rulers whose inscriptions we read were merely dependents of a dynasty in Kish. The king of Kish's power seems to have derived

from some kind of political understanding in the region. Backed by military might (remember that Eannatum became king of Kish only after defeating several neighbors), he had an authority that was regionally accepted.

Another such political agreement is attested in the administrative texts from Shuruppak, dating to around 2500. Records of soldiers from Ur, Adab, Nippur, Lagash, and Umma were kept in this small city. Those men are said to be “stationed at KI.EN.GI,”<sup>1</sup> a term that a few centuries later came to mean Sumer, the southern half of Babylonia, but which at this time probably referred to a single locality. The same group of texts also makes reference to a coalition in a place called Unken, the Sumerian word for “assembly,” made up of Lagash, Umma, and Adab. These arrangements were ephemeral: the last two were upset by the border conflict between Umma and Lagash. They probably were a result of the struggles characteristic of the period: cities concluded various alliances in order to stand up to enemies.

Yet, there was a shared understanding that all the city-states belonged to a common religious system that joined them together in war and peace. This is already attested around 3000, when multiple cities had just developed, and not surprisingly the oldest urban center, Uruk, played a prominent role in it. The existence of collective cult practices centered on Uruk is suggested by a group of seal impressions on tablets and lumps of clay, which display symbols that render the names of several other cities. Seal impressions on tablets from the Jemdet Nasr period (3100–2900) show a fixed sequence of city-symbols, including those of Ur, Larsa, Zabalam, Uruk, Arina, and probably Kesh. It is likely that the tablets reported contributions made to the goddess Inanna of Uruk, and that the inhabitants of various cities supported her cult. In the slightly later Early Dynastic I levels at Ur, a large number of sealings were found, giving somewhat different combinations of city symbols and often combined with the rosette symbol of Inanna. These had been mostly used to lock doors, indicating that a storeroom in Ur had been set aside to contain materials for her cult.

At some moment in the Early Dynastic period the focus of the unified cult shifted to the city of Nippur in the center of Babylonia. The divine families of individual cities were joined together in a common Babylonian pantheon that, by the late Early Dynastic period, was headed by Enlil, patron of Nippur. He had supreme power in the divine world, and demarcated, for example, the border between Umma and Lagash as we saw before. Enlil’s city, Nippur, attained a unique status that was to last until the eighteenth century. In the late third millennium all Babylonian cities were to provide support for its cult, and in the early second millennium political control over it gave a king the right to claim sovereign rule. Somehow the priests of this militarily unimportant city had the authority to grant a special status to one of many competitors. They seem to have had this power already in Early Dynastic times, when kings of Adab, Kish, Lagash, Umma, and Uruk left short inscriptions at Nippur, suggesting that they sought to curry favor with its priesthood.

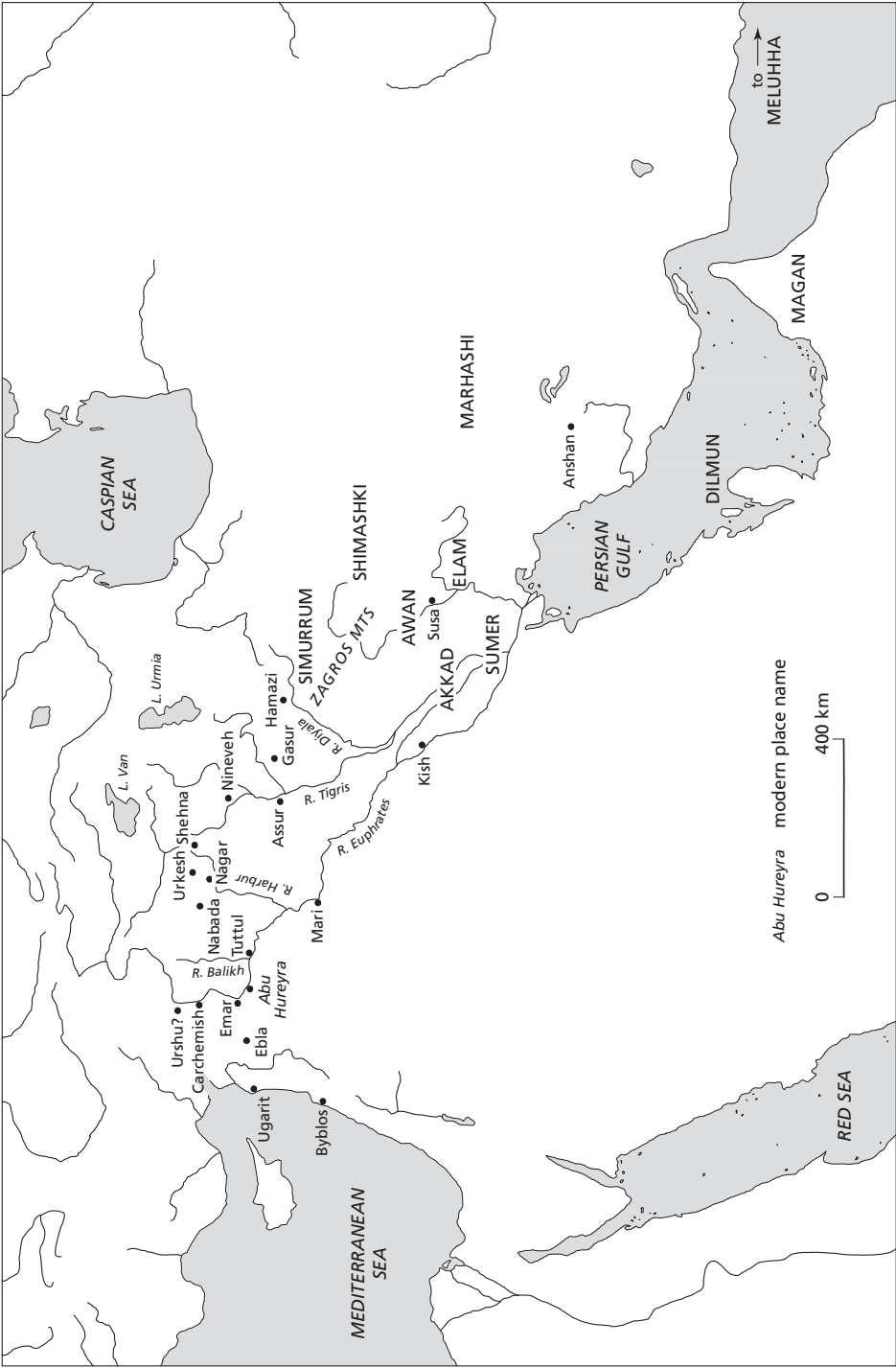
This sense of unity was not restricted to speakers of a single language. We can state with certainty that at least two languages were spoken in Babylonia during

the Early Dynastic period: Sumerian and a Semitic language sometimes referred to as proto-Akkadian. The two languages were very different in character, but they shared some vocabulary and Sumerian grammar influenced Akkadian, which indicates that the same people used them simultaneously. It is not easy to determine someone's spoken language in a multilingual ancient society. All literate Babylonians in this period (or Near Easterners for that matter) shared the same scribal culture, which will be described below. Although they could record their own vernaculars, all of them mostly wrote Sumerian. A text written in Sumerian is thus not evidence that the author's mother tongue was Sumerian. The scribes of Abu Salabikh, around the year 2500, bore Semitic names but wrote almost exclusively in Sumerian. Indeed, the names of people are probably a better indicator of the language they spoke. In the ancient Near East, people's names were often short sentences and so give an indication of their familiarity with a language. For instance, the Sumerian name Aba-a'a-gin means "Who is like the father?" We tend to take the language of name-giving – Sumerian, Akkadian, and later Amorite, Aramaic, etcetera – as evidence of the language spoken at home. So we see in Early Dynastic society a mixture of Sumerian and Semitic names, the former predominant in the south of Babylonia, the latter in the north. This distinction did not lead to ethnic conflict, as has sometimes been argued. Members of the two linguistic groups lived side-by-side. Politically, Early Dynastic Babylonia was divided; culturally it was not.

### 3.3 The Wider Near East

Early Dynastic Babylonia did not exist in a void (map 3.2). Countries that the Babylonians considered to be foreign and with which they had diverse relations surrounded it. The political situation in the rest of the Near East needs to be pieced together primarily from archaeological data as people there did not write until late in the period when texts appear in a few Syrian sites. By then Babylonian documents start to refer to the outside world as well. This is an unfortunate situation in that it leads to too great an emphasis on contacts with Babylonia and a focus on the south. With the end of the Uruk expansion in the late fourth millennium, contacts between Babylonia and the surrounding world changed radically. In the early third millennium, local traditions reemerged in full strength in the north and the east, and the Near East shows a great deal of cultural variety. Whatever southern influence there had been vanished. Simultaneously, certain nearby regions became more closely drawn into the Babylonian orbit, including one that had been outside the Uruk sphere, the Persian Gulf.

The Gulf gave access to Omani copper mines, which were crucial to the newly developed bronze technology. Babylonian interest in the region was thus not unexpected. Texts start referring to a land of "Dilmun" as an important trading partner and a source for wood and copper. Dilmun had been attested only once in texts from the Uruk IV period, but throughout the Early Dynastic references to it



Map 3.2 The Near East ca. 2400.

became more numerous. Its location is uncertain: for this period northeast Arabia or the island of Bahrain are the most likely candidates. In either case, Dilmun itself was not the producer of timber and copper, but rather acted as a mercantile center, trading goods obtained farther away. Archaeological material from eastern Arabia and Oman shows a great deal of contact with Babylonia. Many pottery vessels were Mesopotamian imports, but they were found within archaeological contexts that are not at all Mesopotamian in character. In Oman, for instance, many circular tombs with stones piled over them were constructed in this period, an entirely un-Mesopotamian practice. So we see here a kind of interaction different from that attested in the Uruk period: at that time the Babylonians seem to have traded through colonies, while in the Early Dynastic period they did so without a permanent presence in the region.

The countries to the east of Babylonia had been incorporated in the Uruk expansion and Uruk IV culture had heavily influenced Susa, the main urban center there. This suddenly changed with the beginning of the third millennium, and a local culture we call proto-Elamite appeared, more closely related to eastern Iran. Some 400 kilometers (250 miles) to the southeast of Susa another center, Anshan (present Tal-i Malyan), became prominent and expanded substantially in size. Susa dominated the lowlands to the west of the Zagros Mountains, Anshan the highlands of the southern mountain range. It is unlikely that a territorial state including both cities and the territories in between had developed this early, yet mid-third-millennium texts from Babylonia start referring to a land of Elam. This was probably a loosely joined coalition of polities, some of which also appeared independently in Mesopotamian texts. Late Early Dynastic rulers from Lagash campaigned against Elam, probably for access to trade routes that reached places far afield. For instance, carnelian beads made in the Indus valley and lapis lazuli from Afghanistan appear in archaeological contexts in Babylonia at this time. Babylonia seems to be on the receiving end, importing luxury goods its new elites demanded. In return most likely textiles and other easily transportable manufactured goods were exported. The material culture of Iran does not demonstrate strong Babylonian influence, which suggests that there was no permanent presence of Babylonian traders.

Throughout northern Iraq and Syria east of the Euphrates River, a new material culture appeared at the beginning of the third millennium, which we term by its pottery style, Ninevite 5. Its remains are usually found at sites on important overland routes, and it seems that the people with this culture were in control of trade. Areas farther west show a variety of material cultures, suggesting the absence of any regional entity. These societies were not urbanized, at least in comparison with Babylonia. Several settlements that later developed into important centers originated at this time, but truly urban characteristics were absent until about 2600. Only then did walled cities and dense habitation reappear. While southern influence may have been a catalyst in this late urban development, it was an indigenous process and there were clear differences from the south.

The agricultural regime of northern Mesopotamia and Syria differed from that in Babylonia in that it relied on rainfall rather than irrigation for growing cereal

crops. Yields per hectare were lower than when irrigation was used, however, so larger areas were cultivated to feed the same number of people, though with less intense labor. Consequently, cities in the north tended to be smaller than those in the south, and more of the population lived in outlying villages. Another difference was in the role of the palace in northern society. Unlike in the south, where the temple was the foremost institution in early cities, secular authority was preeminent in the north and the palace dominated the cityscape.

Northern cities were the cores of small states incorporating the surrounding countryside where villagers farmed. Settlement in these states was more spread out than in the south and the hinterlands were larger, but with their focus on the central city these were still, in essence, city-states. We know many of them by name: for example, Nagar, Shehna, and Urkesh in the Habur region, Mari, Tuttul, Emar, and Carchemish along the Euphrates, Assur and Hamazi in the east, and Ebla, Ugarit, and Byblos in the west. These states were in contact with one another through diplomatic and commercial means. The subject of trade dominates the palace documents found at Ebla, which suggests widespread diplomatic contact. Kings and other foreign state representatives commonly visited Ebla, they concluded diplomatic marriages, and regularly exchanged gifts. Warfare was also part of these contacts. Ebla had a long-lasting conflict with Mari on the Euphrates, probably for control over trade to Babylonia, and for some time had to pay a heavy tribute until Ebla's last ruler of the period, Ish'ar-Damu, reversed the situation. Some of these centers – Mari, Nagar, and Ebla – seem to have become able to impose their will on surrounding states, but the details of their military actions remain unknown. Alongside the centralization of secular power, a sense of religious unity also developed, as rulers from various cities took oaths in the temple of Dagan at Tuttul on the Euphrates. The latter city may thus have had a regional prestige comparable to that of Nippur in Babylonia.

Another similarity between Babylonia and the region to its north is that both had multilingual societies. Most people spoke Semitic dialects, but we also find evidence of Hurrian, a language that is neither Semitic nor related to Sumerian. Personal names again are the prime marker of this linguistic multiplicity. Hurrians were probably predominant in the north of Syria, where a Hurrian state of Urkesh and Nawar later arose, but people with Hurrian names appeared soon after the Early Dynastic period as far south as Nippur in Babylonia. Also people with Semitic names lived throughout Syria and northern Mesopotamia. This linguistic heterogeneity did not lie at the basis of any social or ethnic conflict to our knowledge.

The political organization of the north – a much larger area than Babylonia – was thus essentially similar to that in the south. Urban centers were the seats of power and dominated the surrounding countryside, even if the northern states were geographically larger. There was a difference in the ideological basis of power, however: in the north it was secular rather than religious. The city of Kish in the far north of Babylonia functioned as an intermediate point between these two worlds. It maintained close contacts with both the southern and the Syrian states and may have had a political organization that was based more on secular

than on religious power. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that a man from Kish, Sargon, was to upset the entire system.

### 3.4 Early Dynastic Society

For the study of social history in the Early Dynastic period we must rely primarily on administrative documents. Characteristic for the period – and for the entire third millennium – was the organization of society into “households.” Those were entities whose members resided together, including various generations of a family as well as dependents such as servants. Households originated in economically independent kinship groups, but the concept was expanded as the structure for large institutions centered round gods and kings. Thus the Sumerian word for palace was *é-gal*, “great household,” that for temple, *é* and the name of a god, for instance “household of the god Ningirsu.” All important tablet archives derive from these units and portray a world with the household at its center, leaving other activity undocumented. Each household can be regarded as an autonomous and self-sufficient unit: it owned land, livestock, tools, and fishing boats, and included farmers, shepherds, fishermen, and people to produce and prepare food and to manufacture goods. Larger households incorporated several departments with distinct tasks, which were often themselves designated by the term *é*. In the late Early Dynastic period, individual members of the elites also had their own households. In Lagash, for instance, the queen had one, called the women’s household (in Sumerian *é-mí*), which she ran independently. Her property was smaller than that of the king, but it was self-sufficient and it seems that women administered the queen’s household. We cannot document this for the Early Dynastic period, but in the later Ur III period its officials were mostly women.

Internally, the personnel of each household was hierarchically organized. Male and female workers (Sumerian *gurush* and *gème*) were at the bottom of this hierarchy and were by far the most numerous of its members. While they were not unfree, in the sense of slaves, they were dependent laborers. They could live with their families or in institutional lodgings provided by the organization for which they worked. They were rewarded with rations: standard amounts of barley, accounted for on a monthly basis, and of oil and wool, accounted for annually (see document 3.2). The persons receiving these goods were mainly active men and women, but they also included children and old people. It is clear that rations constituted the support given to all the household’s dependents, whether they were productive or not. The amounts were calculated according to the sex and status of the worker: a man regularly received double the amount of grain given to a woman, supervisors received more than their subordinates, specialized craftsmen more than unskilled laborers, and so on. This pattern whereby the household provided for its dependents by issuing them basic necessities of food and clothing remained a fundamental characteristic of Near Eastern society throughout the third millennium. Since the goods given did not constitute a complete diet, we have to conclude that these people had access to other foods through channels

**Document 3.2** *Extract from a ration list*

*Many administrative accounts list the rations issued to temple dependents in great detail. They provide the names of the recipients or identify them by gender and age, and list the amounts of barley issued to them. These texts often end with a summary of the totals and identify the official responsible for the disbursement. For example:*

In total: 1 man at 50 liters  
 1 man at 40 liters  
 5 men at 15 liters each  
 23 men at 10 liters each  
 They are males  
 56 female laborers at 20 liters each  
 72 female laborers at 15 liters each  
 34 women at 10 liters each

A grand total of 192 people, including young ones and adults, received barley.

The barley was 2,935 liters. Barley rations. The female laborers and children are the property of the goddess Bau.

Shasha, the wife of Uru'inimgina, king of Lagash.

In the month of the eating of malt for Nanshe, did Eniggal, the inspector, distribute this from the granary of Bau. It is the ninth distribution of year 4.

Translation after Selz 1989: 93–4.

outside the ration system. Vegetables and fish were probably homegrown or gathered by family members; or perhaps workers exchanged part of their rations for those foods.

The majority of workers provided repetitive manual labor. Women were especially engaged as millers and weavers. Milling at this time was a backbreaking chore which required that grain be rubbed back and forth over a stone slab with a smaller hand-held stone. The women were supposed to produce set quotas of flour or cloth on a daily basis. The amounts produced depended on the quality of the final product, which varied enormously. From later Ur III period texts we know that the quotas were high: one woman had to produce 10 liters of regular flour or 20 liters of coarse flour per day. Weaving quotas could easily be as high as 2 square meters (21.5 square feet) a day. Those were heavy tasks and they could lead to physical injuries, as the skeletons of women excavated at the seventh millennium Neolithic site of Abu Hureyra in Syria illustrate: their knees, wrists, and lower backs showed signs of arthritis while their toes were deformed from constantly tucking them under the foot in a position needed when milling.<sup>2</sup> While the Early Dynastic accounts are for women as groups, it is likely that they worked individually at home, simultaneously taking care of children. These tasks were primarily cottage industries.

Belonging to a great household also provided a means of survival to the weak in society, however. Widows and children unable to feed themselves entered temple households, where they received basic support. Households not only existed in the cities but also in the countryside, where rural communities, composed of large families that owned land in common, survived outside institutional control. Their presence in the Early Dynastic society – but also the decline of their importance – is clear from a group of about fifty land-sale documents. When a piece of agricultural land was sold, it usually went from multiple sellers to a single buyer. The sellers had unequal levels of claim to the land. Those most closely associated to it received the highest recompense, others somewhat less, and large groups of people were given symbolic gifts, such as meals, at the time of the transaction. Originally the land was thus probably communally owned. But all of the recorded buyers were single actors, members of the elite who were able to acquire individual ownership of rights, possibly at times by force. These elites were probably all members of the institutional households, who took advantage of their status to obtain personal property.

Several institutional households coexisted within each city-state: some belonged to gods, others to secular authorities. Among the temples there was a hierarchy reflecting that of the gods in the local pantheon. For instance, in Lagash the household of the city-god Ningirsu was larger than that of his divine wife Bau; and hers was in turn larger than those of their sons Shulshagana and Igal-ima. It is remarkable how encompassing the control of these institutions could be; the records from Shuruppak, for instance, show highly centralized control of the economy. Barley accounts register amounts that could provide 10,000 people daily rations for a full year, and grain silos excavated at the site show that such quantities could be stored together. The agricultural areas attached to institutional households were similarly enormous. However, since all our textual documentation from southern Babylonia derives from temples, it used to be thought that temples were completely dominant in Early Dynastic society. Because the temple of the goddess Bau there is our primary source of texts, Lagash was once described as a temple-state, where the gods owned all land and property. Today, most scholars reject this idea, acknowledging the fact that other sectors of society were important participants in economic life but simply remain undocumented.

The far-reaching nature of central administration is even clearer in the case of Ebla in northwest Syria. All our documentation there was excavated in a palace archive and demonstrates how this institution controlled widespread economic activity. It administered multiple units including the king's household and entities referred to with a term that in Babylonia meant "village." Whether the use of the word indicates that village communities coincided with administrative units, or were turned into administrative units with the advent of centralized power, is unclear. We can say, however, that agriculture in Ebla's territory remained the responsibility of villages under royal supervision, unlike in Babylonia where much of it was directly undertaken by institutional labor forces.

The ability of certain individuals to draw unequal shares of resources to themselves is best shown in the archaeological record. The so-called Royal Cemetery

at Ur clearly reveals the existence of a small group of people who could command great amounts of luxury items to be buried with them. Sixteen of the roughly two thousand graves excavated had elaborate chambers of stone and brick. Extremely valuable grave goods were placed in them: golden helmets, daggers, inlaid musical instruments, and so on (figure 3.3). Most telling of the power of the buried is the fact that some of them were accompanied by human attendants, killed or willing to die at their master's or mistress's funeral. We do not know who exactly was honored with such elaborate burials, whether they were members of the palace or temple elites. This in itself demonstrates how power structures gaining legitimacy on various ideological bases coexisted in the late Early Dynastic period, and that the full definition of social and political hierarchies was still wanting then.

### 3.5 Scribal Culture

During the Early Dynastic period in Babylonia, the recently invented technology of writing evolved both in its ability to render spoken languages and in the extent of information it provided. The system changed in several ways. First, scribes started to impress the signs into the clay of the tablet using a bevel-tipped reed rather than tracing them. When the tip of the stylus was pushed into the clay, it formed a small triangle and a thin line, creating thus the wedge shape we now call cuneiform. Signs became increasingly schematic and standardized, and it was possible to impress them rapidly with a limited number of strokes. By the end of the period few of the signs any longer resembled the pictorial elements on which they were originally based.

The use of signs rendering syllables also expanded, indicating more and more elements of the spoken language. Nevertheless, signs that represented entire words and required the reader to supply grammatical elements remained dominant. While indications of verbal conjugation, for instance, were absent in the proto-cuneiform texts from Uruk, the expression of such elements became increasingly explicit, although there was never an obligation in the cuneiform writing system to express them all. The growing use of syllabic signs made it possible to write languages other than Sumerian; scribes could write out personal names in Semitic dialects and in Hurrian, they inserted Semitic prepositions in the text, and so on.

They also standardized the layout of tablets, dividing them into one or more vertical columns of boxes to be read from top to bottom, mostly containing one word only, with or without grammatical elements. The sequence of the signs reflected the pronunciation of words better, although even in the latest Early Dynastic texts they were sometimes still scrambled. These developments made texts more comprehensible to their readers in antiquity, and to us today. Administrative records became more explicit, indicating, for example, whether a specific person issued or received goods. Royal inscriptions expanded from simple marks of ownership to lengthy narratives. Writing thus acquired an expanded function and increased its ability to inform someone of new knowledge, while information was preserved

for future generations. A king who left a votive object in a temple could indicate on it that he had given it, so that later visitors would acknowledge his act.

These developments took place in Babylonia where there was a continuous use of writing from the Uruk period onward. Outside the region even the people who had been exposed to Uruk writing or to the Proto-Elamite script of Elam had abandoned the technology. It was only late in the Early Dynastic period that inhabitants of several cities in Syria took it up again, clearly under Babylonian influence. The increased use of syllabic signs there facilitated the adaptation of the script for different language groups. The Syrian scribes imported Babylonian tablet shapes, sign forms, and their readings, and although they used primarily Sumerian word signs to write out their texts, it is clear that they pronounced them in the languages they spoke. At Ebla they regularly inserted Semitic grammatical elements between words.

The archaic texts from Uruk already show that writing was not restricted to economic transactions, even though these texts continue to dominate the corpus numerically. Lexical lists, words in a set sequence, provide the earliest systematic evidence of speculative and associative thought. They include lists of god-names, professions, animals, birds, metals, woods, city-names, and so on. In the Early Dynastic period this genre flourished and shows the acceptance of the same traditions over a wide geographical area. Most remarkable is the faithfulness with which these texts were copied in every city where they are found. Lists from Abu Salabikh are duplicated with only minor variants in Ebla, some 900 kilometers (560 miles) away. There are other literary texts from the period, usually short compositions including incantations, hymns, and wisdom literature, that is, catalogs of proverbs or proverbs set in an artificial dialogue where a father gives advice to his son. These are difficult to understand because the writing system was still very terse. The same compositions are often found at different sites (those of Shuruppak and Abu Salabikh especially show much overlap), which demonstrates that a common source inspired the various scribal schools. While most of the material is in Sumerian, there is a proto-Akkadian hymn to Shamash, which was found both at Ebla and Abu Salabikh.

In the middle of the third millennium, we thus see a cultural *koine* in the literate Near East. The intellectual center was Babylonia, where the scribal practices and most literary texts were first produced. After urban cultures developed in Syria and northern Mesopotamia they adopted the technique anew from Babylonia, and certain cities probably acted as intermediaries in this process. Northern Babylonian Kish was very important, as was Mari on the Middle Euphrates. Some texts at Ebla state that “the young scribes came up from Mari,” which suggests that the city provided training to Syrian scribes. People from western Syria read the same texts as those of southern Iraq. They employed the same scribal practices, shaped their clay tablets similarly, wrote the same cuneiform signs, organized them in the same way on the tablets, and so on. Politically they were separate, however, living in independent city-states. The states in the south were relatively small in territorial extent, while those in the north and in western Syria had a wider expanse. The states competed through military and other

means, and rulers routinely gained supremacy over their neighbors or concluded ephemeral alliances with them. These actions laid the groundwork for Sargon of Akkad, who initiated a new period in Near Eastern history by pursuing a policy of conquest to the extreme.

### Debate 3.1 *What happened in the Royal Cemetery at Ur?*

In the 1920s the British archaeologist Leonard Woolley, excavating in the southern city of Ur, discovered in the center of town a cemetery which had been in use for 500 years and contained some 2,000 graves. The earliest burials belonged to the Early Dynastic period and dated to around 2600 to 2450, at a time when Ur was one of the independent city-states of Babylonia. A small number of the graves took the excavators aback: they contained vast amounts of wealth and, even more surprising, seven of them showed evidence of human sacrifice. Woolley immediately announced his find as the Royal Cemetery of Ur in such popular publications as the *Illustrated London News* and it drew as much attention as the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in Egypt had done a few years before.

Woolley did not hesitate to call his tombs royal, but they contained remarkably few inscriptions, all of them very brief, and none of the names recorded in them were known as royal elsewhere. So the occupants could have derived their powers from other sources, temples perhaps (Moorey 1977). Some scholars have argued at length that these people were royals (Marchesi 2004), but doubts remain. We know very little about them.

More startling, however, is how they could have acquired such distinctive burials. After all, Ur did not control a vast territory at this time and even if it was the sea harbor of Babylonia, the city was not exceptionally rich it seems. Yet, the grave goods were made of very expensive imported precious materials – gold, silver, lapis lazuli, carnelian, and others – and they were so finely crafted that their manufacture must have required numerous days of highly skilled work. Moreover, how were these people able to demand that other humans died to serve them in the afterlife? Up to seventy-four men and women were deposited in a single grave as musicians, attendants, and bodyguards. Woolley believed they died willingly, committing suicide by drinking poison in a ceremony accompanied by music (Woolley 1982: 74–6). If this were true, how could they have been convinced to accept their fate? It is possible that they were essentially brainwashed to believe they contributed to the well-being of society and that rituals involving banquets – often depicted on objects discovered in the tombs – enticed them into this (Pollock 2007).

Recent reexamination of a few skeletons suggests, however, a more chilling alternative. The people were killed with a blow of a pointed ax to the back of their heads. Afterwards the bodies were heated, embalmed with mercury, and dressed (Baadsgaard et al. 2011). Then they were laid out neatly as if they formed musical groups, lines of guardsmen, etcetera (Vidale 2011). It is still possible that people voluntarily submitted to this fate, but also that the occasions were displays of cruelty to scare citizens into submission (Dickson 2006). It could also be that people captured in war were the victims.

Why would anyone have thought this necessary? The burials could have been ritual occasions that hoped to create public support for the institution of dynastic rule and show that the death of one king or queen did not affect the office (Cohen 2005). The fact that

it happened relatively early in the history of the state in Babylonia may indicate that the sources of political power were still uncertain at this time and needed confirmation. The practice ended around 2450 and never reemerged in the region. Perhaps when kings felt more confident they no longer needed to call attention to their power over the lives and deaths of others.

### NOTES

- 1 Capital letters are used to render the name KI.EN.GI as we are not certain about how to read it.
- 2 Molleson 1994.