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Editorial

Alan Tiller editor

If there is no struggle there is no progress....Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. (Frederick Douglass, 1857)

Whether it be women's rights, civil rights, indigenous rights, workers' rights or the anti-war movement, there are many historical examples of powerful voices for change. In this third issue of Agora for 2016 we look at some of the individuals and groups that have fought for recognition for their causes and to right the wrongs of their day.

In Sungraphph, Rachel Towns starts the discussion around our theme with an examination of the Australian women who achieved significant social and political gains in areas such as the right to vote. In The Themis section Richard Broome examines how transformations in thinking and overseas influences in the 1960s and 1970s led to profound changes in the way Aboriginal people saw themselves and their place in Australia. In the text from a keynote speech given to the School Library Association of Victoria Conference in November 2015, author James Boyce reflects on how easy it is to slip into assuming deterministic views of the past, not only for how we understand history but how we imagine the future.

Anthony Stokes discusses the forces that drove deregulation of the Australian financial system in the 1980s and argues that the process did not necessarily always achieve the outcomes expected.

Drawing on stories from her book Between the Dances, Jacqueline Dinan illustrates the many ways that women 'did their bit' for Australia's war effort in World War II and how the opportunities presented changed women's lives and their place in society forever.

In a piece of particular interest to those teaching VCE Australian History, Dianne McDonald examines the visions and actions that shaped the new nation of Australia and how these were affected by the country's participation in World War I.

In his article on Ancient Mesopotamia, Andrew Jamieson initially provides some introductory comments on Sumer and the Sumarian civilization before discussing some of the key developments associated with the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian empires.

Finally in this section, Phillip O'Brien takes a look at how the indigenous Ainu peoples of Hokkaido and the surrounding islands existed for centuries as traders and hunters, and how contact with the Wajin from mainland Japan and a policy of assimilation changed their way of life immeasurably.

In the Praktikos section, Alexandra Pierce outlines some practical approaches for those teaching about the anti-conscription and anti-Vietnam War movements in the VCE Unit 4: Australian History 'Voices for Change' area of study. Jacki Tossol and Kate Mullins provide a differentiated research task based on 'The Vikings' depth study in Year 8 which aims to engage, motivate and challenge students.

We finish this section with an article from Brendan Bawden about his experiences as a chaperone on an overseas study tour of World War I sites as part of the Spirit of Anzac prize and a report from Jo Clyne on the National History Challenge Exhibition.
Empires of Ancient Mesopotamia

The empires of ancient Mesopotamia are defined by dominant rulers and well-documented events. The available data on Mesopotamian empires is abundant and diverse, making them of special interest in the study of ancient empires.

Dr Andrew Jamieson, The University of Melbourne

Introduction

Situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and Syria) has been called the ‘cradle of civilisation.’ Sumer, Akkad, Babylon and Assyria are all distinctive civilisations that originated in Mesopotamia. By the beginning of the third millennium BCE, the three principal elements of civilisation – cities, monumental architecture and writing – had fully emerged in southern Mesopotamia at Sumer, and from these foundations social complexity developed, which resulted in the emergence of empires. The Akkadian Empire, established by Sargon of Akkad (twenty-fourth century BCE), is often described as the world’s first empire. The imperial aspirations and achievements of Sargon were repeated by Hammurabi of Babylon in the seventeenth century BCE. By the first millennium BCE the full extent of the Assyrian Empire may be traced through the activities of the Neo-Assyrian kings (916–612 BCE). Following some introductory comments on Sumer and the Sumerian civilisation, key developments associated with the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian empires are discussed in this article.

Sumer and Sumerians

The name Sumer signifies the extreme southern part of Mesopotamia. The origins of the Sumerians as a distinct people and their ethnic make-up have not yet been determined. Some scholars believe that the Sumerians were already living in southern Mesopotamia by the fifth millennium BCE, while others have argued for a later date in the middle of the fourth millennium BCE. At present there is insufficient evidence to indicate whether the Sumerians were outsiders who migrated into southern Mesopotamia or whether they had always lived in the area. During much of the fourth and third millennium BCE (c. 4000–2000 BCE), Sumerian speakers mixed and intermingled with groups who spoke languages unrelated to Sumerian, such as Akkadian and Amorite. In the earliest periods of history, Sumerian was the common written language of southern Mesopotamia throughout the Early Dynastic Period, but it eventually died out in the second millennium BCE and was replaced by Akkadian. The Akkadians spoke and wrote a Semitic language related to modern Hebrew and Arabic, while the Sumerian language is unrelated to any of the other languages of the Near East.
Early Dynastic Period

The Early Dynastic Period is divided by modern scholars into three parts (I–III)\(^4\). The Early Dynastic I Period witnessed the emergence of large independent cities such as Uruk. At this time the cities of southern Mesopotamia were controlled by a king and his family, who owned vast estates. A number of Sumerian literary sources from the Early Dynastic I Period refer to a great flood. The story was centred around the city of Shurrupak, on the banks of the Euphrates south of Sippur, and tells of a king who survived a devastating flood in a great boat and was rewarded with immortality by the gods. The flood myth appears in many ancient mythologies but the Mesopotamian version is the earliest.\(^5\) The Old Testament story of the flood has been linked to Mesopotamian sources. The flood story makes one of the episodes in the famous Mesopotamian literary work *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (appearing in Tablet XI).\(^6\) During the 1920s, a British archaeologist, Sir Leonard Woolley, found what was considered by some scholars of the day to be evidence of a major flood. While excavating at the Sumerian city of Ur, Woolley found a layer of silt that was over three-metres thick.\(^7\)

The Early Dynastic II Period was an era of increasing conflict. During this period, the temple of the city’s god remained a centre of power, but the ascendency of the military leaders eventually grew to rival the power of the temple and its spiritual leaders. The increase in military conflicts is reflected in a number of myths and stories that concern heroic characters and warriors.\(^8\) The military remain a prominent aspect of Mesopotamian society with the further entrenchment of the authority in the figure of the king. This period is also associated with an improvement in manufactured goods and artistic products, many made of imported materials, indicating trade and contact with distant regions.\(^7\)

By the Early Dynastic III Period hereditary kingship was widely established in southern Mesopotamia.\(^9\) The kings of this period claimed their power was given to them by the gods and that this entitlement remained in the king’s family. It was believed that the son of the king was born of sacred marriage between the king and the high priestess of the temple. This special birth gave him privilege and status to rule by divine right, and in return he would make large donations to the temple. This created a relationship of mutual dependence between the king and priests: the religious and political elements of early Mesopotamian society. In order to avoid constant military conflicts, a mutual defence agreement was reached between the various city-states. The formation of this union enabled the city-states to unite on religious and cultural grounds.

The royal tombs of Ur, an important site in southern Mesopotamia, are some of the most significant discoveries associated with the Early Dynastic Period. The city of Ur was one of the oldest and most powerful cities of the ancient Sumerians. Ur was excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley from 1922 to 1934. He found a large cemetery at the site that included sixteen royal burials. One noble grave contained the remains of Igal (or ‘king’) Meskalamdug. Meskalamdug was both king and warrior, and his grave goods included a gold dagger. In another of the royal burials, Queen Shudi-ad (commonly known as Puabi) was placed on a platform and three female attendants were placed next to her. According to Woolley, it is probable that her servants were killed or drugged before being sealed in the tomb. The tomb of a king was also found. Outside these tombs Woolley found large quantities of gold, silver, cornelian and lapis lazuli, and deceased members of the royal court: retainers, servants, musicians, soldiers and bodyguards. One of the most spectacular royal tombs at Ur contained seventy-four attendants. Woolley dubbed it ‘The Great Death Pit’.\(^9\)

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4. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is widely recognised as one of the world’s earliest and finest literary works. The first surviving version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (known as the Old Babylonian version) dates to the eighteenth century BCE — only a few tablets of it survive. A later version (known as the standard version) dates from the thirteenth to tenth centuries BCE. Approximately two-thirds of this longer and better-known twelve-tablet version survive. Some of the best copies, written in Akkadian (cuneiform script), were discovered in the royal library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (c. 688–661 BCE) at Nineveh. The Epic follows the heroic exploits of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (in present-day Iraq), as he embarks on a journey of self-discovery and strives for immortality. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has influenced both ancient and modern literature and culture, and themes from the epic can be found in later biblical and classical literature. See Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).
The findings of ritual human sacrifice indicated to Woolley that the Sumerian rulers at Ur considered themselves to be partly divine. He claimed that these semi-divine kings were accompanied by their retinue of servants and attendants into the underworld where they would share in a special afterlife with their sovereigns that was not accorded to other non-elite members of the society.

**Akkadians and Sargon of Akkad**

The term Akkadian refers to Semitic-speaking peoples who occupied the regions of the Tigris–Euphrates river valley north of the cities of Nippur and Sippar. It may derive from Akkad, the name of the main city of the Akkadians located somewhere in central Mesopotamia (the city of Akkad has not yet been located but archaeologists believe it to be situated somewhere near the modern capital Baghdad). Throughout much of Mesopotamian history, the term Akkadian (Akkade, Agade) meant the geographical region where predominantly Akkadian speakers resided. Later, this region would be called Babylonia (named after the city Babylon). The Akkadians adapted cuneiform signs to write their own language.

Sargon, king of Akkad, was regarded as a newcomer in the political scene of Mesopotamia. Sargon, or Sharru-kin (meaning legitimate king or true king, which suggests to historians he was a usurper), formed the world’s first empire. Sargon is credited with making a number of fundamental changes to the political system of Mesopotamia. Under Sargon and his descendants, political power was transferred from southern Mesopotamia further north to around the city of Akkad. All of Mesopotamia was under Akkadian control, including parts of modern-day Iran, Syria, and the regions around the Persian Gulf.

The Akkadians developed and expanded trade networks in many directions. Sargon’s military activities were motivated by economic interests and attempts to control the sources and access to raw materials. During this period, trade routes along the Euphrates River were an important link with the Mediterranean Sea and the markets of Syria, Anatolia, and Egypt. Sargon also exploited the resources of Islam and the Iranian Plateau in the east, and even pursued emerging markets with the Harrapans civilization in the Indus River valley. Through conquest and trade, Sargon the Great, as he became known, expanded Akkadian interests far beyond the boundaries of the previous Sumerians.

The Akkadian period prevailed for about 170 years (2334–2160 BCE) and left a mark on the political, religious and economic development of Mesopotamia. Its geographical horizons had been enlarged as never before and the period of small city–states gave way to large, centralised kingdoms that held control over extensive trading networks and vast expanses of territory, overseen by a single king.

Towards the end of the Akkadian Empire there was a period of intense intercity rivalries between a number of city–states. Around 2200 BCE, as the centralised political influence of the Akkadian dynasty began to fade, power was once again divided among a number of local rulers. Cities such as Ur, Lagash and Kish became local centres of power as they had been under the city–state system of government. Just before the final collapse of the dynasty of Sargon, the city of Lagash broke away from Sargonid rule and became an independent kingdom. In the following years a number of other cities would replicate this pattern. Historians call this the Lagash dynasty, and its most famous king was Gudea of Lagash.

The Akkadian period is historically important as it marks the time when the city–states of southern Mesopotamia were for the first time united under one rule by an Akkadian dynasty. Through the reign of Sargon of Akkad it is possible to explore concepts of warfare and conquest, conflict and power, and empires and domination. The representation of Sargon in ancient sources, including The Epic of the King of Battle and The Chronicle of Kings provide a historical context for understanding processes in the establishment and growth of the Akkadian Empire. The new image of the king as the heroic ruler left a significant mark in the artistic and literary expressions of the period. Mario Liverani proposes that this change towards a clearer and more conscious use of iconic and epigraphic monuments was a means for propaganda and celebration of a ruler’s achievements.

**Ur III Period**

The Third Dynasty of Ur, also known as the Ur III Period, marks a brief but
effulgent period of Mesopotamian history. It is often referred to as the ‘Sumerian renaissance.’ This period was dominated by several important kings, among them Ur-Nammu. He and his successors restored order, stabilised the region and reintroduced the Sumerian language and culture. Thousands of economic and administrative texts have survived from this period, providing scholars with a good indication of the workings of the Sumerian economy. Ur-Nammu emphasised diplomacy and promoted negotiation to bring others under his influence. From this period comes a collection of legal prescriptions known as the Laws of Ur-Nammu, which called for the re-establishment of order and justice in the land. He also undertook programs to develop agriculture by maintaining a vast network of irrigation canals. He initiated the rebuilding of destroyed or damaged fortifications of Ur and the building or rebuilding of a number of temples. Ur-Nammu also built an imposing ziggurat at Ur. To support trade, Ur-Nammu established uniform weights and measures that greatly facilitated commerce, resulting in a century-long period of economic growth and political stability.

Around this time, the Amorites, Semites who spoke a language related to Akkadian, start to appear in the archaeological record. These semi-nomadic herders and labourers began infiltrating into the Mesopotamia landscape towards the end of the third millennium BCE. Over time they abandoned their nomadic lifestyle, adopted many of the ways and customs of the people they conquered, and gradually became the dominant culture of Mesopotamia. Scholars like Liverani see these Western Semitic nomads as playing a crucial role in the erosion and definite collapse of the dynasty of Ur.

Hammurabi of Babylon and the First Babylonian Dynasty

The rise of the First Babylonian Dynasty, including the expansion of the empire under Hammurabi (sometimes spelt Hammurapi), provides an insight into the development of Babylon as a centre of power. Hammurabi was a descendent of the Amorites. He was reputedly a skilful leader and soon established control over much of Mesopotamia; he was also involved in relations with the Kingdom of Mari (see the discussion following). Hammurabi is best remembered for his laws: the famous Code of Hammurabi. At one time it was thought that the laws of Hammurabi were the oldest in history, but it is now known that there were several older collections of laws written a few centuries before his time, such as the laws of Ur-Nammu. The Code of Hammurabi is inscribed on a diorite stele 2.25 metres high made of polished black basalt (now in the Louvre); 282 legal decisions or laws are inscribed in vertical columns. In the epilogue Hammurabi mentions that his purpose in setting up his stele was to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak and to give justice to widows and orphans. The Code of Hammurabi is historically important for understanding Babylonian society, providing a systematic indication of the legal disputes of the time.

16 Luick, Mesopotamia, 109–140.
19 Liverani, The Ancient Near East, 175.
The Kingdom of Mari

Mari was a strategically situated city on the Euphrates River (located in Syria near the border with Iraq). The archaeological evidence from Mari enables the relationship between this city and its neighbours, especially those in southern Mesopotamia, to be examined. An opulent multi-room palace containing mural paintings showing the king Zimri-Lim was discovered at the site. One scene is described as depicting the investiture of the king in the throne room. A large collection of cuneiform clay tablets was found in the palace archives. Inscribed in a dialect of Akkadian called Old Babylonian, the tablets document the activities of the kingdom of Mari. Because of these texts, Old Babylonian Mari is one of the best-documented palace compounds of any capital city in the long history of the ancient Near East. The archives cover a period of three generations in the first half of the eighteenth century BCE. They provide a valuable source for understanding the political, economic, cultural and social context of Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE.

The Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad conquered Mari and appointed his son Yasmah-Addu as its ruler. For this reason, Shamshi-Adad’s reign is attested in the Mari archives. The social, political and cultural features of Assyria may be traced in the correspondence of Shamshi-Adad. Parts of the kingdom of Mari’s resources were moved to support the interests of Shamshi-Adad – from the provisioning of troops for his military endeavours to the financing and provisioning of technical and administrative specialists for his building programs.

Mari was destroyed by Hammurabi of Babylon. The violent destruction of Mari’s palace managed to preserve the royal archive, providing a detailed account of this historical phase.

Ashur and the Assyrians

The name Assyria derives from the ancient city of Ashur (or Assur), located on the Tigris in northern Mesopotamia. Ashur was also the name of the main god of the city, who became the supreme god of the Assyrian Empire. He is often symbolised wearing a horned cap. Sometimes he is shown standing on a winged bull or dragon (mušuššu) or emerging from a winged sun disc. The history of Assyria is divided into three periods: Old Assyrian (c. 2000–1740 BCE), Middle Assyrian (c. 1353–1056 BCE) and Neo-Assyrian (c. 934–609 BCE). These eras correspond with Assyrian expansion, punctuated with periods of contraction or decline.

The Assyrians were known for their military might. They developed an economy based on warfare and military conquest that required acts of violence against conquered peoples. The Assyrians left behind vivid accounts of their military campaigns and detailed scenes of their exploits and battles. Not only were the Assyrians successful on the battlefield, they produced finely crafted works of art (ivory, metalwork) and constructed opulent palaces.

Like other ancient peoples of Mesopotamia, the Assyrians went to war for multiple reasons: economic, strategic and religious. Annually, the Assyrians would organise military raids, assaults and offensives. Assyrian troops were backed by chariotry, cavalry and engineers. Engineering units built and operated siege engines and battering rams, built bridges out of timbers, made rafts for crossing rivers and were responsible for cutting roads and removing obstacles so that the army could keep moving in difficult terrain. The Assyrians used various types of two-wheeled chariots as mobile weapons-firing platforms. When a successful campaign was completed, the enemy hostages and booty taken from them was carried back to Assyria. Evidence of Assyrian military activities are graphically depicted in the reliefs and reported in the annals. The formidable military expertise and efficient tactics of the Assyrians was emulated by subsequent empires.

Before embarking on a campaign, priests and diviners performed sacrifices and examined sheep livers in search of favourable omens to determine whether the campaign would be successful. Divination was an important Mesopotamian practice enacted by Babylonians and Assyrians as a means of determining the inclination of the gods.

Neo-Assyrian Kings

The early part of the first millennium BCE was a time of political and social
tumult. This unrest enabled the Assyrians, a small nation of farmers and herdsmen on the upper Tigris River (northern Iraq), to assert their influence. As Amélie Kuhrt notes, the history of the Near East in the period from the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE—well over two-and-a-half centuries—is dominated by first the recovery and then the rapid expansion of the Assyrian state.

The rise of the Assyrian Empire is reflected in the Assyrian annals, and developments in the organisation and administration of the Assyrian Empire may be traced through the activities of the Neo-Assyrian kings. The campaigns and activities of the late Neo-Assyrian kings—Assurnasirpal II, Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal—are well documented. The kings of the Neo-Assyrian period constructed imposing palaces at their capitals in Ashur (Qal'at Sharqat), Nimrud (ancient Kalhu, biblical Calah), Nineveh and Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin, meaning ‘Fortress of Sargon’). Carved stone reliefs and sculptures (such as the lamassu, winged bulls or lions flanking entrances of cities or palaces) decorated the royal residences. Detailed reliefs depicting the triumphs of Assyrian kings in times of war and peace were recorded in stone on the walls of a succession of palaces. These finely carved works also served as a form of propaganda, glorifying the achievements of the Assyrian kings and promoting the supremacy of the Assyrian Empire.

Like most Mesopotamian monarchs, Assurnasirpal II hunted wild animals such as bulls, lions and elephants. Lion hunting in particular was considered a royal sport and a demonstration of the king's strength and authority. It was the king's duty to protect his subjects from these dangerous creatures. Assurnasirpal constructed a new palace at Nimrud on the east bank of the Tigris River that was decorated with numerous lion reliefs. The lion-hunting scenes are considered masterpieces of Assyrian art. After Assurnasirpal's reign, Assyria went into a period of decline. Urartu, a region north of Assyria, contributed to the problems of the Assyrians. Inscriptions of the Assyrian kings mention Urartu (concentrated in the region of Lake Van in Armenia)—Urartian tribes (skilled horsemen) threatened Assyrian interests in the area and represented a powerful northern rival.

Assyria's heyday or revival was instigated by Tiglath-pileser III; his success was founded on many public reforms. Under Tiglath-pileser the Assyrian army was completely restructured: the army became large, full-time and permanent. Soldiers were equipped with superior and stronger (iron) weapons and military leaders employed better tactics than before. Tiglath-pileser III's predecessors had always considered the Euphrates River as the border or boundary of greater Assyria in terms of direct rule, but Tiglath-pileser III went beyond it and incorporated a number of former vassal states into the empire by converting them into Assyrian provinces. This process of colonisation continued under subsequent rulers and served to enlarge the empire. The Assyrians implemented a policy of mass deportation as a way of maintaining control and preventing revolt. Thousands of conquered peoples were displaced from one part of the empire to another to meet the needs and aspirations of Assyrian political and military strategy.

When Assurbanipal ascended the throne in 668 BCE, the Assyrian Empire was at its height. Assurbanipal amassed a great library in his palace at Nineveh, and he sent scribes to seek out and copy texts. The library contained works on medicine, divination, mathematics, astronomy and historical inscriptions. The royal library was discovered by British archaeologist

33 Jane McIntosh, Ancient Mesopotamia: New Perspectives (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 100.


Austen Henry Layard in 1847. Through a series of excavations, thousands of tablets and fragments have been recovered. Many had been burnt when the palace was destroyed. According to British Museum curator Sarah Collins, many of these tablets are of unparalleled importance for our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia. The best known tablets are the literary masterpieces such as *Atra-hasis* (the flood story), *Enuma Elish* (the creation epic) and the copies of the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The library was destroyed when Nineveh was sacked in 612 BCE by a coalition of Babylonian and Persian forces.

The end of the Assyrian Empire coincides with the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. With the collapse of Assyria the northern domination of the Tigris–Euphrates river valley came to an abrupt end.

**Conclusion**

The rich archaeological evidence and abundant primary sources from Mesopotamia provide a vivid account of the historical developments and distinguishing characteristics associated with the empires of Akkad, Babylon and Assyria. This unrivalled body of material (texts and artefacts) informs historical inquiry allowing a critical investigation of the key concepts of empire, beginning with Sargon I of Akkad and continuing down to the fall of Nineveh at the end of the Neo-Assyrian Period. Archaeological investigations and the decipherment of cuneiform texts enable the activities and achievements of the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian empires to be assessed and appreciated.

The classical world of Greece and Rome inherited and adopted many ideas and inventions that originated in ancient Mesopotamia, including the concept and mechanics of empire. Today, the legacies of ancient Mesopotamia are overshadowed by conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Despite the current tragedy associated with these unfortunate circumstances in the Middle East, knowledge of past historical events remains important. For as Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, noted:

Look back over the past, with its changing empires that arose and fell, and you can foresee the future too.  
(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book VII, Chapter XLIX)
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