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Empire of Akkad

Type of Government

Based near the modern city of Baghdad, Iraq, the Empire of Akkad was a powerful if short-lived monarchy. The Akkadian king reigned over a number of formerly independent city-states, replacing native governors with Akkadians and imposing garrisons manned by Akkadian troops. Most of the conquered cities had two parallel administrations: one civil and the other military.

Background

Mesopotamia, the traditional name for the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq, was home to some of the earliest and most sophisticated civilizations in the ancient world. Located in southern Mesopotamia were the Sumerians, a Semitic people divided politically and geographically into a number of independent city-states, each ruled by a governor, called the *ensi*, and under the protection of a patron god. To the north lived the Akkadians, who spoke a different language. Little is known of their history until roughly 2300 BC, when an Akkadian army under King Sargon (twenty-fourth to twenty-third centuries BC) swept through the Sumerian cities, tore down their walls, and proclaimed them Akkadian possessions. Gaps in the archaeological record make it difficult to determine the precise extent of the empire, but at its height it probably reached as far as modern-day Turkey. Dependent states on the frontiers and the control of trade routes extended Akkadian influence even farther.

Government Structure

Political organization in Mesopotamia, whether Akkadian or Sumerian, was inseparable from religion. The temple of the patron god was the civic and geographic heart of the Mesopotamian city, and a ruler who failed to perform his temple duties would have immediately lost all claim to legitimacy. Sargon wisely left the temple administrations intact and installed his daughter as priestess of the moon god in the Sumerian city of Ur, thereby underscoring his support of local tradition and religious orthodoxy. Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin (c. 2254–c. 2218 BC), overturned this policy, asserting that he was not merely the earthly representative of the gods, as Mesopotamian tradition dictated, but also a god himself. Even though there may have been some uneasiness about such an abrupt shift, there is little indication of popular or priestly protest. The permanent presence of Akkadian troops in the conquered cities was surely intended to prevent such outbursts. Special officers reporting directly to the king commanded these detachments and provided him with an alternative to the cities' civil administrations, which he reorganized by replacing most city governors with native Akkadians of proven loyalty. Apparently an Akkadian innovation, the double administrative structure gave the king a system of checks and balances on the power of his subordinates. As such, it is a vivid illustration of the ever-present danger of rebellion.



Bronze sculpture of an Akkadian king, c. 2250 BC. The sculpture may depict either Naram-Sin or Sargon. (c) Bettmann/CORBIS

Political Parties and Factions

Sargon himself seems to have risen to power in a palace coup. Documentary evidence points to his position as a “cupbearer” in the service of a northern king. The job of cupbearer was not as insignificant as it sounds to modern ears, because it probably included a variety of important administrative functions. Even the most important cupbearer, however, did not inherit his master’s throne without a fight. Violent plots among palace insiders were a recurrent feature of Akkadian politics, and Sargon’s sons were both assassinated.

Major Events

One of Sargon’s first acts was the construction of a capital, a task he imposed on his subjects in the form of unpaid labor. He called the new city Agade (the term *Akkadian* is derived from this name). An existing city was inappropriate for the imperial capital, for in the Mesopotamian worldview a mystical and inextricable tie existed between a city’s physical being—its bricks and mortar—and its political fortunes. Conquered cities carried the taint of their defeat.

Aftermath

The reign of Sargon’s great grandson, Shar-kali-sharri (twenty-third to twenty-second centuries BC), ended in murder and chaos. There were Akkadian kings after Shar-kali-sharri, but they quickly fell into obscurity as the empire disintegrated. Historians link the Akkadian decline to several mass migrations, notably the arrival of a group called the Amorites. The details are unclear, however. Disillusionment among the Akkadians themselves likely played a role. Sargon, the father of the empire, ruled for fifty-six years with foresight and forbearance, whereas his successors exhausted themselves in plots and petty rivalries. This contrast suggests a growing indifference on the part of Akkad’s divine patron, an implication that would have demoralized the Akkadians and heartened their enemies.

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