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Political Centralization in the Late Third Millennium

3000 2500 2000 1500 1000 500

2288	Accession of Sargon of Akkad
2211–2175	Naram-Sin of Akkad
ca. 2100	Gudea of Lagash and Puzur-Inshushinak of Awan
2110	Start of the Ur III period
2003	Fall of Ur

Successive periods of centralization of power under two city-dynasties characterized the last centuries of the third millennium: one from Akkad in northern Babylonia in the twenty-third and twenty-second centuries, the other from Ur in the far south in the twenty-first century. They not only exercised direct control over southern Mesopotamia, but their armies exerted great influence over large parts of the wider Near East. There is a substantial increase in the available sources, which modern historians also understand much better, and this enables a more detailed reconstruction of these periods than those before. The two states shared a number of characteristics: they were both created through military actions in Babylonia proper and in the surrounding regions; they pursued policies of centralization in political, administrative, and ideological terms; and they collapsed through a combination of internal opposition and external forces. They differed in the extent of their reach and their internal cohesion, however.

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4.1 The Kings of Akkad

The Sumerian King List portrayed the dynasty of Akkad¹ in the same way as it did for the dynasties that came before it: a list of city-rulers who held universal kingship, which had been transferred to the city of Akkad (for a list of kings, see Section 1 in the King Lists at the end of the book). The nature of its rule was very different from what preceded, however, and temporarily Akkad ended the system of city-states that had characterized Babylonia until then. The processes of political centralization in Babylonia and the spread of Babylonian influences throughout the Near East evident in the Early Dynastic period attained an unprecedented climax. Moreover, never before had Babylonian armies systematically campaigned that far, nor had the political dominance of one city ever been so great. The focal point of the developments was northern Babylonia. The creator of the dynasty, Sargon, seems to have been a commoner who rose to prominence in the city of Kish. He probably usurped power there, taking the programmatic Akkadian throne-name *Sharru-kin*, which means “the king is legitimate.” His two successors still bore the title “King of Kish,” but Sargon moved the center of his rule to Akkad, either an entirely new city, as later sources state, or a place previously of little importance. Although its location is unknown, it certainly was in the very north of Babylonia, perhaps underneath modern Baghdad. This geographical position reflects the dual interests of the dynasty: full dominance of the Babylonian heartland and an extensive presence throughout the Near East.

Akkad attained its prominence through military might. It was written of Sargon that “daily 5,400 men ate at his presence,”² which may refer to the existence of a standing army that would have had superiority over the armies of conscripts his opponents fielded. Military activity is the sole subject of his own inscriptions. The south of Babylonia, where the city-states of the late Early Dynastic period had been partly united, was one area where he campaigned actively. Lugalzagesi, who ruled Uruk, Umma, and several other southern cities, acted as the focus of opposition to Sargon, and the latter claimed that he captured “fifty governors . . . and the king of Uruk,”³ a victory that clinched his control over the entire region.

A new system of government had to be developed: the formerly independent city-states needed to be integrated within a larger structure in every respect, politically, economically, and ideologically. Politically, the original city-rulers mostly remained in place, only now acting as governors for the king of Akkad, despite Sargon’s claim that these were Akkadian officials. Thus kings Meskigal of Adab, Lugalzagesi of Uruk, and perhaps Uru’inimgina of Lagash are still attested under the first Sargonic rulers. The Sumerian title *énsi*, which in the Early Dynastic period designated independent city-rulers, now became used throughout Babylonia to indicate governors. This system did not work well, however. Sentiments of independence could be rallied around native governors, and over the entire period Akkad’s kings had to deal with rebellions, as described later in this chapter.

Still, the court actively pursued centralizing policies. It developed a new system of taxation in which part of the income of each region was siphoned off and sent to the capital or used to support the state bureaucracy locally. In the reign of

Box 4.1 *The year name*

One aspect of the administrative centralization of the Akkad state was the introduction of an annual dating system that would be applied throughout Babylonia, although not at the expense of other systems used for local records. One of the earlier existing systems was chosen, which we call the year name. Each year was identified with a name referring to a major event from the year prior or early in the year itself. For instance, Sargon's destruction of Mari was used to name the following year. This system remained in use in Babylonia until about 1500, and provides us with a list of what the rulers themselves saw as important events. The names usually mention military campaigns, the building or restoration of temples or city-walls, the digging of canals, the appointments of high priests or priestesses, or the donation of cult objects. The dates appear primarily on economic records (not on letters). In order to remember the proper order of years, official lists of year names were drawn up from the Ur III period on. While we have not fully recovered the sequence of names for the entire period, long stretches are certain. These provide an extremely useful insight into the chronological order of events, and allow us to date the numerous administrative documents preserved.

Under the Kassite dynasty in Babylonia in the second half of the second millennium, a system numbered by the regnal year of each king replaced year names. The first official year started with the first New Year's Day of his reign. The period between the death of the former king and that day was indicated as the accession year. This system stayed in use until the Seleucid period.

Naram-Sin a standardization of accounting is visible in certain levels of the administration in order to facilitate central control. For those aspects of the economy that concerned the crown, scribes had to use a standard system of measures and weights. Thus we see the introduction of the "Akkadian gur" of ca. 300 liters to measure barley. The shape and layout of the accounting tablets and the formation of the cuneiform signs were centrally prescribed. In order to have a consistent method of dating in centrally controlled accounts, year names were used throughout the state (see box 4.1).

The local scribes, who were forced to adopt new techniques of accounting, also had to adjust to a new language. Akkad was a northern Babylonian city situated in the region where people spoke a Semitic language rather than the Sumerian of the south. The language, in fact, came to be known as the language of Akkad, hence our term "Akkadian." The existing cuneiform script, however, had been developed as a vehicle for Sumerian, rooted in an entirely different language family. Akkadian required more flexibility and accuracy in the indication of grammatical forms, which could be obtained through the increased use of syllabic signs. The royal inscriptions of the Sargonic kings were mostly written in Akkadian, either by itself or, less often, with a Sumerian translation. Few of these texts are known in a Sumerian version alone. Sumerian remained commonly written in areas of

Babylonia with a long tradition of the language, however. The royal administration only demanded the use of Akkadian and of centralized accounting practices for the records it needed to consult. Those had to be uniform; local affairs were left to traditional ways.

The royal house drew many economic resources to itself, and the Akkadian kings probably confiscated the estates previously owned by the city-rulers. Yet even this was seemingly insufficient for their needs. The Obelisk of King Manishtushu, one of the major monuments of the period, is a 1.5 meter high (59 inches) diorite pillar onto which was carved a text recording his purchase of eight large fields in northern Babylonia, totaling almost 3.5 square kilometers (865 acres). Although the price paid was not unusually low, it is almost certain that Manishtushu forced the sale on the owners in order to be able to parcel out the land to his own supporters. The creation of agricultural estates granted by the king to privileged people was a novelty the Sargonic kings introduced. They seized the land needed from local owners, which certainly led to resentment and opposition to Akkadian rule.

In ideological terms also, the dynasty tried to unite Babylonia, and sought to connect the cultic system of the region, with its shared pantheon, to the royal family. For instance, Sargon installed his daughter as high priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur, where she was made the god's wife. For that function she received a purely Sumerian name, Enheduanna, "priestess, ornament of heaven." Thus an Akkadian princess resided in one of the main Sumerian centers of the south and she actively participated in the religious and cultural life there. The authorship of several literary compositions in the Sumerian language is credited to her (making her the first identifiable author in world literature), including a set of hymns to temples located in thirty-five cities throughout Babylonia. The compilation of those hymns into one series shows how the various cults of the region were considered to belong to an integrated system. For some five centuries afterwards, the control of the high priesthood of Nanna at Ur remained an indication of political prominence in Babylonia. Any ruler who could claim authority over Ur installed his daughter there, giving her access to the temple's considerable economic assets. Naram-Sin expanded this policy by placing several of his daughters as high priestesses of prominent cults in other Babylonian cities, a clear attempt to gain a solid foothold throughout the region. He also explained his own deification (see below) as the result of a decision made by the gods of various cities all over his state.

Akkad's kings did not exert power over Babylonia alone, however. Some Early Dynastic kings had declared that they campaigned in different areas of the Near East, but none even remotely measured up to what the Sargonic kings accomplished. To determine the regional extent and nature of their influence, we have to turn to royal inscriptions and year names. Many Akkadian royal inscriptions are preserved and military matters dominate their contents. They were originally inscribed on statues that the kings set up in the courtyard of the temple at Nippur, continuing the Early Dynastic tradition that gave this city regional prominence.

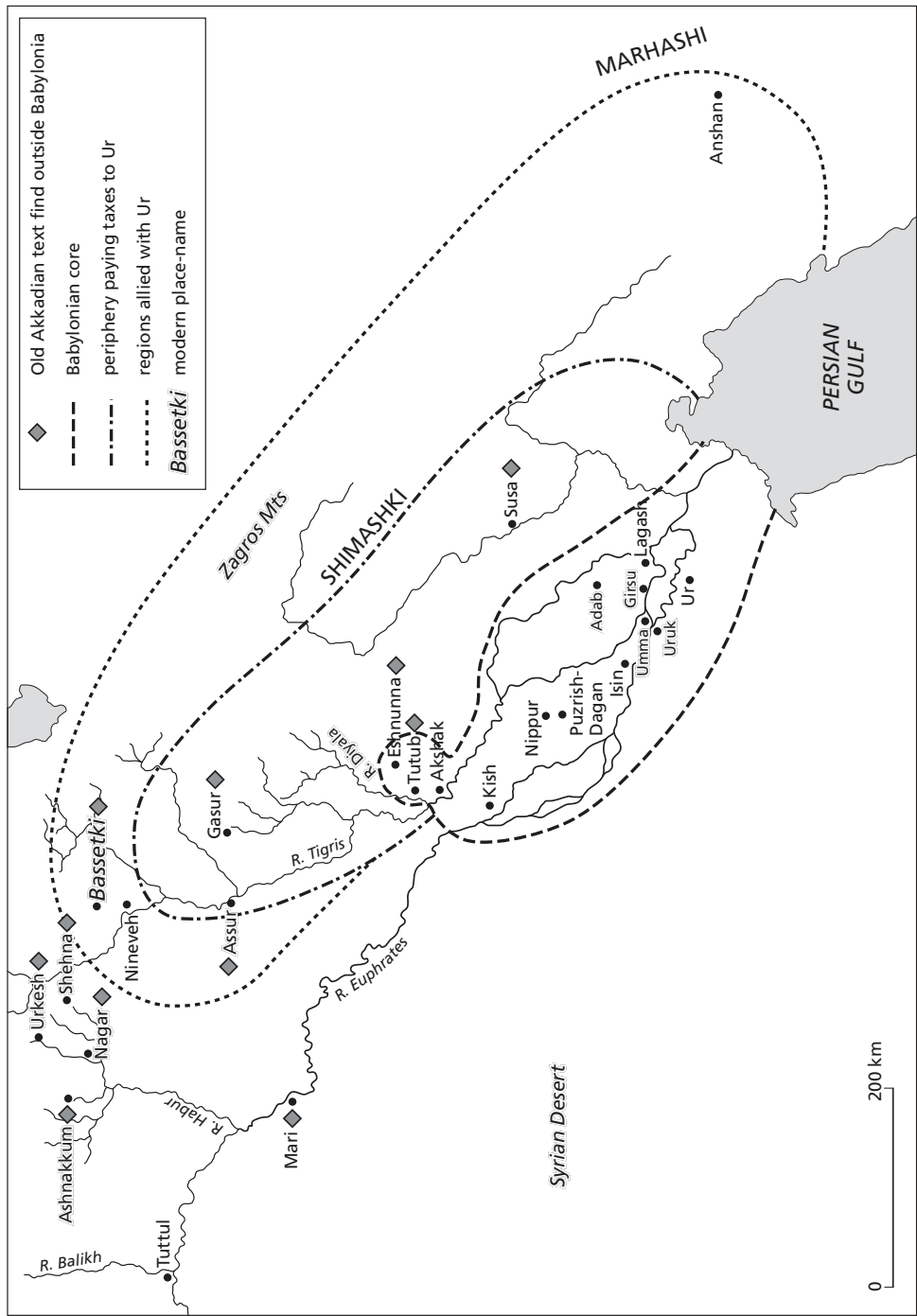
We no longer have the statues themselves, but scribes in the early second millennium copied out the texts in which the first five Akkadian kings boasted about their military exploits, and some of these copies have survived. The statements of Sargon and Naram-Sin stand out, because of their wide geographical range: they were certainly the greatest military men of the time. Yet, as Naram-Sin had to repeat many of his grandfather's campaigns, it seems these often amounted to no more than raids.

The kings focused their military attention on the regions of western Iran and northern Syria. In the east they encountered a number of states, such as Elam, Parahshum, and Simurru, whose location we cannot always exactly pinpoint. In the north they entered the upper Euphrates area, reaching the city of Tuttul at the confluence with the Balikh River, the cult center of Dagan that acted as a central focus of northern and western Syria. Mari and Ebla, the most prominent political centers of the region up till then, they destroyed. These places, which had been so close to northern Babylonia in cultural terms during the Early Dynastic period, were now considered to be major enemies.

The accounts mention many places even more remote, such as the cedar forests in Lebanon, the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in central Turkey, Marhashi, east of Elam, and areas across the "Lower Sea," that is, the Persian Gulf. Akkad's kings claim to have reached these in far-flung forays to procure rare goods, such as hard stone, wood, and silver, and booty from these areas poured into Babylonia. Several stone vessels excavated at Ur and Nippur were inscribed with the statement that they were booty from Magan (Oman), for instance. It seems unlikely, however, that Akkad established firm control over these areas. Rather, the raids aimed at securing access to trade routes. Ships from overseas areas, such as Dilmun (Bahrain), Magan, and Meluhha (the Indus valley) are said to have moored in Akkad's harbor. So when Naram-Sin claims that he conquered Magan, it seems more likely that he used his military might to guarantee the supply of its resources.

Local circumstances determined to a great extent how Akkad maintained influence over this wide region. We observe a variety of interactions. After Rimush established full control over Susa in western Iran, for instance, the language of bureaucracy there became Akkadian and local officials bore Sumerian titles, such as governor (*énsi*) or general (*shagina*), which imply a full dependence on Akkad. Yet, the rulers of Susa retained some degree of authority. Naram-Sin concluded a treaty with an unnamed ruler or high official of Susa, a document written in the Elamite language but in Babylonian cuneiform. The agreement specified no submission to Akkad, only a promise by the Elamite to follow Naram-Sin's lead in international affairs: "The enemy of Naram-Sin is my enemy. The friend of Naram-Sin is my friend." The autonomy of Elam should not be underestimated.

In Syria, the Akkadians set up footholds in certain existing centers, indicated by the presence of military garrisons or trade representatives there. At Nagar (modern Tell Brak), they constructed a monumental building with bricks stamped with the name of Naram-Sin. Its character – military or administrative – cannot be



Map 4.1 The Old Akkadian and Ur III states. After Piotr Steinkeller, “The Administrative and Economic Organization of the Ur III State: The Core and the Periphery,” in McGuire Gibson and R. D. Biggs, eds., *The Organization of Power: Aspects of Bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1987), p. 38.

established, however. At Nineveh, King Manishtushu is said to have built a temple devoted to Ishtar, which suggests that he wanted to promote the cult of a goddess who was of special importance to his dynasty.

The question remains how thorough Akkadian presence in the periphery was. Throughout the Near East, documents in the Akkadian administrative style appear: in the Diyala region (probably part of the Akkadian core); at Susa in Elam; Gasur and Assur in Assyria; Mari on the Middle Euphrates and in northern Syria at several sites, Nagar, Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan), Shehna (modern Tell Leilan), and Ashnakkum (modern Tell Chagar Bazar). The records using Akkadian style are not necessarily evidence of an Akkadian royal administration, however: just as in the late Early Dynastic period, this may merely show the spread of southern scribal practices. Widespread territorial control of the region seems unlikely. The Old Akkadian kings probably established points through which they could channel their commercial interests, such as Nagar, and possibly used the threat of military action to obtain what they wanted.

More distant areas were tied to Akkad through diplomatic means, including marriages. We find sealings of Naram-Sin's daughter, Taram-Agade, in the north Syrian city of Urkesh, and it is likely that she was living there as the wife of the local ruler. A princess of the eastern state of Marhashi was, conversely, married to Sharkalisharri or his son. Such marriages indicate that the Old Akkadian state did not exist in a political void, but was surrounded by states with which it had to negotiate on a level of equality. Unfortunately, the latter are only known to us through Akkadian eyes, so we cannot evaluate their extent or powers with any degree of certainty.

Akkad's far-reaching influence had a great effect on how the kings perceived themselves and presented themselves to their subjects. Already under Sargon the traditional title "King of Kish" came to mean "king of the world," using the similarity of the name of the city of Kish and the Akkadian term for "the entire inhabited world," *kishshatum*. Naram-Sin took such self-glorification to an extreme. First, he introduced a new title, "king of the four quarters of the universe." His military successes led him to proclaim an even more exalted status. After crushing a major rebellion in Babylonia, he took the unprecedented step of making himself a god. A unique inscription found in northern Iraq, but not necessarily put there in Naram-Sin's days, claims that the citizens of the capital requested this from the major deities of the state. As a newly founded city Akkad needed its own patron deity, and Naram-Sin had shown he could fulfill that role when he had protected the city against numerous rebels:

Naram-Sin, the strong one, king of Akkad: when the four quarters of the universe together were hostile to him, he remained victorious in nine battles in a single year because of the love Ishtar bore for him, and he took captive those kings who had risen against him. Because he had been able to preserve his city in the time of crisis, (the inhabitants of) his city asked from Ishtar in Eanna, from Enlil in Nippur, from Dagan in Tuttul, from Ninhursaga in Kesh, from Enki in Eridu, from Sin in Ur, from Shamash in Sippar, and from Nergal in Kutha, that he be the god of their city Akkad, and they built a temple for him in the midst of Akkad.⁴

Henceforth his name appeared in texts preceded by the cuneiform sign derived from the image of a star; it indicated that what followed was the name of a god.

Conceptually, this placed him in a very different realm from previous rulers. Earlier kings had been granted a cult after death, but Naram-Sin received one while he was still alive. The court initiated a process of royal glorification through other means as well. Perhaps the most visible of these efforts was in the arts. Stylistic changes originating in the reign of Sargon culminated in amazing refinement, naturalism, and spontaneity during Naram-Sin's reign. Most impressive is his victory stele, a 2 meter high (79 inches) stone carved in bas-relief depicting the king leading his troops in battle in the mountains. Naram-Sin dominates the composition in a pose of grandeur, and is much larger than those surrounding him. Wearing the insignia of royalty – bow, arrow, and battleaxe – he is also crowned with the symbol of divinity, the horned helmet (figure 4.1). Court sponsorship led to technological and stylistic excellence in other areas of the arts as well. Sculpture in the round now showed enormous refinement. The copper Bassetki statue (bearing the text regarding Naram-Sin's deification), for example, shows great naturalism in the representation of the human body. It presents a technological breakthrough too, as it was made with the lost wax technique, a technique long credited to the classical Greeks. The stylistic elegance of these sculptures is also visible in the minor arts. Seals of royal family members and of many others in the Akkadian administration are remarkable works of art. Even the script of the time displays a high level of elegance in the writing of cuneiform signs. The impression one obtains from the material remains of this period is one of skill, attention to detail, and artistic talent.

Old Akkadian hegemony was unstable, however. Both in Babylonia and in the wider Near East, it met resistance, a problem exacerbated by outside pressures on the state. Opposition to Akkad in Babylonia was a permanent feature of the period and may have been the main cause of its failure. Rebellions were violently suppressed; in several of his inscriptions Rimush claimed to have killed or displaced tens of thousands of men from southern cities. Even allowing for exaggeration, these were very drastic measures. The most elaborate description of an uprising derives from the reign of Naram-Sin, when he confronted two coalitions of Babylonian cities: a northern one under Iphur-Kish, king of Kish, and a southern one under Amar-girid, king of Uruk. That even the region of Kish near the capital participated in the opposition to Akkad is a sign that the idea of centralized rule was intolerable everywhere. The battles are described as taking place in the open field and between two well-organized armies with numerous men. The ability of the rebels to mount such military opposition indicates that local structures had continued to exist even after decades of Akkadian rule. Naram-Sin claimed victory in a quick succession of battles, and it was probably after this that he proclaimed himself a god. The threat to his rule had been serious. It is probably not without irony that Naram-Sin stated that the gods of the very same rebellious cities were asked to grant him divine status.

Opposition to Akkad in other areas of the Near East exacerbated these Babylonian problems. Since our knowledge of the Akkadian presence in different places is



Figure 4.1 The stele of Naram-Sin. The scene shows Naram-Sin as a god (identified as such by the horned crown) leading his troops in battle against a mountain people called the Lullubi in the accompanying brief inscription. The portrayal is much more dynamic than in the earlier Stele of the Vultures. The king crushes enemies beneath his foot and one of them is shown falling naked into the netherworld. When he took the stele to Susa in the twelfth century, King Shutruk-Nahhunte carved his own inscription on the mountainside. Louvre Museum, Paris. Spicular limestone, H. 2 m (79 in); W. 1.5 m (59 in). Credit: akg images/Erich Lessing.

haphazard at best, and the nature of that presence varied in the first place, it is hard to determine when and how it was successfully rejected. At Susa in Elam the local governor, Epir-mupi, appeared with the title “the strong one,” an epithet usually reserved for kings. Ititi of Assur raided Gasur, an act that probably would have been impossible if the Akkadian ruler had firmly controlled both cities. Since we do not really know how direct dominion over these regions had been, we cannot determine whether this represents a serious weakening of Akkadian rule.

Akkad was frequently on the defensive, in fact, against military threats from groups within or adjacent to its zone of influence. A major opponent had

always been the Iranian state of Marhashi, which lay to the east of Susa. In Sharkalisharri's reign it seems to have overrun Elam, and together the states fought a battle against Akkad near Akshak at the confluence of the Diyala and Tigris rivers, a site very close to the capital. The most severe threat came from mountain people in the east, the Gutians, whose homeland most likely was in the Zagros. In Sharkalisharri's time they appeared in increasing numbers in Babylonia as settlers, which necessitated the appointment of a Gutian interpreter in Adab. While they primarily seem to have entered Babylonia in the process of migration, their arrival there was not always peaceful. Sharkalisharri fought them in an unknown location, and we have at least one letter where they are accused of cattle rustling.

The combination of internal and external pressures led to a rapid collapse of Akkad's rule during Sharkalisharri's reign. The entire Near East reverted to a system of independent states, some of them now governed by new populations. In Babylonia, the Gutians took over several city-states and may have been the strongest power in the region. Gutian rulers even presented themselves as heirs to the Akkad dynasty. One of them, Erridu-pizir, set up statues at Nippur in imitation of the Akkadian kings and claimed their title "king of the four quarters of the universe," added to that of "king of Gutium." They did not supplant Akkad, however, as several independent city-rulers existed alongside them. Best known to us is the state of Lagash, where a local dynasty left numerous archaeological and textual remains. The statues and inscriptions of one of them, Gudea, rank among the masterpieces of third-millennium Mesopotamian art and literature (figure 4.2). In the city of Akkad itself, the dynasty of Sargon continued to rule. The situation was so confused that the *Sumerian King List* exclaimed: "Who was king? Who was not king?"

Outside Babylonia, the disappearance of Akkadian influence permitted the development of several new states. In the north of Syria, people speaking the Hurrian language created a small kingdom named "Urkesh and Nawar" after two of its main cities located quite close to each other in northern Syria. At Mari, a "dynasty of generals" (Akkadian *shakkanakku*) had perhaps already come into being in the reign of Manishtushu, and ruled the city as an independent state for the next 300 years. Susa became the capital of a state called Awan, a political entity that may already have existed in the Early Dynastic period, stretching from the central Zagros to the area south of Susa. When Akkad lost its power, however, a new king there called Puzur-Inshushinak embarked on a major program of military conquest. He unified the entire southwest of Iran and also occupied parts of northern Babylonia and the Diyala valley, while the Gutians held sway in the south. It is perhaps at this time that a new indigenous script came into use in western Iran. Although Puzur-Inshushinak commissioned several inscriptions in Akkadian cuneiform, there are also a few written in a script we call linear Elamite, vaguely related to Proto-Elamite and not yet deciphered. Together with a small number of short inscriptions on objects such as silver vases they are evidence of the development of a local script that disappeared together with Puzur-Inshushinak. He became the target of military campaigns by Gudea of Lagash and the first



Figure 4.2 Gudea statue. This statue showing the ruler of Lagash seated is one of the smaller examples of a group of some fifteen excavated at his capital, Girsu, and the only one where the king's image is fully preserved. The inscription on the skirt states that he built temples for Nanshe and Ningirsu, and gives the statue's name "Ningizzida gave life to Gudea, the builder of the house." It was customary in Mesopotamia for each statue to have its individual name. Louvre Museum, Paris. Diorite; H. 46 cm; W. 33 cm; D. 22.50 cm (18 × 13 × 9 in), AO 3293, AO 4108. Credit: akg images/Album/Oronoz.

Ur III ruler, Ur-Namma, who managed to destroy his state and occupy Susa. But, Puzur-Inshushinak may have laid the basis for political centralization in the region later on.

The century of Akkadian rule and influence over the entire Near East was an important first in the region's history. Never before had armies campaigned so consistently across such a wide area, and the Mesopotamians never forgot this. Sargon and Naram-Sin became the paradigms of powerful rulers and were the subjects of numerous detailed stories, created and preserved for almost two

Document 4.1 *Later traditions about the kings of Akkad*

Sargon and Naram-Sin in particular were remembered throughout Mesopotamian history in numerous texts that granted them increasingly far-flung military successes until they ruled almost the entire world. These texts also included elements of criticism, however, from early on for Naram-Sin, though only in the first millennium for Sargon. An example of a later tradition on Sargon is found in a chronicle of the first millennium that discusses several early kings:

Sargon, king of Akkad, rose to power in the era of Ishtar. He had no rival or equal, spread his splendor over all the lands, and crossed the sea in the east. In his eleventh year, he conquered the western land to its farthest point, and brought it under his sole authority. He set up his statues in the west, and he sent their booty across the sea by rafts. His courtiers he made reside at intervals of five double miles and he governed all lands at once. He went to Kazalla and reduced it to a ruin, destroying it to the last spot on which a bird could perch. Afterwards, in his old age, all the lands rebelled against him and laid siege to him in Akkad. But Sargon came out to fight, and defeated them, he overthrew them, and overpowered their large army. Later, Subartu rose up in full force and made him take up his arms. Sargon set out an ambush, defeated it, overthrew it, overpowered its large army, and sent its possessions to Akkad. He dug up earth from the clay-pit of Babylon, and made a counterpart of Babylon next to Akkad. Because of this transgression the great lord Marduk became angry and wiped out his people with a famine. From east to west they rebelled against him, and he (Marduk) afflicted him with insomnia.

Translation after Glassner 2004: 268-271.

millennia. Fact and fiction were combined in tales that accorded them increasingly greater achievements (see document 4.1). These literary creations, while providing us with an abundance of information, also pose great challenges to the modern historian (see debate 4.1). How do we recognize historical facts in the accounts we have? How much did later Mesopotamians or other inhabitants of the Near East add to the images of these rulers for their own purposes? If we do not include information from the later stories in our historical reconstruction, although they are much more detailed and explicit than the texts produced during the actual reigns of these kings, we seem to ignore important data. Yet some of those very details may be entirely fabulous, or embroidered with anachronisms, and might produce only stories of how those early kings were perceived in later times. To keep the two types of sources fully separate is impossible; historians will always fill in gaps in the contemporary record based on an awareness of the later stories. But we can work to remain conscious of anachronisms and “improvements” these later stories included. And we can use them to study their creators, people as distant in time as the Assyrians of the seventh century, and try to understand why the Old Akkadian rulers left such a deep impression on them.

Not all later accounts presented the Akkad kings in a positive light. For a long time Sargon was seen only as a heroic warrior, until the mid-first millennium

when accusations of arrogance appear. Naram-Sin had already been faulted for his insolence in the late third millennium. He was said to have destroyed the Enlil temple at Nippur, for which he was punished with the loss of his state. So the Mesopotamians also saw the negative aspects of these outbursts of military power and the self-aggrandizement these kings expressed in their texts and art.

4.2 The Third Dynasty of Ur

The period of fragmentation of power after Akkad's hegemony was short-lived. Although the chronology is confused – the *Sumerian King List* records thirty-two otherwise mostly unknown rulers – probably only some fifty years separated the death of King Sharkalisharri from the start of Babylonian reunification, which began with the expulsion of the Gutians. King Utu-hegal of Uruk relates how he chased them from southern Babylonia and returned kingship to Sumer. His brother and successor, Ur-Namma, imposed the rule of a new dynasty over the entirety of Babylonia, using the city of Ur as his capital. Ur-Namma continued Utu-hegal's work: he forced into submission autonomous rulers and those dependent on the Gutians, but the details are vague. Neither his inscriptions nor his year names devote attention to battles in Babylonia. Was there little opposition, or did he not want to describe how he won supremacy? In any event, by the end of his reign he could claim a new title, "King of Sumer and Akkad," referring to the entirety of Babylonia. The expulsion of the Gutians did not stop at the domestic borders, however. Ur-Namma campaigned in the Diyala region against them, and this brought him into conflict with Puzur-Inshushinak of Awan, who had unified a wide area of western Iran. Soon Ur occupied his capital city of Susa.

Around 2100 Ur-Namma started the Third Dynasty of Ur (or Ur III dynasty), a succession of five rulers from the same family (for a list of kings, see Section 2 of the King Lists at the end of the book). According to the *Sumerian King List*, it was the third time that Ur held kingship, hence our modern designation. For about seventy years, this dynasty governed Babylonia and adjacent regions to the east, using an elaborate bureaucracy that produced a vast number of written documents. Virtually no period of ancient Near Eastern history presents the historian with such an abundance and variety of documentation. Indeed, even in all of the ancient histories of Greece and Rome, there are few periods where a similar profusion of textual material is found. And since the succession of year names is well-known from the start of Shulgi's reign to the end of Ibbi-Sin's, we can reconstruct the basic sequence of political events for some ninety years. The royal court also produced inscriptions commemorating military campaigns and building activity and its scribes composed a series of hymns honoring the kings, which refer to some of their important acts (see document 4.2).

Most plentiful are the archival texts from this period. Close to 100,000 of them are now published and thousands more are known to exist in museums and other collections. They range from the simple receipt of one sheep to the calculation of the harvest of 38 million liters of cereals. They document many aspects of

Document 4.2 *Hymns to kings of the Ur III dynasty*

With the Ur III dynasty appeared a new form of royal celebration in literary form, the composition of hymns that sang the king's praises. His accomplishments were wide-ranging, including especially skills in warfare, but also as an athlete, a virile sexual partner, a scholar, and a just ruler. The hymns connected the king to the pantheon, claiming that the gods protected and promoted him, and sometimes declared that he was related to mythical heroes of the past, such as Gilgamesh. The genre was popular until the late Old Babylonian dynasty, and used the Sumerian language. The compositions are mostly known from manuscripts schoolboys wrote in the early second millennium, when they formed an important part of scribal training. King Shulgi of the Ur III period had the largest number of such hymns devoted to him, probably because of his long reign of forty-eight years. The extract here praises his skills as a student as well as a warrior, using metaphorical language.

I am a king, offspring begotten by a king and born by a queen. I, Shulgi the noble, have been blessed with a favorable destiny right from the womb. When I was small, I was at the academy, where I learned the scribal art from the tablets of Sumer and Akkad. None of the nobles could write on clay as I could. There where people regularly went for tutelage in the scribal art, I qualified fully in subtraction, addition, reckoning and accounting. The fair goddess Nanibgal, the goddess Nisaba, provided me amply with knowledge and comprehension. I am an experienced scribe who does not neglect a thing.

When I sprang up, muscular as a cheetah, galloping like a thoroughbred ass at full gallop, the favor of the god An brought me joy; to my delight the god Enlil spoke favorably about me, and they gave me the scepter because of my righteousness. I place my foot on the neck of the foreign lands; the fame of my weapons is established as far as the south, and my victory is established in the highlands. When I set off for battle and strife to a place that the god Enlil has commanded me, I go ahead of the main body of my troops and I clear the terrain for my scouts. I have a positive passion for weapons. Not only do I carry lance and spear, I also know how to handle slingstones with a sling. The clay bullets, the treacherous pellets that I shoot, fly around like a violent rainstorm. In my rage I do not let them miss.

Translation: Jeremy Black et al., <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.2.4.2.02#>.

economic life, including agriculture in all its aspects, manufacture, trade, taxation, and the sale of goods, and they derive from many cities in the state. The largest groups are from Ur, Umma, Girsu, Puzrish-Dagan, Nippur, Garshana, and Iri-Sagrig (the exact location of the last two places is unknown) in the southern half of Babylonia. But smaller finds were made throughout Sumer and Akkad. Ironically, this abundance presents a great challenge. Confronted with this mass of documents, scholars had to develop approaches that enable them to look at groups of texts rather than individual documents. This task is complicated by the fact that looters excavated most of them and that they were dispersed into innumerable collections through the antiquities market. More serious is the impression

that is created by the mass of texts, namely, that it is complete in its coverage of economic activity. That is not the case. The record is extremely biased, produced almost exclusively by the state, and it illuminates that area of society, leaving other aspects, such as private business activity, nearly in the dark. While these documents mostly provide information on the economic life of the period, political figures appear in them as well: when kings, queens, high officials, and foreign dignitaries are mentioned we get a better idea of when and where they were active, how they were related, and other aspects of the lives of the state's elites.

Remarkable is the lack of interest in this period by later Mesopotamians when compared to how long they remembered Akkad's kings and the amount of tales they created about them. In the first centuries of the second millennium, Ur III rulers were known primarily through the school curriculum. Students at that time copied out hymns, royal correspondence, and some inscriptions, but few new compositions were created around the Ur III kings. The failure of Ur, rather than its success, was the focus of these new literary texts. Soon after its collapse several laments were composed describing the destructions of Ur, Nippur, and other southern cities. These did not narrate the ruin of the Ur III state for its historical interest, but were probably intended more to justify the presence of new dynasties, which could claim to have restored order after great calamities. In later centuries, only a handful of references to the Ur III kings appear. Those are almost totally restricted to omens giving vague remarks about kings' deaths, like one that states that Amar-Suen died from "a bite of his shoe," a reference we fail to understand. These kings did not leave the impression on the Mesopotamian consciousness that the Akkadian ones did.

The Ur III state was indeed of a different character than its predecessor: geographically more restricted in size, but internally more centralized. The state itself had two distinct parts: the heartland of Sumer and Akkad, and a militarily controlled zone to the east in between the Tigris River and the Zagros Mountains. Outside lay the rest of the Near East with which Ur maintained diplomatic contacts or where its armies raided. The system was developed primarily during the forty-eight year reign of King Shulgi, who restructured the heartland of the state and conquered the adjacent zones to the east starting in his twentieth regnal year. It was not put in place overnight – nor did it stay unchanged over time – but in its general outlines it worked as follows.

The heartland was the traditional area of Babylonia including the lower Diyala valley. It was divided up into about twenty provinces, in essence the territories of the formerly independent city-states. Governors administered these on the king's behalf and were identified with the Sumerian term *énsi*, which in Early Dynastic days had designated the sovereign ruler of the city-state. The men often were from prominent local families, and the office of governor regularly passed from father to son. Other family members held high positions in the province. Part of the king's strategy was thus to keep these families on his side, something he may also have pursued through marriage. Shulgi, for instance, is known to have married at least nine women, each of whom may have been from various important local families. The governors primarily controlled the temple estates, which were

especially extensive in the south. They were responsible for the maintenance of the canal system and acted as the highest judges in the province. While representing the king, a wide range of powers was concentrated in their hands.

A military administration headed by generals (Sumerian *shagina*) paralleled the civil one of governors, although their zones of authority did not always fully coincide with the provinces. The province of Umma, for instance, had one governor and several generals, each in charge of a separate district. The generals were not native to the region where they were stationed or descendants of prominent old families, but the king chose them from groups of men who had made their careers in royal service. Many of them had Akkadian or foreign (Hurrian, Elamite, Amorite) names, the latter seemingly recent arrivals in Babylonia. They were personally tied to the king, often marrying women of the royal family, and they received their income from royal agricultural estates and other properties.

The central administration established a system of taxation that collected a substantial part of the provinces' resources. This system was given the Sumerian label *bala*, which basically meant "exchange." It was a massive fund to which all provinces had to contribute and from which they withdrew goods, enabling the state to use resources from all over its territory. The amount and composition of each province's contributions depended on its economic potential and the nature of its productive sector. For instance, Girsu provided grain, which it grew in abundance, while its neighbor Umma also contributed manufactured goods in wood, reeds, and leather. Many of the taxes were consumed locally by crown dependents, but some were sent to specialized collection points from which they were distributed when and wherever the goods were needed. Each province's contribution was calculated in advance on the basis of its agricultural and manufacturing potential. In the case of cereals, for example, officials measured the size of the agricultural area, and estimated the likely harvest. On the basis of that figure, they determined the amount to be contributed to the state. At the year's end, actual contributions were compared to what had been demanded and often a positive or negative balance was carried over to the next year. Also, contributions of the periphery, especially in the form of livestock, were added to the *bala*-fund (see below). Provinces were able to withdraw from the fund for their needs, thereby getting access to their neighbors' resources. State administrators carefully accounted for all these movements of goods.

Under the Ur III dynasty, Sumer and Akkad flourished economically, partly as the result of royal works. The archaeological record shows that there was a high level of urbanization at this time and that population density was higher than ever before. The degree to which wealth was available is also indicated by the extensive building activities of kings throughout the state. In their year names the kings often commemorated that they dug irrigation canals to expand the available agricultural zones. They needed a great labor force for these works and its organization perhaps best shows how far-reaching the influence of the crown in economic life was. Hundreds of able-bodied men and many women (called *gurush* and *gème* respectively in Sumerian) were conscripted to provide labor to the state, and that labor was also part of the *bala*-fund. Two classes of workers can be distinguished:

those who worked for the state year-round, and those who were only asked to do so part of the year. Service was predominantly paid for in rations – barley, oil, and wool – the amounts of which depended on the laborer's status. They were usually assigned specific tasks, such as weaving or the cutting of reed, but when needed in times of high demand they could be transferred to agricultural duties, for harvesting or canal maintenance. It seems that the people whose labor was only requisitioned part-time hired themselves out to the state at other times. Since the state's assets were so enormous, including fields, fishing grounds, manufacturing workshops, and so on, the demand for manpower was very high. The Garshana archive, from an unknown location in the Umma province, documents how large groups of women could be engaged as unskilled laborers in construction projects, in this case the building of a princess's estate in the countryside. They were hired to carry bricks from their place of manufacture to the building site. The Ur III state was not a totalitarian regime whose inhabitants were fully subjected to the bureaucracy, so labor had to be recruited by offering sufficient compensation. Many texts record the issuing of rations, which had to be taken from the state's central resources. Most recipients complemented those with homegrown or otherwise acquired vegetables and other foods. Some, however, received their entire food supplies from the state. The archive from a small city whose exact location we do not know, Iri-Sagrig, includes records of distributions of soup, meat, fish, bread, sweets, and beer to royal messengers and officials.

This depth of organization was applied throughout the heartland of the Ur III state, which included the region of the Mesopotamian alluvium where irrigation agriculture was practiced. Ur ruled the territories to its east through means different than those employed in the heartland. Already Ur-Namma had campaigned in the area between the Tigris and the Zagros Mountains, and by the end of Shulgi's reign Ur fully controlled the area there from Susa in the south to the Mosul plain in the north. The Ur III kings imposed a military government over this region. They put in place a system of direct exploitation that was headed by generals (*shagina*), who could be moved at will from one center to another. The royal chancellor (*sukkal-mah*) represented the interests of the crown and supervised the system from the capital out. He charged the generals with collecting tribute calculated in exact numbers of cattle, sheep, and goats to be procured by the military establishment. How the soldiers acquired the animals is not reported, but most likely they requisitioned them from the local populations. Large numbers of animals were taken to Babylonia where they were gathered in a place near Nippur called Puzrish-Dagan, which Shulgi founded especially for this purpose in his thirty-eighth year. There they entered the *bala* taxation system and could be issued as food for the court or for offerings in the numerous temples. Many animals were kept for their wool. The numbers of animals involved, both from the eastern territories and from Babylonia proper, were staggering: records demonstrate that up to two hundred sheep and goats and fifteen head of cattle could pass through Puzrish-Dagan on a single day. The eastern periphery was thus exploited for its resources of animals, which entered the economy of the heartland.

Beyond these eastern dominions were large regions considered to be hostile and frequently the targets of military campaigns. Royal inscriptions mention a variety of peoples and places raided for booty and captives. Some of the states encountered there had already existed in the time of Akkad and remained formidable opponents. The Ur III kings used diplomacy to appease their rulers: three of the five kings of Ur sent their daughters to marry Iranian princes. In the end the policy failed: eastern states such as Shimashki remained hostile, and eventually played an important role in the overthrow of the Ur III state. In the Persian Gulf, Ur maintained the trade contacts that had existed since the Old Akkadian period. Already Ur-Namma claimed to have restored trade with Magan, and throughout the Ur III period we find administrative documents that mention that region. Merchants' records indicate that woven cloth, abundantly produced in Babylonia, was sent there to be exchanged for copper and stones, such as diorite. Ur's contacts with the east and south were thus for the purpose of obtaining mineral resources, through trade, diplomacy, and military raids.

The Ur III kings approached the regions to the north and west differently. They established diplomatic relations with the states there and made no attempts toward military control. Ur-Namma arranged for the marriage of a Mari princess to his son Shulgi, perhaps in the hope that this state on the Middle Euphrates would act as a buffer and intermediary with regions farther north. Syrian states maintained friendly relations with Ur, but contacts were rare. The archaeological record shows that urbanism declined in Syria in the late third millennium. In the region along the Habur River cities almost fully disappeared while elsewhere they became smaller. Some scholars have suggested that this was due to climate change, but this is disputed. The raids of Akkad kings may have caused an economic downturn, and only those cities that controlled trade routes continued to maintain contacts with Babylonia. In the Ur III sources from Babylonia we find references to people from the Syrian cities Tuttul, Ebla, and Urshu, and messengers from the Mediterranean harbor of Byblos also appear. There is no indication of any single city dominating Syria politically or militarily. These events seem to have allowed semi-nomadic people to gain greater influence and probably their numbers expanded with people who abandoned urban life.

Akkad's military interactions with Syria had thus been replaced by diplomacy under Ur. Even if the Ur III rulers proclaimed themselves "kings of the four quarters of the universe," their military reach was geographically smaller than that of the Old Akkadian rulers. Yet the Ur III state's internal coherence was greater. Several reforms were instituted in Babylonia in order to facilitate the functioning of the state. The bala taxation system was a major organization that enabled the collection and distribution of resources throughout Sumer and Akkad. The state's involvement in the local economies was enormous, and its employment of men and women extensive. An elaborate bureaucracy was needed to account for all movements of its assets, which is why there is such an abundance of administrative records. The scribes who wrote them had to be trained to use proper accounting techniques and formulae. We see a uniformity of the writing system in official documents throughout the Ur III state, and it is likely that schools were



Figure 4.3 Dish inscribed with the name of the high priestess of the god Nanna. This dish was excavated at Ur and contains a brief inscription that identifies the owner or donor as “Enmahgalanna, the priestess of (the moon god) Nanna.” Beside it is an unusual pictogram of the crescent moon and the cuneiform sign EN, “priestess.” From other texts we know that Enmahgalanna was the daughter of King Amar-Suen. British Museum, London. 19 cm (7.5 in) base, 24.30 cm (9.5 in) exterior rim, H. 3.50 cm (1.4 in). Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

established to teach this. The system of weights and measures was simplified, and Shulgi may have attempted to introduce a standard calendar throughout the land. While each city continued to use its own sequence of month names, a calendar appeared in his reign that was used at Puzrish-Dagan and elsewhere for royal business. It was never imposed on the entire region, however, not even for central accounts, which shows that local practices had great resilience. Only in the next century, when the region was once more politically fragmented, did one calendar, the Nippur one, become used throughout Babylonia.

The kings did pursue an active policy to unify the land in ideological terms as well. They placed their children as high priests and priestesses in the major cults, and they built and restored temples all over the kingdom (figure 4.3). Before his twentieth year of rule, Shulgi was deified and his successors assumed this status when they came to the throne. They were regarded as gods of the entire land, rather than of individual cities, and cults for them existed throughout the state. Temples and statues of the kings as gods were built in various cities, thus providing a focus of centralization through the cult as well. Many officials used cylinder seals to certify the business they undertook, and those usually contained an inscription providing the owner’s name and his or her title (see figure 4.4). It is important that they always referred to their status as “servant of the king,” indicating that their authority ultimately derived from him. Moreover, people gave their children names referring to the king as god, and officials were encouraged to change their names to include a reference to the king. Names such as “Shulgi is my god” were



Figure 4.4 Cylinder seal, with its impression, used by King Ibbi-Sin's official, Ilum-bani. This is one of the typical cylinder seals from an Ur III official, which shows the owner of the seal being introduced to a seated deity by an interceding goddess. The inscription also has a very standard text for the period. It praises King Ibbi-Sin as king of Ur and of the four quarters of the universe, and states that Ilum-bani a nubanda-official was his servant. This suggests that this was the seal he used for official business. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Martin and Sarah Cherkasky, 1988 (1988.380.2). Hematite; H. 2.8 cm, Diam. 1.7 cm ($1\frac{1}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{16}$ in). Credit: © 2014 The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

common. The ideology of the centralized state thus permeated down to the level of the entire citizenry.

We can doubt, however, that in practice this royal ideal was achieved. The local economies and hierarchies survived quite independently, even if they had to pay taxes and homage to the king at Ur. This is most clearly demonstrated by the aftermath of the Ur III state's collapse. Babylonia did not experience a period of decline at that time, but regions that had been part of the unified state reverted to their local habits without evidence of disruption. This would not have been possible had their economies become specialized and interdependent components of a single system. We have to remember the bias of the documentation: almost all the texts derive from the state bureaucracy and describe the state's activities. It would thus be easy to see the Ur III state as a highly authoritarian one, documenting and directing all the movements of its dependents. But within this abundance of state records we see traces of economic activity that was not controlled by it. People often simultaneously provided services to the state and interacted economically with others on their own behalf. We also see that regional variations in many respects had survived: in the south the state administered its extensive holdings through the temple-estates that had existed for many centuries, while in the north it relied more on individual agents who may have contracted other business on the side. Other traditions survived through this period, and the multiplicity of local systems must not be forgotten.

The end of Ur's hegemony was sudden and (as usual) we do not fully understand what happened or what the main causes were. Both internal and external factors played a role. Within Babylonia itself, the former city-states and their local governors had always nursed feelings of independence. Early in the reign of Ur's last king, Ibbi-Sin, provinces stopped contributing their taxes, and by his ninth year the whole bala system had disappeared. Scribes no longer dated their accounts with Ur III year names in Puzrish-Dagan, Garshana, and Iri-Sagrig after Ibbi-Sin's year 3, at Umma after year 5, and at Girsu after year 6, which indicates that these cities had broken off ties with Ur. In Ibbi-Sin's eighth year, a man called Ishbi-Erra set up an independent dynasty at Isin, near Nippur, the religious center of Babylonia, and soon he annexed that city. Simultaneously, a famine may have struck the region of Ur. The king's correspondence, known only from later copies and perhaps fictional, includes letters in which Ibbi-Sin implored Ishbi-Erra to acquire grain in the north at whatever price was necessary. At Ur grain seems to have risen fifteen times in price and it could no longer be used as animal fodder. How much of that was due to the lack of good harvests and how much to the refusal of the provinces to pay their taxes is unclear. The idea that climate change, floods, or droughts contributed to the problems seems contradicted by the fact that certain spheres of the economy performed well at this time. Ur had a workshop that produced precious goods for the temples and palace, and accounts from Ibbi-Sin's fifteenth year indicate that some 18 kilograms of gold and 75 kilograms of silver were used that year. The state's coffers were still well stocked and despite his much-reduced powers Ibbi-Sin remained king for twenty-five years.

The decisive blow to Ur came from outside Babylonia. The ruler of Shimashki, which had been Ur's major opponent in the east, seized Susa and Elam when Ibbi-Sin's authority waned in his third year. Two decades later he turned against Babylonia itself. He captured the capital Ur and deported King Ibbi-Sin to Susa. For some seven years the Elamites occupied the city, until Ishbi-Erra of Isin chased them out. Ishbi-Erra and his successors claimed to be the heirs of the kings of Ur, but they could not control the same geographical area. More and more independent city-states emerged throughout Babylonia, a situation that we will discuss in the next chapter. The spotlight on Babylonia in the twenty-first century is so bright that the rest of the Near East is often ignored in historical reconstructions. Regions often can be studied only when they were in Ur's orbit. But states in the east, such as Shimashki in Iran, escaped the control of Ur. And these external forces took advantage of the internal opposition to Ur's centralized rule to put an end to that state.

At the height of its powers the royal court of Ur sponsored literary creativity, which to a large extent was self-serving as the texts included many hymns of praise to the kings (see document 4.2). It is also likely that much Sumerian literature regarding heroes such as Gilgamesh was composed at this time, and the Ur III kings claimed that they were related to them (e.g., Shulgi alleged he was the brother of Gilgamesh). But almost no manuscripts from the Ur III period of that literature survive. We know of it from copies students made during their training

in the early second millennium. Hymns of praise of the Ur III kings were part of the curriculum, and scribes learned of the greatness of the dynasty at a young age.

At the same time, however, they copied out literature that focused on Ur's failures. Two types of texts especially dealt with that topic. Most explicit was a group of poems we call "city laments." They described how the gods became displeased with the leading Ur III cities Ur, Nippur, Eridu, and Uruk, abandoned them, and left them to the Elamites to destroy. The *Lament over the destruction of Sumer and Ur* narrates how they carried off King Ib-bi-Sin in chains to Elam. A second type of text that students copied out purported to be part of the correspondence Ur's kings maintained with officials. These identified as the state's main enemy a group of people called Amorites, the subject of other literature of the time that depicts them as the negation of civilized life. The role of the Amorites in Near Eastern history is a difficult question (see debate 5.1), and there is little evidence from the Ur III period that confirms the picture the royal correspondence draws. Yet, in the early second millennium they were assigned much of the blame for Ur's collapse.

After the Old Babylonian period memories of Ur III seem to have become vague. Unlike for the Akkad dynasty its military successes were ignored and in omens Ib-bi-Sin became the model of a ruler whose reign ended in disaster. The end of the dynasty was of more interest than its successes. As the *Lament over the destruction of Sumer and Ur* states: "Ur was indeed given kingship, but it was not given an eternal reign."

Debate 4.1 *Can we trust later Mesopotamian accounts about the dynasty of Akkad?*

The dynasty of Akkad was never forgotten in ancient Mesopotamia: in the Persian period, close to 2,000 years after his death, a statue of King Sargon still received offerings as if he were a god. He and several of his successors, but especially Naram-Sin, were the subjects of a long tradition of legends, which over time ascribed greater and greater feats to them (Westenholz 1997). Not only Babylonians, but also Assyrians, Hittites, and even Egyptians, read about them. New texts continue to be discovered, including an account of Sargon's heroic abilities written by Assyrians in the nineteenth century and recently found in their Anatolian colony at Kanesh (Günbatti 1997). The meaning of that text is much debated: some say it is a parody (e.g., Foster 2005: 71–5), others that it should be taken seriously (e.g., Dercksen 2005). In the mid-first millennium Sargon was depicted as living on the edge of the world with the sole survivor of the flood, Utnapishtim, and a description of his "empire" has it stretch from Crete in the Mediterranean to Oman and from Anatolia to Egypt (Van De Mieroop 1999a: 59–76).

How reliable is this information and how useful is it for our understanding of the Akkad dynasty? Some scholars take a maximalist approach and argue that we would be foolish to ignore what these stories tell us. Their authors lived much closer to the events than we do and they must have had access to information now lost (Halla 1998 and

2001; see also there for the terms maximalist and minimalist). Of course, we need to ignore the exaggerations, but there is a “historical kernel” to be discovered through critical examination of the legends combined with other sources (Potts 2001). What can serve as external evidence, however, that helps verify the statements made in the legends? Regularly there seems to be circular reasoning. For example, omen literature sometimes claims to describe signs that appeared when something happened to an Akkad king, such as when Naram-Sin conquered the city of Apishal, probably in northwest Syria. Some scholars have stated that historical allusions in omens are the only reliable information the Mesopotamians provided us (Finkelstein 1963). But these references clearly derive from the same background as the legends on the kings (see Liverani 1993a for a survey of the literature up to then).

Much more critical minimalist attitudes appear as well, and some argue that there is no indication that actual events inspired any literary creations in Mesopotamia (Cooper 2001). It is more important to study the context in which an account was written than the historical details it pretends to give, as all histories are part of their own mental world (Beckman 2005). Thus, scholars have tried to connect legends about the kings of Akkad to later moments in Mesopotamian history. For example, when around 1950 the Isin ruler Ishme-Dagan planned to restore the Ekur temple at Nippur, a lobby in his court developed a tale of Naram-Sin’s mistreatment of the sanctuary to urge the king to restore it to its pre-Akkad glory (Liverani 1993a). The problem with such an analysis is that we often do not know when exactly a particular work of literature was composed. We study manuscripts that may reproduce or edit stories that existed for centuries before. So it is more appropriate to ask why anyone would have written out a story about Akkad’s kings at the time the manuscripts are dated (Van De Mieroop 1999a). The legends are not sources on the kings they describe but on the people who thought those tales to be of sufficient interest to read them.

NOTES

- 1 There are various designations for the state, most commonly Old Akkadian or Sargonic. The name of the dynastic seat, Akkad, is sometimes anglicized as Agade or Accad.
- 2 Frayne 1993: 31.
- 3 Frayne 1993: 16.
- 4 Translation after Farber 1983.