



Original Article

## MESOPOTAMIAN KINGSHIP IN THE BRONZE AGE AS PORTRAYED IN SUMERIAN & BABYLONIAN LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the institution of kingship in Bronze Age Mesopotamia as depicted in Sumerian and Babylonian literature. It explores the representation of kings in mythography, hymnography, and epic poetry, emphasizing their divine association, military responsibilities, and administrative authority. The study draws on texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Enuma Elish, and The Death of Ur-Nammu, analyzing their portrayal of the ruler's role in governance, war, religious devotion, and the consolidation of power.

**Keywords:** Kingship, Mythography, Hymnography, Epic, Religion, God, Semi-Divine and Literature

### INTRODUCTION

Mesopotamian literary tradition, particularly in the early second millennium BCE, provides valuable insights into the concept of kingship. Most of the surviving texts focus on mythological and historical figures, often emphasizing the divine mandate of rulers. Unlike non-royal narratives, royal literature primarily praises the wisdom, strength, and administrative prowess of kings, reinforcing the institution of monarchy.

Majority of the discovered Sumerian literary tablets and the Sumerians literary works employed the poetic form of writing. A good part of Sumerian literature concerned the earlier rulers of Mesopotamia, and this is expressed through the literary devices of Mythography and Hymnography. At times, the specific pattern of many literary biographies of ancient kings may reflect a tendency of contrast with some perspectives of kingship and human destiny.

### DIVINE ASSOCIATION

#### 1) The divine legitimacy of kingship

Sumerian and Akkadian texts frequently emphasize the divine selection of rulers. The concept of righting, or the issuance of royal decrees, was regarded as a sacred duty bestowed by deities. Kingship was considered an enduring institution, and rulers were often depicted in the epics as mediators between the gods and their people.

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As such, the early king strove for the prestige of superior force and effective rule with its detailed administrative control. The ruler, whether referred to as king or *ensik*, is appointed to his regional office by a deity, with ultimate authority and sovereignty vested in kingship.

## 2) Sacred kingship model

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, as a semi-divine figure, sacred, perfected by the valiant gods and made unmatched in strength. His authority is absolute, and his subjects obey him unconditionally. The strength of his weapons has no equal. His subjects obey him by the mere sound of his drum, indicating the absolute commanding authority of kingship.

The narrative illustrates kingship as both a divine right and a social contract, where the king must demonstrate wisdom and martial prowess. Gilgamesh's right to select brides first, as decreed by *Enlil*, highlights the sovereign's privileges and responsibilities. Gilgamesh is thus exalted above all men, and the kingship is higher than the people.

Lines 160-162 from Tablet III, Column IV [Heidel \(1946\)](#) illustrate the authoritative rule of Gilgamesh in a war-like figure, an ambitious and determined ruler, who can pass orders by the mere virtue of his kingship.

(160) "An everlasting name I will establish for myself."

(161) "Orders, my friend, to the armor I will give."

(162) "Weapons shall be cast in our presence."

Despite his power, Gilgamesh's kingship is subject to counsel from the elders of the court, reflecting a structured advisory system. However, the final decision rests with the king whether to accept or reject their advice, as seen in *Gilgamesh and Agga*, where he defies the elders' advice and prepares for war with Agga, the king of Kish. This decision was contrary to the advice of the elders, who told him to submit, rather than fight.

This relation between the king and the elders is seen in Col I of 'The Asrysian Version' [Heidel \(1946\)](#), lines 11-12.

(11) In our assembly, we have paid heed to thee, O king

(12) In return, pay thou heed to us, O king.

## 3) Union between divine and earthly power

Around the middle of the third millennium BCE, a significant idea emerged in Sumerian religion

and kingship ideology that the king of Sumer would ritually become the consort of the life-giving goddess of love and fertility—Inanna (or Ishtar in Akkadian tradition). This union, often enacted through the Sacred Marriage Rite, was believed to ensure the fertility of the land and the prosperity of the people.

The ritual symbolized the union between divine and earthly power. The king would symbolically (and sometimes ritually) take the role of Dumuzi, Inanna's lover. Dumuzi was a prominent ruler of the Sumerian city-state of Erech early in the third millennium BC, who had the honour of being the first mortal ruler to become the husband of the goddess, ie. Inanna, who fell to him. The available Sumerian material concerned with the sacred marriage consists of stressing its importance for the welfare of the king and the prosperity of Sumer and its people. This practice reaffirmed the king's divine legitimacy and his role as the mediator between the gods and the people. It often coincided with the New Year festival or major agricultural cycles.

In the Sacred Marriage Texts: Rite and Ritual, CT XLII no.4, Obv Col ii, lines 9-18 [Kramer \(1963\)](#) is written:

(9) Give him a reign favourable (and) glorious

(10) Give him the throne of kingship on its enduring foundation

(11) Give him the people directing sceptre, the staff (and) the crook (a staff with a hook-shaped end, used for herding and rescuing sheep).

(12) Give him an enduring crown, a diadem which ennobles the head

(13) From (where) the sun rises to (where) the sun sets

(14) From South to North.

(15) From the upper sea to the lower sea

(16) From (where grows) the halub tree to (where grows) the cedar

(17) Over all Sumer and Akkad give him the staff (and) the crook

(18) May he exercise the Shepherd ship of the black-heads (wherever they dwell)

Ninsubur, the vizier of Inana asked her to bless the king with the above lines. The lines contain everything essential for the well-being of the king and his people, such as a good reign, a firmly founded throne, a well-governing sceptre, a staff and a crook for the control of Sumer and Akkad and the lands beyond. All these are significant symbols of kingship and authority of the king.

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#### 4) Religious significance of kingship

The literature shows the life of the king to be much honored and protected. There are many repeated lines asking *Enkidu* to protect Gilgamesh. Enkidu is created by the gods out of clay and is initially a wild man, living in harmony with animals in the steppe. He is created by the gods as a counterpart to Gilgamesh, to challenge him and curb his arrogance. He is described as being free of human civilization and has a deep connection to nature. The king's divine favor is evident in ritual practices and prayers. In Tablet V, Column III, line 20, depicts Enkidu, the companion of Gilgamesh calling the latter as god expressly. The narrative also depicts kings relying on divine assistance in battle, as demonstrated in Gilgamesh's confrontation with Humbaba, where Gilgamesh was helped by the gods to defeat Humbaba. Thus the king finds favour with the gods by prayers to win fights and battles.

The symbols of kingship, including royal (*asitu*) garments, fastened with an *aguhhu*, which is a sash, scepters, and thrones, reinforce the ruler's elevated status. The palace, as the center of power, contained the king's private chamber, symbolizing his governance.

#### MILITARY RESPONSIBILITIES

##### 1) The military aspects of kingship

The defensive role of kingship is evident in Lagash's historical records. Lagash was continuously exposed to raiders from the mountain countries in the East and rival city-states from the North and West. Additionally, Lagash also had a strong boundary conflict with its North-Western neighbour Umma. All these made Lagash's rulers prioritized military defense. Titles such as *ensik* (governor) reflected the rulers' engagement in strategic warfare, often leading to non-aggression treaties with neighboring states.

Gilgamesh is depicted as having an assembly of 'men,' that is, armed warriors, before whom he presented his plans. He exercised commanding authority over these men, indicating that the king functioned both as a ruler and as the commander of the army.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITY

##### 1) The institution of kingship

The political evolution of Mesopotamian states fostered the growth of epic poetry that highlighted the permanence and authority of kingship. The assembly, once a powerful governing body, gradually receded in importance as rulers assumed greater authority. The king, often described as a *lúgal* ("great householder"), was the head of the *eğal* ("great house"), supported by loyal retainers and a well-structured military force. His forces are bound to him by strong ties of dominance and obedience. This centralized power structure is formed by the king and his household troops are allowed to establish new administrative centers and expand their domains for the king in the form of a new "great house" where needed.

##### 2) Justice, economic prosperity, and divine order based kingship

In *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic recorded on seven clay tablets, there is an opening reference to a time when nothing existed except the primordial beings, the parents of the gods, Apsu (fresh water), Tiamat (salt water), and Mummu (the personified mist or craftsman of Apsu). It further elaborates on kingship as a divine institution with the event of the violent death of Apsu. Apsu had planned to destroy the younger gods because their noise disturbed him. Ea, with great wisdom, discovered this plan and killed Apsu first.

Tiamat, enraged, began plotting revenge. Ea (also known as Enki), her great-grandson and a god of supreme wisdom, was informed of her plans. Ea went to his grandfather Anshar who in turn urged Anu, his son, to try peaceful measures in this regard. Not paying heed to his father's words, Anu, marched against Tiamat with his own authority and that of the leader of the gods, but returned in terror seeing that Tiamat could not be overcome by any amount of mere authority or degree of magic power. At this time, Marduk, Ea's son, who was regarded as the wisest of the gods, was summoned to go to battle and deliver the gods from disaster. Marduk had a condition for the agreement that the kingship of the whole universe be given to him.

The assembly of the gods agreed to meet his demands. They invested him with the royal insignia, the sceptre, the throne and the royal rope, and "an irresistible weapon for smiting the enemy". These are significant symbols of kingship. In the fight, Marduk killed Tiamat and he took from Kingu, the tablet of destinies and sealed it with his own seal, to prove his ownership and to legalise his claim over it.

Marduk's ascension to supreme ruler was acknowledged by the gods, who approved his might, and granted him full authority over the universe. The assembly of gods legitimizes his rule, presenting him with royal insignia. Additionally, the sceptre, the throne and the royal rope, and "an irresistible weapon for smiting the enemy" were given to Marduk. These objects are associated with divine kingship and royal authority in Mesopotamian ideology and mythology.

*After this, the Enuma Elish describes how Marduk established a great structure opposite Apsu and called it Esharra, which is often interpreted as a poetic designation of the organized cosmos, particularly the earth and heavens. It further shows that Marduk was planning to create mankind, and for this purpose, he summoned an assembly of the great gods. (Tablet VI, Heidel 1946:46) lines 18-19:*

(18) "Ordering them kindly and giving instructions."

(19) "The gods pay attention to his word."

This indicates that the assembly or office of the gods is duly consulted in "matters stately matters, of and important constructive works".

Marduk is described as the lord of all the gods of heaven and earth, whose instructions prevail. He established dwelling places on earth as well as heaven, and allotted stations. He is the administrator of justice. He regulates pasture and drinking places and established them for the land. He is:

Tab VII (A Heidel: 56) Lines 65-66:-

(65) The lord of plenty, abundance and heavy crops

(66) The provider of wealth, who enriches all, the dwelling places

Line 96, page 58:-

(96) Who is highly exalted in the abode of kingship, who is very prominent among the gods.

In most of the other creation stories, the king is shown in the position of justification among the Babylonian gods, exalted in one way or other. Marduk's kingship is thus associated with justice, economic prosperity, and divine order. His exaltation among the gods mirrors the earthly kings' role in maintaining stability and resource distribution.

### 3) Commanding authority over the elders

The king possessed the authority to summon and command the elders of the assembly, requiring them to listen to his voice. Gilgamesh exercised this authority particularly after the death of his companion, Enkidu. Grieving and overcome with sorrow, he addressed the elders in Tablet

VIII, Column II [Heidel \(1946\)](#), saying:

"Hearken unto me, O elders, and give ear unto me."

Further, in Tablet VIII, Column III (ibid: 63-64), lines 4-5, he declared:

(4) *Over thee I will cause the people of Uruk to weep and to lament*

(5) *The thriving people I will burden with service for thee*

These lines reflect the authoritative and commanding role of Gilgamesh's kingship in Uruk.

### 4) Royal mourning

The lamentation poem *The Death of Ur-Nammu* portrays the Sumerian ruler's demise as a national catastrophe. His funeral rites emphasize the significance of the king's presence for the prosperity of the land. The poet describes how Sumer and Ur descend into chaos following his death, underscoring the king's role as a stabilizing force.

The composition "*The Death of Ur-Nammu and his Descent to the Netherworld*" was considered to be the work of a highly imaginative palace or temple poet who was so much saddened by the death of Ur-Nammu, one of Sumer's great kings. The poet wrote about Ur-Nammu's death as having caused fear and terror to Sumer and Ur. The poet went on about Sumer's anguish, barrenness and sterility ensuing Ur-Nammu's death, after being wounded in battle.

He was brought to Ur for burial. The poet then describes the funeral procession and Ur - Nammu's descent to the Netherworld, whose arrival in the Netherland was announced to the people by all the important dead priests and priestesses.

The funeral procession and other passages concerned with sacrifices and lamentation reflects the royal funerary rites and rituals practised in Sumer for the rulers. By the authority of his kingship, a king thus holds out internal and external peace, through his superiority in armed might and his relations to the gods. He possessed charismatic powers. Nevertheless, he was also shown as a human being with normal emotions at occasions, as when he was driven by the fear of death following the demise of Enkidu, also known as Ea. It shows how Gilgamesh undertook long and arduous journeys in search of immortality. This pursuit highlights the human dimension of Gilgamesh, beyond his sacred kingship and heroic courage.

## CONCLUSION

Mesopotamian literature provides a comprehensive portrayal of kingship, highlighting its divine origins, military functions, and administrative duties. The texts reinforce the notion that kings were both warrior-leaders and sacred figures, essential for maintaining order and prosperity. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Enuma Elish*, and other literary compositions serve as testaments to the enduring concept of monarchy in Mesopotamian civilization. The literature which depicts the king as a farmer who sets the fields in order also shows him as a faithful shepherd who multiplies the flocks. Under his reign, the land is expected to produce all the necessary plants and grains. These portrayals symbolically reflect the extensive administrative responsibilities the king was expected to fulfill during his rule.

It is commonly assumed that epic poems were initially composed and performed at royal courts to entertain and glorify the king. However, one might question that if the primary purpose of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or other such epics was to legitimize a ruler, why is this not conveyed in a more direct and explicit manner?

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