

DC – I

Course -II

**Paper: Social Formations and Cultural Patterns of the Ancient and Medieval
World-1**

Lesson: CENTRALIZATION OF POWER IN

MESOPOTAMIA: TEMPLES AND PALACES

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CENTRALIZATION OF POWER IN MESOPOTAMIA: TEMPLES AND PALACES

This Unit introduces you to the various aspects of history of the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. The core issues of center of power and the branches, which contributed to the origin, and development of Mesopotamia as the leading civilization of its age and also gave an impetus to overall growth of power centers. The unit would also give a broader understanding of the important role played by the temples and palaces which could be seen as the main center of power and hegemony in ancient Mesopotamia.

Introduction

The Twin River Valley region, i.e., the Tigris-Euphrates region, saw the rise of the world's earliest known civilization – the Mesopotamian civilization. The Greeks called this land 'Mesopotamia', which means 'the land between the two rivers'. The emergence of civilization and subsequent urbanization here has been an issue of much research and debate among scholars. Both were complex processes that were not caused by a single factor, but by numerous inter-related political, socio-economic and cultural processes. As they approach the sea, the land becomes marshy, with lagoons, mud flats, and reed banks. Today, the rivers unite before they empty into the Persian Gulf, but in ancient times the sea came much further inland, and they flowed into it as two separate streams.



<http://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/SumerianMyth.htm>

The land is too dry to grow many crops on. As a result, much of it has been - and is still - home to herders of sheep and goat. These nomads move from the river pastures in the summer to the desert fringes in the winter, which get some rain at this time of year. At various times they have had a large impact on Mesopotamian history. Near the rivers themselves, the soil is extremely fertile. It is made up of rich mud brought down by the rivers from the mountains, and deposited over a wide area during the spring floods. When watered by means of irrigation channels, it makes some of the best farmland in the world. The marshy land near the sea also makes very productive farmland, once it had been drained. Here, the diet is enriched by the plentiful supply of fish to have from the lagoons and ponds.

It is this geography which gave rise to the earliest civilization in world history. Agriculture is only possible in the dry climate of Mesopotamia by means of irrigation. With irrigation, however, farming is very productive indeed. A dense population grew up here along the Tigris and Euphrates and their branches in the centuries after 5000 BC. By 3500 BC, cities had appeared. The surplus food grown in this fertile landscape enabled the farming societies to feed a class of people who did not need to

devote their lives to agriculture. These were the craftsmen, priests, scribes, administrators, rulers and soldiers who made civilization possible.

The Mesopotamian civilization was clearly influenced by its environmental and geographical setting. Mesopotamia is one large geographical unit, having for its axis the valleys of the erratically-flowing Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. It can be divided into two distinct regions on the basis of its geographical features – Northern and Southern. Northern Mesopotamia (Assyria) extends from the Zagros Mountains in the north to the Middle Tigris, with the Syrian Desert in the west. It receives adequate rainfall, which removes any great need for irrigation, and some of the earliest settlements emerged here. By 6000 B.C., 3 Neolithic cultures had developed – the Hassuna (6000-5500 B.C.), the Samarra (5500-5000 B.C.) and the Halafian (5500-4700 B.C.).

Southern Mesopotamia is the arid zone from the Middle Tigris to the Persian Gulf, with Iran in the east and the Arabian Desert in the west, which receives scanty rainfall. The climate is dry, of sub-tropical variety. As a result, agriculture depended almost entirely upon irrigation by a complex system of canal, dykes and reservoirs. The process of settlement here began around 5000 B.C. The southernmost part here is known as Sumer, while the part between Sumer and Northern Mesopotamia is known as Akkad. Together, these two were known as Babylonia from 2000 B.C. onwards.

The important stages in the growth of urbanization in Mesopotamia can be classified as the Sumerian stage (c.4500-2350 B.C.), which included the Ubaid culture (c.4500-3500 B.C.), the Uruk culture (c.3500-3100 B.C.) and the Jamdat Nasr culture (c.3100-2900 B.C.). This was followed by the Early Dynastic Period – Early Dynastic I (c.2900-2750 B.C.), Early Dynastic II (c.2750-2600 B.C.) and Early Dynastic III (2600-2350 B.C.); and then the Akkadian stage (c.2350-2000 B.C.). Each stage was characterized by certain changes in the life of the people, which is also reflected in the simultaneous development of their cities. The two primary urban institutions were the temple and the palace, which therefore must be seen in the context of the urban development in which they were based. Both began as autonomous units, but gradually the palace increased in importance and eroded the power of the temple.

Throughout the 3rd millennium B.C., cities and city-states came to comprise the basic unit of Mesopotamian polity and society. Literary sources say Sumer was organized on the basis of 15 to 20 small city-states, each politically autonomous, but all economically interdependent. Archaeological surveys show till about 2370 B.C., rural population was attracted to the urban centers. However, this situation underwent a change with the emergence of the Akkadians, as the power base shifted northwards and the Sumerian city-states declined in relative importance. There was a gradual decline in urban population, and a simultaneous increase in the population of rural areas as compared to earlier periods. For instance, while in the Early Dynastic Period III 10% of the total settlement area was non-urban (10 hectares or less), this increased to 18% by the Akkadian Period. At the same time, urban settlements (40 hectares or more) decreased from 78% to 63%. This development was halted when the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur attempted to re-unify the South. Some scholars have referred to this as the 'Sumerian Renaissance'.

Scholars like Robert M. C. Adams argue that since their origin, cities were important mainly due to economic reasons. They may have been symbolically described as the abode of deities, but in reality, they were primarily market centers. Thus city-states represented the mode of outflow and inflow of resources. In the '*Heartland of Cities*', Adams observed the mechanism for the flow of resources from the cities to the rural areas and vice versa. There was a flow of grains, domesticated animals, agricultural products, dried fish, *corvee* labour, spun wool, woven cloth, hides, reed mats etc. from rural areas in exchange for the reciprocal flow of stones, luxury goods (to validate the status of regional local elites), copper, tools and weapons, vessels (both for utilitarian as well as conspicuous consumption) etc. This exchange was dominated first by the temples, and later, from the Early Dynastic Period onwards, by the palaces.

Cities also emerged as political centers from the Early Dynastic Period II onwards, when inter-city and inter-community conflicts became common. The cities and secluded areas within them like *temenos* (sacred place where the temple and *ziggurats* were located) came to offer both security and political refuge. Their importance further increased as ritual activities came to be linked to them. This was crucial for urban development.

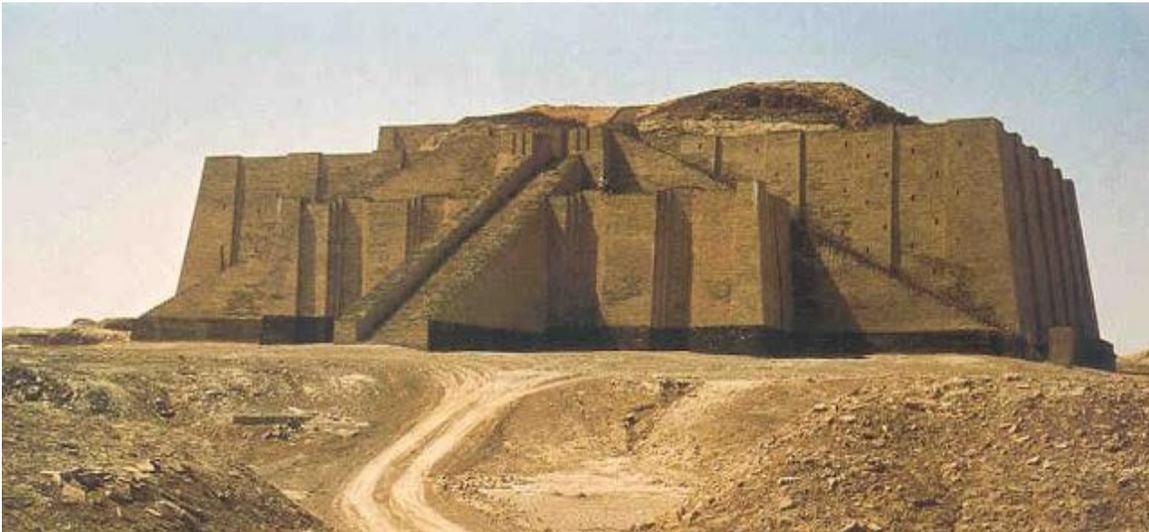
Temples:

Temples played an important role in the formative phase of Sumerian civilization. Shrines had formed an important part of Mesopotamian society since the Ubaid Period onwards, when cereal agriculture was becoming important. Small shrines were built on raised platforms of clay or imported stone, with a flight of steps leading to the entrance; and consisted of a square room (*cella*) with an altar in the center for the supreme deity, surrounded by small rooms projecting forward at the corners, for the lesser deities. The exterior was decorated with elaborate projections and recesses, a characteristic of all later Sumerian sacred buildings.

By the Uruk Phase, these grew into massive temple complexes that symbolized the Mesopotamian cities. They came to be associated with specific gods and goddesses and were strikingly decorated with cones, clay nails etc., e.g. 'Pillar Temple' at Warka. Gradually, each city came to have its own specific patron god. For example, Uruk was dedicated to the sky-god *Anu* and his consort *Inanna*; and Ur to the moon-god *Nanna*. But the temple of Nippur became the basis of the religious and ritual activities central to Sumerian religion, even though the city was never politically important. Thus while the city-states remained politically divided, there was a sense of unity among them in terms of culture and religion from the Uruk Period onwards. In this context, the temple emerged as an important institution and the centre of the social, economic and political life of the city, which developed around it.

The importance of temples was primarily due to the fact that the worship of the deities related to fertility came to be seen as necessary for successful and abundant agriculture. Almost all early ritual activities conducted by the temple were related to cultivation. This is symbolically represented on some seals where the priests (*en*) were depicted as holding the plough at the time of the beginning of the agricultural season. Similarly, ritual activities connected with harvesting were also related to the temple. Later, the *en* even undertook the ritualistic opening of canals and embankments for irrigation. Thus religion was clearly seen as the basis of prosperous agriculture in economy. As a consequence, the temple became powerful and the *en* came to be regarded as the intervening human agency between the people and the gods.

From the Early Dynastic Period onwards, temples in the form of *ziggurats* emerged in almost every city-state and became important. By the time of the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur, construction of the *ziggurat* was seen as an important duty to be performed by every ruler (*lugal*). The term itself is derived from an Akkadian term of reference, '*ziggurate*', meaning 'summit' or 'mountain-top', which came from '*ziquaru*', meaning 'high'. Scholars have offered various interpretations of the meaning of this term and its application in Mesopotamia. Some argue that these temples were given shape as stepped towers due to the fact that the Early Sumerians came from Elam where the mountains had been significant. Others see the origin of the *ziggurats* as a colossal staircase, a half-way between heaven and earth, where men and the gods could meet on certain occasions. They extended to the gods a permanent invitation to descend on Earth, while simultaneously expressed man's desire to rise above his miserable condition and come into closer contact with divinity.



Sumerian Architecture Ziggurat

<http://architecturediagramsgalleries.blogspot.in/2013/08/sumerian-architecture-ziggurat.html>

There is unanimity of opinion that in time, the *ziggurats* became important centers of religion as well as economy and craft production. They were constructed according to a regular tripartite plan, essentially as artificial mountains of sun-baked brick, built with outside staircases that tapered towards a shrine at the top. They later came surrounded by courtyards, workshops, warehouses and granaries. Their construction was very time-consuming and involved the use of organized skilled labour on an extensive scale. Further, it pre-supposes a central supervisory authority with access to a large amount of resources. Its administration was hierarchical, from the *en*

downwards to the slaves (*geme*). Thus temples can be seen as evidence of the beginnings of social stratification.

Once the *ziggurats* became established in every city-state, their range of economic activities widened – temples now became centers of not just reciprocal ties but production as well. They emerged as institutional centers for control over production, accumulation and distribution of resources. This was, however, not done by force but by instilling the fear of the gods among the people. There is reference to *ziggurats* as centers of intense manufacturing activities such as carpentry, leather-making, textile-manufacturing etc. Trade was controlled by the temple, though some private trade did exist. Since they were sacred places, they were considered safe enough to store wealth and also acted as banks. It was also a center for organizational and technological innovation. The temple's need to record the extensive economic transactions also encouraged the development of writing, as is seen from the earliest samples that are of ration lists and temple accounts with conventional numerals.

The central importance of the temple and the *ziggurats* has led scholars like Leonard Woolley to characterize the Mesopotamian economy as a 'theocracy'. However this understanding is now seen as an oversimplification. Andrew Sherratt points out that the role of temples and *ziggurats* cannot be seen as completely autonomous or monopolistic. Postgate has shown that though re-distribution was undertaken by the *ziggurats*, several clay tablets speak of other kinds of reciprocity ties that still continued between the villages and the urban centers without the *ziggurats'* intervention, for instance, between merchants. Yet temples were important as they represented the communal identity of each city. Moreover, the functions performed by them were more crucial for the growth of economy, urbanization and social stratification than the exploitative strategies adopted later by the palaces.

By the Early Dynastic Period II, the autonomy of the temples started to decline. The last stage in the development of complex urban society came when the palace gradually replaced the temples in importance and took over the functions carried out by them, intensifying the trends of urban development and increasing social complexity. The state, once dominated by the palace, became manipulative and coercive. It came to override the importance of kin-based organization by the

application of order through force. Thus coercion and force were adopted by the palace to establish itself vis-à-vis the temple and gain a stronghold in Mesopotamia from 3000 to 2000 B.C.

Initially the priest himself was the ruler in most cases, with the palace built as a part of the temple complex. He got power and authority from his control over the administration of the temples as well as their monopoly over the knowledge of writing, astronomy and science. Later, as the palace grew in importance, it was clearly demarcated from the rest of the city. Postgate believes that this was also because space was limited and thus the palace had to be built a little further away from the temple or the old city. It moved out of the temple complex and a huge, imposing structure was built for the comfort and luxury of the king and the royal family. Temple life was replicated inside the palace. It had a throne room (similar to the sanctum in the temple), i.e., a *knave* with a central chamber, where the king sat. It opened into smaller courts for the nobles.

The Sumerian texts inform us of the gradual rise of individuals in the political history of this period. The earliest public institutions were, however, community-based. T. Jacobsen has argued the earliest political institution was an assembly of adult male citizens. The beginning of such an assembly can perhaps be traced back to the Jamdat Nasr Period, when it performed the essential task of appointing the *en* and an individual in charge of administration and war and peace, who was later known as the *lugal*. However, according to Jacobsen, this division must have come under threat as wars became endemic and constant after 2750 B.C., due to which the *lugal* got more importance than the *en*. There are textual references as well to the increasing eminence of the *lugal*. With this, the army came to be reorganized on a professional basis, instead of the earlier band of mercenaries and raiders. This too increased the power of the palace.

A document called the 'Sumerian King List' dated to the 3rd millennium B.C. informs us that the different city-states came to be headed by *lugals*, who governed the city on behalf of the gods. Further, it describes the course of the political changes in the various Sumerian city-states and the beginning of monarchical tradition and a dynastic government. Monarchy is referred to as "kingship being lowered from heaven, first in Eridu after the floods". Earlier this document was considered as fool-

proof evidence by scholars. Now however, it is believed to be a fictional document which, though important, perhaps dramatized the events it describes to highlight the importance of kingship. It does, nevertheless, inform us of the tensions between the different *lugals* and city-states. This suggests that monarchy must have been in a period of political tension and chaos. There was, thus, no smooth transfer of power from the temple to the palace.

The Sumerian texts inform us of 3 kinds of rulers that existed in Mesopotamian society. The first were the *en* (priests) and *entum* (priestesses). The second were *ensi*, who were mainly administrators, especially of the temple land. The most important, however, was the *lugal* or the king, who from the Early Dynastic Period II onwards came to dominate over the priests and the *ensi*. Despite this, the *en* continued to perform important rituals for the *ziggurats* and the palaces, even though they lost their political importance.

An important reason for this was the increase in wars from 2750 B.C. onwards. Texts inform us of tensions between the city-states of Lagash and Umma in this period. At the end of Early Dynastic Period II, a smaller city-state Kish seemed to have taken over Sumer militarily. This inter-regional tension laid the basis for the rise in the power and importance of the *lugal*, since the temple management was only for the appeasement of the gods rather than defense in wars.

Childe and Adams have argued that social stratification grew as a result of the intervention of the *lugals* and their rise to power, as wars led to forcible collection of booty and loot, and tributes and taxes from political subordinates, emphasizing centralization of authority. Other scholars have pointed out that the *lugals* came to distribute the booty differently, further intensifying stratification. This had not been done by the temples earlier, when integrated inter-city connections formed the basis of their importance. But once wars became frequent, destruction of cities by the *lugal* became essential to show one's superior status.

With regard to the economy, two distinct closed economies developed – under the palace and the temple – and an unsaid race began for dominance and control over economic resources. The palace initially took over the functions performed earlier by the temples. Eventually, however, it came to provide a different direction to

production and distribution. There was a qualitative change in both agriculture and craft-production, as kin-based communities lost their importance as well as their control over land to the palace. Hereditary nobility came to be replaced by a new kind of land nobility by the Akkadian Period, as the palace distributed land mainly to the warlords and the bureaucrats. This new nobility owed its importance to its loyalty to the palace. The shift in craft-production was due to the different demands of the palaces, as compared to the temples. Production was not just for exchange. The palaces, more than ritualistic items, needed weapons and elaborate craft goods for conspicuous consumption.

The period of Akkadian hegemony, which began around 2350 B.C. with the coming of Sargon, represented a different stage in centralized rule. In this phase, the whole region gradually came under the control of Akkad (Northern Mesopotamia) and city-states as independent sovereign political units lost their importance. Evidence for this comes from the signs that there was a regular destruction of the ramparts and boundary walls of the cities. Thus empire formation and imperial expansion can be traced back to Akkadian rule, though it was not yet a full-fledged cohesive empire but merely represented military expansion. This does not imply that the Sumerian city-states had not been aggressive earlier.

However, before 2300 B.C., subordination had been more economic than military, as seen from the Akkadian invasions of Syria, Anatolia and Persia. The Syrian trade centre, Ebla, which was important for the supply of raw materials and lay in the route from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia, now, became a part of Mesopotamia, not just its dependency or colony. In the social and economic fields, the Akkadian preference for private property and the constitution of large royal estates eroded the domain and power of the temples, at least in Sumer.

The Akkadians were disturbed by the Gutian invasion from the Zagros Mountains. Other such frequent tribal invasions led to the end of Akkadian hegemony. Around 2150 B.C., the Sumerian city-states began to increase again in importance, united, at least culturally, under the leadership of the city of Ur, leading to the establishment of the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur, which lasted till 2000 B.C., until the coming of Semitic newcomers from the west, the Amorites. They succeeded in establishing a dynasty in Babylon, the most distinguished member of which was Hammurabi, the sixth

monarch. By this time, the palace had finally emerged supreme and the temple had gradually reconciled to its dominance and became a beneficiary subservient to the palace, increasingly dependent on it for the sharing or donating of war booty; and for its maintenance and upkeep.

Questions:

- What were the geographical features of Ancient Mesopotamia?
- Briefly explain the main differences in the climate of northern and southern Mesopotamia?
- What were the main features of the economy of Mesopotamia?
- What role did temple play in the Mesopotamian society?
- Were palaces could be seen as the main centers of power?

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