

POLITICS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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1. Introduction

From the sixth millennium to the sixth century BC, more diplomats, bureaucrats, judges, politicians and businessmen than autocrats, priests and soldiers lived in Egypt and Mesopotamia, as democratic procedures and values existed long before true democratic regimes were invented. However, tribal or rural origins of the egalitarian communities did not favor the founding of a hierarchical administration. Checks and balances invented to prevent heads of lineages and villages from abusing collective resources eventually prevented them from becoming heads of states. This scenario was more frequent than the dictatorships supposedly achieved by a handful of prominent figures such as famous Pharaohs and Babylonian kings, whose images were forged in the religious literature to contrast with democratic prophets. Oriental states suffered from their weakness, not from excessive power, although they had their lot of red tape and public complaints.

According to numerous literary and archeological sources, the real seat of power was the bureaucratic elite. Centuries before kings achieved a divine status, their predecessors were tribal or local chiefs supported by a Council of Elders. Guilds also played a role—corporations of sailors, accountants, astronomers in Egypt; haruspices, traders and raiders in Mesopotamia, all well organized and governed by powerful boards. The political *cursus honorum* merely mimicked a professional career: competitive examinations to become a scribe copied the admission rules to a guild. Both listed the skills required to become an initiate member of the corporation (such as literacy, knowledge of professional secrets, devotion to an organized hierarchy), and promised benefits to the happy few (distribution of advantages and duties in the most acceptable way, a warranted right to a fair trial).

As bureaucratic elites were vying for power, they imposed similar requirements on such

positions as "scribes", "priests", or "licensed merchants", and they invented means to favor leadership while limiting authority. However, they paid more attention to defining a *substantive* ideal of justice which would benefit all competitors than to its *procedural* implementation which could be advantageous to some of them. This is why the "democracies" of their time were regimes in which routinized democratic institutions and norms were less important than repeated public commitments to the rule of fairness. Elites shared the same ideology of reciprocity, solidarity and mutual advantage. These common goals were turned into constitutional and civil law. They inspired deliberative, judging and voting procedures. They constrained government, at least when rulers were not able to impose their own ideology—which they often tried to do.

Politics, then, started with a definition of community rights, collective goals, and civic behavior—embedded in what would nowadays be called a "public culture". Promoting this public culture was the purpose of ruling, and a duty of every civil servant. Because no one could rule alone, and due to the necessary coordination between rulers and public agents, the arts of deliberating, voting, and judging were highly praised.

2. Ruling and Abiding by the Rules

What were then the most salient values of this public culture? Were they the same everywhere? Were governments constrained by these values? Although it is not easy to answer such questions, some general assessments can be made. First, during the process of state-building an "authoritarian" public ideology competed with previous egalitarian cultures, which were never suppressed. Second, in the whole region, throughout the whole period, there were shared beliefs in good governance, and a common knowledge of the art of ruling.

2.1 Early Components of a Public Culture

How did people of these remote times view the world in which they lived? In their minds, the cosmos was an expanding universe—all the qualities of a perfect world existing before the "big bang" (the very moment when God becomes conscious of His creative power, bursts out of the primeval ocean, and names His creatures). At each stage of this expansion, any individual act could either help or hamper these dynamics. Each person should therefore contribute with great care to the achievement of a cosmic equilibrium. To this purpose, he or she could try hard to maintain a balanced relationship with others, and give them their due share of collective resources. Generosity, tolerance, and solidarity were at the root of politics because a consistent society was the very basis of a harmonious universe.

Although this culture was not so far from the Confucianist creed destined to appear centuries later in China, a major difference is worth noting. Ancient Near Eastern political systems were also determined by a tremendous impulse toward "civilization"—the process of civilizing "barbarians" or "non-believers" and settling "bedouins" in cities. Contrary to Far Eastern beliefs, Near East harmony was not the static reflection of a pyramid of notables ruling their public life according to family values, but the dynamic result of an expanding body of knowledge, aesthetic skills, and civic virtues. Since the whole universe was expanding, its political replica should inflate at the same

rate. The appropriate behavior was consequently a mix of wisdom and strength—as exemplified in Egypt by the opposition of Osiris and Seth—even when it led political winners or military conquerors to refrain from using all the powers invested in their success.

The wild hero hidden in the heart of every ruler was a prominent actor in politics, as exemplified by the Gilgamesh epic. But he had to be tamed. This is why councillors, representatives, spokespersons, diplomats, etc. became so important in the political systems of the area. Each ruler, not to say each family head, should ask for advice before making any decision. These millenary customs helped leaders to limit their own power, to listen to critics, and to achieve self-restraint. Moreover, local assemblies could veto royal decisions, a not so infrequent episode which prevented rulers from imposing their own ideas on the people. There are indications that assemblies even came first in some cities (especially in northern Syria), which were ruled collectively.

At the very least, power was shared between the King's cabinet and the assembly. Egyptians even duplicated competence at each level of decision: there were two vizirs, two general accountants, two major officers (in charge of the Army and the National Guard—the latter wisely integrating former militiamen after periods of turmoil), two or more teams of workers on construction sites, or priests in temples. Circulating assignments and positions, duplicating charges, sharing governmental power with ambitious challengers, dividing wealth and rights to the throne between incumbents—all these means were used at least from the beginning of the second millennium BC.

Notwithstanding the differences between regions, those who were ruled shared a common defiance towards rulers. This was grounded in lively folk cultures conveying egalitarian trends. Whatever the history or pseudo-history of state and nation-building their scribes told them, people living in tribes, villages and cities accepted to be ruled by the state provided their "founding charts" were incorporated into law. To bedouins, peasants, and citizens, tacit rules and formal guarantees obtained during a long history of independence had to be respected in all circumstances. To kings and courtiers, constitutions were inscribed in the "natural" order and did not depend on humans. Both at the bottom and at the top of the social ladder, therefore, consensus on good governance existed. This agreement was so strong that constitutions were quickly restored after being suppressed during invasions or rebellions.

Generations of pupils learned grammar copying legal and historical texts. Among these founding documents, the "pyramid texts" of archaic Egypt, the "constitution of Sneferu" from the Old Kingdom, "Amenemhat's will" from the New Kingdom, "Gilgamesh and Agga" in Sumer, and "Esarhaddon's Treaty" in Assyria were the most celebrated. Usually presented as a former ruler's legacy, they not only detailed his or her good deeds as examples of appropriate behavior, they also contained lists of duties, the division of assignments between elders and rulers, local representatives and ministers—not to speak of temple and palace, civilians and the military.

They organized a cascade of courts, representative councils, accounting and auditing offices, and defense districts—most of them based on remote tribal distinctions (such as Egyptian nomes) or former glory (such as Mesopotamian cities which benefited from

fiscal and military exemptions: Babylon, Nippur, Sippar, Borsippa, etc.). Problems raised by their implementation are discussed in official correspondence (e.g. King Shamsi-Adad from Assur to his son, ruler of Mari), and speeches from the throne (e.g. "the reception of Rekhmire," a new vizir of Tuthmosis III).

These constitutional prescriptions were so compelling that in case of emergency, rules had to be respected to test a war champion's democratic goodwill before he could be appointed as chief of staff endowed with supreme powers. Special procedures were legally required to pass on provisional "dictatorship", so that many real dictators took great care to respect established norms. This is how Sesostris, Hatshepsut, Tuthmosis III, and Horemheb in Egypt pretended to be called by phantoms claiming revenge, or priests looking for a savior).

Those who were temporarily vested with authority (Adapa, Marduk, and Erra) had to be tested by their peers to check their goodwill before gaining access to secret files and terrible weapons—such as God's eye and its deadly radiations. When they relinquished power to the opposition or successors, they signed pacts of non-aggression with them to obtain juridical immunities and political guarantees for their partisans (e.g. "Zakutu's treaty" in favor of Assurbanipal against his elder brother Shamash-shum-ukin). International agreements (such as the famous "Qadesh Treaty" between Egyptians and Hittites) achieved the same goal, going into great detail about legitimate opponents versus ordinary criminals, while protecting allies against exiled conspirators. All these cautious regulations made room for peaceful transitions supported from abroad.

2.2 Good Governance and the Art of Ruling

If this was not enough to suppress authoritarian temptations, scribes would write myths, legends, and "history" to remind kings of good governance, and press them to show their weakness and not only their strength. According to these norms, rulers were periodically exposed to the pain and mistakes striking ordinary human beings. Pharaohs had to display their athletic skills in stadiums during their Jubilees; Sumerian heroes toured the world to find out eventually that death was their fate; Assyrian Emperors or Babylonian Kings were publicly slapped in the face by a priest on New Year's day while kneeling before him in front of a gathering of the entire people attending the ceremony. To perform their duties, Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings left their luxury garments to wear white robes or short skirts.

The great Rameses II himself made his misfortune at Qadesh known everywhere in the Nile Valley, telling the story of being abandoned on the battlefield by his closest officers while he was waging his first war against the Hittites. What the Greeks called *hubris* was prohibited as an evil condemned everywhere in the ancient world, where it was feared as a source of curses. The "curse of Naram Sin" and the "sin of Esarhaddon" are well documented in Mesopotamian literature. Dynasties fell like the Tower of Babel, by excessive enthusiasm. Characters nurturing too much pride or ambition were punished by gods because they were suspected of competing with them; their cities were destroyed and burned, their statues hammered and dismembered, their names wiped out of their fellow citizens' memories.

The lesson was clear: nobody should accumulate excessive power or fortune. Those who became wealthy had to conceal their money, or redistribute it to the less fortunate. When winning a war, the victor should confer over the vanquished not only citizenship but also every right attached to this privileged status. To burn, behead, or crucify prisoners was "guilty" behavior. The handful of kings who were not deterred by this rule and who displayed cruelty against the defeated caused distaste among their own biographers. When tested by powerful forces—and even by God or gods, the weighing of the souls being a critical chapter of the Egyptian "Book of the Dead", while "the poor man" tales of Mesopotamia predated the Biblical story of Job—a person should keep faith in his or her good deeds. The promise of being cleared in the netherworld was a sufficient incentive to behave well upon earth—giving, sharing, caring, and listening to those who complained.

It is no surprise that "restoration edicts" enacted by new kings were frequent in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. They restored the reciprocity cycle, each individual being theoretically indebted to every other, even if such decrees limited their own riches and sharing political power. This was not an economic investment, only a political one; to stay in power, one had to be cooperative and open-minded.

Finally, power was both creative and destructive. One had to be careful in handling its tools and symbols—seals, fans, scepters, crowns, statues of Gods acting as sources of X-rays (Egypt) or lightning conductors (Mesopotamia). Provided by the cosmos, energy was ambiguous and had to be channeled by authorized persons. Its sources were as dangerous as our nuclear reactors: only experienced people could be exposed to its radioactivity. "Experienced" was an attribute deserved by Elders, older persons, and experts selected through a complicated initiation ritual. Because so much was at stake, and because it was so perilous for those who had to "refill" power and make daily use of it, as well as to those towards whom it was directed, politics was quickly understood as a full-time occupation focused on the quest of the *juste milieu* through a long deliberative process.

Of course, what politicians (and courtiers) did was legitimize the polity (and the king), not express the views of their people. Nevertheless, since their constituency was the entire country, they fought not against earthly corruption but against disruption of the cosmic order. They no longer serviced private interests but rather a modern conception of the "common good". They behaved like experts devoted to an agreement, not like party supporters split by deep social and ideological cleavages. They thus anticipated modern bureaucratic systems where no public measure is taken without consulting political advisors.

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