

SARGON THE GREAT OF AKKAD:
THE FIRST EMPIRE BUILDER OF MESOPOTAMIA

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Sargon the Great (reigned c. 2334-2279 BC) was ruler of Mesopotamia near the end of the Early Bronze Age. He was a powerful and innovative warrior who brutally subdued his opponents and established a precedent for imperialism in Mesopotamia.¹ Ruling from the archaeologically lost city of Akkad, perhaps near modern Baghdad, he established what might have been the world's first empire. Sargon expanded his influence beyond Akkad and the neighboring cities to build an empire that encompassed much of the Fertile Crescent at a time when most other rulers controlled only individual city-states, foreshadowing later conquerors such as Hammurabi, Tiglath-Pileser, and Nebuchadnezzar. Unfortunately, the historical Sargon and the legendary Sargon are inseparably blurred due to the lack of historical sources and the aggrandizement of various traditional accounts. As a result, historians have only a vague historical image of Sargon, a man whose enormous accomplishments arguably merit the numerous legends and traditions about him. Sargon was a powerful warrior and the first great empire builder of Mesopotamia.

Historians know little, if anything, about Sargon's life before his ascendancy to the throne. This is due in part to the inadequacy of surviving information. Extant inscriptions concerning him lack the details necessary to construct an accurate history of his life.² There are, however, numerous legends about Sargon, such as various "romances." Like the Alexander romances written in the centuries following Alexander the Great's conquests, the stories about Sargon often cloud our understanding of him rather than improve it. On the other hand, the Sargon romances likely contain some snippets of historical texts, creating a body of historical

¹ For information concerning the dates of Sargon's reign, see William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 BC: Holy Warriors at the Dawn of History* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 73. The dates used by Hamblin refer to the "low" chronology described in Paolo Matthiae, "Tell Mardikh: Ancient Ebla," *American Journal of Archaeology* 82, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 542, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/504642> (accessed October 21, 2014).

² Jerrold S. Cooper and Wolfgang Heimpel, "The Sumerian Sargon Legend," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 1 (January-March 1983): 68, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/601860> (accessed October 21, 2014).

fiction interwoven with historical fact, providing historians with the only information we have about certain aspects of Sargon's life.³

The "Legend of Sargon," likely written long after Sargon's death, provides a great example of a work of historical fiction that may contain some historical fact. It provides some rare clues about Sargon's early life, or at least the life Sargon wanted his scribes to portray. In James B. Pritchard's 1958 translation of the legend, Sargon's mother was a "changeling," and he "knew not" his father. Sargon's mother bore him in secret in the city of Azupiranu, placed him in a basket, and sent him floating down the Euphrates. A "drawer of water" named Akki rescued him and raised him. Sargon became a gardener for Akki. The goddess Ishtar fell in love with Sargon and helped him become king and ruler over various people and places. Sargon's legend ends with a prayer that his successor would travel, conquer, and rule just as he had done.⁴

If the Sargon legend contains any historical truth, it certainly leaves a great deal of room for scholarly debate. Clearly, there is an obvious similarity between Sargon's birth legend and the biblical story of Moses in Exodus 2:1-10. However, in the Sargon legend, the term "changeling" is puzzling. Other translations use terms such as "princess," "vestal," or "high priestess," more closely paralleling the Moses account.⁵ The father that Sargon "knows not" may represent a divinity, such as in the birth narratives of the Greek hero Perseus, Rome's founders Romulus and Remus (who also floated in a basket at birth), the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), and Jesus of Nazareth. Another

³ W. F. Albright, "A Babylonian Geographical Treatise on Sargon of Akkad's Empire," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 45 (1925): 242, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/593503> (accessed October 21, 2014).

⁴ James B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East, Volume I: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 85-86.

⁵ For a discussion of these translations, including their citations, see Michael P. Carroll, "A Structuralist Exercise: The Problem of Moses' Name," *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 4 (November 1985): 776, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644184> (accessed October 21, 2014).

interpretation of the father Sargon “knows not” points to an illegitimate birth, negating a legitimate claim to the throne. Thus, Sargon may have been a usurper. A fragment of a Sumerian text contradicts the Sargon legend by naming his father, a gardener named La’ibum.⁶ Akki was a gardener, so there may be some link between La’ibum and Akki, but the available evidence is inconclusive. Certainly, as the scholarly debate over Sargon’s parents indicates, there is little certainty concerning Sargon’s early years.

A controversial theory about Sargon’s origins, presented by Mrs. Sydney (Ethel) Bristow, linked Sargon and the biblical Cain, son of Adam and Eve. In an attempt to refute the mythologization of the Bible’s story of creation by modern scholars, Bristowe wrote *Sargon the Magnificent*. According to her theory, people known as pre-Adamites lived on the earth before Adam and Eve.⁷ This is the reason that Cain, who killed his brother Abel, feared he would be killed by “anyone who finds him” if he had to leave Eden as a punishment for his sin.⁸ The Land of Nod to which Cain journeyed may have been Akkad, the region now associated with Sargon’s empire. The Bible states that Cain was a tiller of the ground, just as the Sargon legend states that Sargon was a gardener for Akki. Bristow’s theory explains Sargon’s/Cain’s conquests of and interactions with people from Mesopotamia to Egypt and from Crete to China.⁹ Bristowe’s theory, however, appears to have many problems, including the timing of Cain’s/Sargon’s life in relation to the biblical flood and other historical events in and out of the Bible. In addition, her ethnocentric views, namely her exclusion of the “black race” from the line of the Adamites, raise

⁶ Cooper and Heimpel, 69.

⁷ Mrs. Sydney (Ethel) Bristowe, *Sargon the Magnificent* (London: The Covenant Publishing Co., Ltd., 1927), 16.

⁸ Gen. 4:13-16, NIV.

⁹ Bristowe, 31.

a great deal of suspicion about the entire theory. Nevertheless, the theory provides an interesting perspective of Sargon's life and exemplifies the enduring interest in his great accomplishments.

A less controversial theory presented by J. Dyneley Prince and Yigal Levin equates Sargon with the biblical Nimrod, possible builder of the Tower of Babel.¹⁰ The Bible states about Nimrod, "Cush was the father of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; that is why it is said, 'Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord.' The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar."¹¹ The mention of Nimrod's hunting prowess fits the militarism of Sargon. In addition, the mention of Akkad as one of Nimrod's "first centers" is certainly an important clue, since Akkad served as the capital of Sargon's empire. Another clue possibly linking Sargon with Nimrod is the mention that Cush was the "father of Nimrod." Cush may have been the biblical name for the city of Kish, where Sargon first took power.¹² While this theory is perhaps more credible than Bristowe's, it lacks conclusive historical verification. Thus, a connection between any biblical figure and Sargon remains elusive.

Sargon's name in Akkadian, Sarrukinu (also Sharrukin or Šarru-kīnu), is often translated as "legitimate king" or "true king."¹³ His true name is unknown, opening the door for the Cain and Nimrod theories. The title "legitimate king" may have been used as a cover for the illegitimacy of his birth as described in the Sargon legend, and his probable usurpation of the throne. Evidence for this may be found in the Sumerian King List, which describes Sargon's

¹⁰ J. Dyneley Prince, "Note on Akkad," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 25, no. 1 (1906): 55, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3260247> (accessed October 21, 2014).

¹¹ Gen. 10:8-10.

¹² Yigal Levin, "Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad," *Vetus Testamentum* 52, no. 3 (July 2002): 361, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1585058> (accessed October 21, 2014).

¹³ Hamblin, 73.

father as a gardener and identifies Sargon as cupbearer to king Ur-Zababa of Kish.¹⁴ If true, Sargon may not have had a legitimate claim to the throne, despite his name. In fact, he may only have been a mere governor of Akkad under Ur-Zababa.¹⁵ According to Hamblin, Lugalzagesi of Uruk's power grew steadily at this time, perhaps weakening Ur-Zababa. This may have given Sargon the opportunity to overthrow Ur-Zababa to take the throne of Kish. As "King of Kish," a prestigious title in Sumer both politically and religiously, Sargon set his sights on Lugalzagesi of Uruk. Sargon conquered Uruk and humiliated the defeated Lugalzagesi by placing him in a "neck stock."¹⁶ Adding further insult to injury, Sargon may have violated Lugalzagesi's wife after the conquest, as indicated in a text known as *The Rise of Sargon*.¹⁷ The rise of the "legitimate king" Sharrukin/Sargon was probably anything but a legitimate affair.

Sargon's treatment of Lugalzagesi, and his perhaps his wife, bears witness to one of the underlying themes of Sargonic traditions, brutality. Sargon's conquests often ended with the destruction of city walls, often the destruction of the cities themselves, and heaps of dead bodies. The Akkadian way of war was to strike hard and show no mercy. This may have derived in part from the religious belief that the king ruled as directed by the gods. Sargon pleased Ishtar, goddess of love and war and the principal deity of Akkad, through violent conquest. Enlil, god of storms and the chief god of Mesopotamia in Sargon's time, commanded that no mercy be shown to the vanquished.¹⁸ According to accounts of his conquests, it appears that Sargon took this religious precept to heart.

¹⁴ J. A. Black et al., "The Sumerian King List," *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (Oxford, 1998), <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr211.htm> (accessed November 2, 2014).

¹⁵ Cooper and Heimpel, 69. See also Hamblin, 73.

¹⁶ Hamblin, 74.

¹⁷ Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "Heroes of Akkad," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 1 (January-March 1983): 328, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/601890> (accessed October 21, 2014).

¹⁸ Hamblin, 99.

Having vanquished his rivals Ur-Zababa and Lugalzagesi, Sargon chose a course of action unique for his time. Rather than exerting influence over his small region as other Mesopotamian kings had traditionally done, he expanded his influence by conquering cities from the Mediterranean Sea in the northwest to the Persian Gulf in the southeast. In so doing, he created the largest empire in recorded history to that point. He campaigned far to the east in Elam (western Iran) and in the north at Subartu (northern Tigris valley), where he “defeated them and cast [their dead bodies] in heaps.”¹⁹ He also campaigned in Syria to the northwest and perhaps as far north as Anatolia. Although verifiable archaeological evidence is lacking, legend indicates that Sargon may have sailed from the shores of the Mediterranean to conquer the island of Cyprus.²⁰ His troops may also have sailed to the east as far as the Indus Valley, a place known as Meluhha, according to archaeological evidence at Kish and Ur dated by dendrochronology and radiocarbon analysis.²¹ Sargon’s appetite for conquest and ambition were nearly boundless.

With his conquests went his policy of brutality. While this may have pleased Ishtar and Enlil, it did not please Sargon’s subjects, who often rose in revolt. In response, he tore down the walls of rebellious cities and executed disobedient city leaders. In a way, Sargon’s brutality had a cyclical effect. The more he brutalized the vanquished, the more they revolted, leading to more brutality. His methods differed greatly from those of Cyrus of Persia and Alexander the Great, who allowed conquered people to keep their customs and traditions in an attempt to avoid rebellion. While further study is needed, it may be possible that Sargon’s illegitimate birth and/or usurpation of the throne created a climate of rebellion from the very beginning of his reign. If so,

¹⁹ Ibid., 75.

²⁰ Leonard Woolley, “Syria as a Link Between East and West,” *Man* 46 (May-June 1946): 65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2792393> (accessed October 21, 2014).

²¹ Robert H. Brunswig, Jr., “Prospective Tree-Ring Calibration of the Indus Civilisation Radiocarbon Chronology,” *Man, New Series* 8, no. 4 (December 1973): 550, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2800739> (accessed October 21, 2014).

the brutality he often showed to conquered people may have been a kneejerk response that grew into a standard policy. Alexander faced rebellion as he took the throne following his father Philip's murder, however numerous examples from his conquests show that he often showed mercy to the vanquished, unlike Sargon.

Sargon may have had the world's first professional standing army to protect him from his rebellious subjects. In his royal court, "5400 men daily [ate] in the presence of Sargon."²² Many of these men were likely priests, scribes, and courtiers of various types; however, the large number of men indicates that he probably had a large personal guard or a standing army. Quelling rebellion after rebellion and campaigning across Mesopotamia and beyond would certainly have produced a cadre of seasoned veterans, so it is not difficult to believe that he had a professional army. What is rather difficult to believe is how he could have fed 5400 men in his court daily. Supplying a professional army would have posed a constant problem. Hamblin suggests that this may have led to Sargon's army becoming "predatory." The army may have needed to be in a nearly constant state of war to gather plunder to support itself.²³ After all, soldiers in Sargon's army would not have been able to tend their farms near Akkad while simultaneously conquering lands as far away as the Indus Valley. Like a drug addict needing the next fix to feel "normal," Sargon's army may have needed to conquer additional territory to support itself. His successes led to the need for more success. This may account for the reason why Sargon expanded his influence over an unprecedentedly large geographical area to form the world's first empire.

Sargon's army was well organized, well armed, and devastating. As king, Sargon would have had ultimate control over his military forces. However, especially if his army was a

²² Ibid., 95.

²³ Ibid., 96.

professional standing force, he likely had a general of the army or field marshal under him to assist in directing day-to-day operations. Subordinate generals commanded large divisions, which were organized by clan. Governors or colonels provided supplies and additional soldiers. Captains commanded regiments or battalions of approximately 200 men, related either by familial groups or by social status. Lieutenants or overseers commanded smaller groupings, perhaps equivalent to modern platoons. A chief sea captain or admiral commanded the navy, and a captain commanded each ship.²⁴ Compared to other armies and navies of the time, Sargon's must have seemed overwhelmingly powerful and well organized. It seems very likely that many cities would have simply surrendered rather than suffer an attack by an army and navy of such magnitude.

Sargon's military likely utilized the wide array of Early Bronze Age weaponry, which was a mixture of stone-age weapons such as the mace, copper weapons such as the battle-ax, and bronze weapons such as bronze-tipped arrowheads. Most of his Sargon's soldiers probably wielded stone-age weapons due to their ease of production and low cost, especially since his army was quite large. Copper was rare, but an empire as wealthy as his probably procured supplies of copper to produce some copper weapons. Bronze weapons, superior to stone and copper weapons, would likely have been used very rarely because of the difficult production process required to make them. In fact, Sargon and his high-ranking officers may have been the only soldiers with such advanced weapons. Cylinder seals frequently show the mace as the primary weapon of choice, despite its rather primitive construction. Because the king and others in the upper social classes used cylinder seals, historians debate whether the frequent depiction of maces on cylinder seals represents real combat or a nostalgic, mythological context.²⁵ After

²⁴ Ibid., 95-98.

²⁵ Ibid., 88.

all, members of the Akkadian nobility could certainly have been wealthy enough to purchase metal axes and other metal weapons.

Akkadian art provides some important clues about the Sargon's arsenal. The two-handed long spear or pike was probably an important weapon based on its use in the "Stele of the Vultures" (Figure 1). Predating Sargon by at least a

century, the "Stele of the Vultures" shows soldiers using pikes in what appears to be a phalanx formation.²⁶ Sargon's

soldiers would likely have fought in such a formation,

devastating lesser-organized armies in the same way the

Spartans, Alexander the Great, and the Romans devastated

their enemies. The "Stele of the Vultures" also shows what

may be a war cart, the precursor of a chariot, likely pulled by a donkey or onager. It is unknown whether these war carts were actually used in battle or were instead used ceremonially in a post-



Figure 1. Fragment of the "Stele of the Vultures" of Eannatum of Lagash (c. 2450 BC). Hervé Lewandowski, 1995. The Louvre Museum, Paris. <http://www.louvre.fr/>



Figure 2. Close-up of the "Victory Stele" of Naram-Sin (c. 2250 BC). Franck Raux, 2009. The Louvre Museum, Paris. <http://www.louvre.fr/>

battle parade to signify the power of the king and his relation to the gods, who rode celestial chariots.²⁷ Also unknown is whether the Akkadians

used a straight self-bow or a composite bow. Naram-Sin, Sargon's most successful descendent, is depicted holding what appears to be a recurved

bow, perhaps a composite bow, in his "Victory Stele" (Figure 2).²⁸

Certainly, a recurved composite bow would have been much more

powerful than the self-bow, but it would have been very expensive to

produce. Scholars continue to debate whether such a powerful weapon

²⁶ Ibid., 55.

²⁷ Ibid., 141.

²⁸ Ibid., 87.

existed during Sargon's reign.²⁹ If it did exist in the Early Bronze Age, perhaps only for the king and his elite officers possessed the recurved composite bow.

No matter which weapons the army used, the purpose of warfare in Mesopotamia was the acquisition of booty. Sargon used the large assortment of weapons available to him to crush his enemies and plunder their possessions. Constant warfare and routine victory provided a steady stream of booty to fuel Sargon's ambitions and encourage his troops to continue fighting. In addition to bountiful plunder, Akkadian soldiers may also have received land in exchange for their military service. The clans from whom Sargon recruited his warriors cherished their land. Successful farming was a matter of life or death, so they built canals and dikes to irrigate their fields. Seasonal raids against neighboring city-states provided slaves for construction projects and to work the fields. These raids also provided luxury items to improve the quality of life in Akkad.

Sargon's extensive conquests no doubt provided a much greater amount of wealth than typical seasonal raids could provide. Sargon was probably extremely wealthy because of his conquests, and Akkad was probably an impressive capital. Similarly, Alexander the Great amassed amazing wealth from his conquests, allowing him to beautify Alexandria and Babylon. Alexander's vast wealth may have been one reason why he refused to accept the enormous sum of 10,000 talents from Darius in exchange for the release of Darius's family.³⁰ Alexander already had plenty of money and wanted to hold onto his very important captives. Furthermore, just as Alexander used his immense wealth to fund great projects such as the famous lighthouse of Alexandria, Sargon's wealth would have allowed him to fund colossal building projects as well. Often, grand temples were the focus of city beautification in the ancient world. Sargon's wealth

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of the scholarly debate regarding Akkadian use of the composite bow, see Hamblin, 89-94.

³⁰ Arrian *Anabasis* 2.25.1.

would have allowed him to build the largest temples in the region, perhaps supporting the historical link between Sargon and the biblical Nimrod, the possible builder of the Tower of Babel.

Sargon conquered the world, at least as he knew it. Keeping the empire together, however, was a substantial challenge. The threat of rebellion constantly loomed. When he died, his empire erupted in widespread revolt. His son Rimish spent a considerable portion of his reign quelling the revolts and maintaining the cohesiveness of the empire. He, like Sargon, fought in the front ranks like a fierce lion. Anything less would have been a sign of cowardice. Rimish, perhaps in response to these revolts and perhaps in an effort to continue his father's conquests, continued Sargon's policy of brutality. He cemented victory over a rebellious city by stripping the countryside of humans and animals, destroying the city walls, and laying waste to the entire area. After all, rebellion against the king was viewed as rebellion against the gods.³¹ When Rimish died, perhaps at the hands of his brother Manishtusu, widespread revolt once again erupted. Manishtusu, like Rimish, spent a great deal of his reign subduing rebellions throughout the empire. However, Manishtusu not only quelled the revolts, but also launched a naval offensive against lands as far away as the Indus Valley.³² The Akkadian Empire was far from finished.

Upon Manishtusu's death, his son Naram-Sin ascended to the throne. Seeing an opportunity for revolt during this time of transition, the empire rebelled dramatically. A coalition of cities including Ur, Uruk, Lagash, and Nippur joined forces against their oppressive Akkadian overlord. Like Rimish and Manishtusu, Naram-Sin spent a considerable amount of time and effort subduing the revolting cities. After regaining control of the empire, Naram-Sin took the

³¹ Hamblin, 79.

³² *Ibid.*, 80.

unusual step of proclaiming himself a god. Actually, according to his inscription, his people petitioned the gods through prayer to ask that he be counted among the gods.³³ It appears that spin-doctors were hard at work in Akkadian politics just as they are today.

The reason for Naram-Sin's self-deification is unknown, but Alexander the Great may again provide a basis of comparison. According to Arrian's history, Alexander was clearly a megalomaniac. However, Alexander may also have deified himself out of a sincere belief that he was a god, or at least that he was the son of the god Zeus-Ammon. Alexander may also have used his self-deification for political purposes to ensure that his newly acquired Persian subjects would obey him as they obeyed their previous god-king Darius. Naram-Sin, probably a bit of a megalomaniac himself, may have hoped that self-deification would send a message to his subjects that rebellion was out of the question. As previously mentioned, rebellion against the king was tantamount to rebellion against the gods. Therefore, rebellion against a deified Naram-Sin would certainly be a mistake. No matter the reason for his self-deification, it is clear from his own inscriptions and from the various "romances" written about him that he was a very successful and powerful ruler. His son, Shar-kalli-shari was not so successful. A perfect storm of enemy invasions by the Gutians and others eventually brought down the Akkadian Empire and ended the Sargonid dynasty.³⁴

Like the Qin Dynasty of ancient China and the vast empire of Alexander the Great, the Akkadian Empire was short-lived. Nevertheless, the impact of Sargon's empire far outlasted the empire itself. The great Assyrian conqueror Tiglath-Pileser III, who lived nearly 1,500 years after Sargon, proclaimed himself "King of Sumer and Akkad."³⁵ Like the title "King of Kish"

³³ Ibid., 82.

³⁴ E. A. Speiser, "Some Factors in the Collapse of Akkad," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 72, no. 3 (July-September 1952): 98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/594938> (accessed October 21, 2014).

³⁵ Hamblin, 101.

from Sargon's time, Tiglath-Pileser's title suggests that it really meant something to be known as "King of Akkad." Sargon permanently transformed Mesopotamia from a provincial region to a cosmopolitan region. Later conquerors such as Hammurabi, Tiglath-Pileser, and Nebuchadnezzar followed Sargon's example, but struggled to duplicate the immense size of his empire. Despite the difficulties modern historians have in trying to piece together an accurate account of Sargon, it is clear from the body of literary and artistic evidence that he was a conqueror ahead of his time. His brutality was legendary, but he quelled the numerous revolts that threatened to dismantle his empire. Sargon was a pioneering military innovator, developing the world's first empire and perhaps the world's first professional standing army. He conquered an area of the Fertile Crescent so large it was not bested until the Neo-Assyrians 1,500 years later. Sargon truly deserved his title "the great," and his legacy shaped Mesopotamia for centuries after his death.

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