A history of ancient Akkad (Akkadians) from its rise to fall including its kings, cities, laws and contributions to civilization

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The Akkadians were a Semitic people living on the Arabian peninsula during the great flourishing period of the Sumerian city-states. Although we don't know much about early Akkadian history and culture, we do know that as the Akkadians migrated north, they came in increasing conflict with the Sumerian city-states, and in 2340 BC, the great Akkadian military leader, Sargon, conquered Sumer and built an Akkadian empire stretching over most of the Sumerian city-states.

Sargon The Great

SARGON OF AKKAD was an ancient Mesopotamian ruler who reigned approximately 2334-2279 BC, and was one of the earliest of the world's great empire builders, conquering all of southern Mesopotamia as well as parts of Syria, Anatolia, and Elam (western Iran). He established the region's first Semitic dynasty and was considered the founder of the Mesopotamian military tradition.

Sargon is known almost entirely from the legends and tales that followed his reputation through 2,000 years of cuneiform Mesopotamian history, and not from documents that were written during his lifetime. The lack of contemporary record is explained by the fact that the capital city of Agade, which he built, has never been located and excavated. It was destroyed at the end of the dynasty that Sargon founded and was never again inhabited, at least under the name of Agade.

According to a folktale, Sargon was a self-made man of humble origins; a gardener, having found him as a baby floating in a basket on the river, brought him up in his own calling. His father is unknown; his own name during his childhood is also unknown; his mother is said to have been a priestess in a town on the middle Euphrates. Rising, therefore, without the help of influential relations, he attained the post of cupbearer to the ruler of the city of Kish, in the north of the ancient land of Sumer. The event that brought him to supremacy was the defeat of Lugalzaggisi of Uruk (biblical Erech, in central Sumer). Lugalzaggisi had already united the city-states of Sumer by defeating each in turn and claimed to rule the lands not only of the Sumerian city-states but also those as far west as the Mediterranean. Thus, Sargon became king over all of southern Mesopotamia, the first great ruler for whom, rather than Sumerian, the Semitic tongue known as Akkadian was natural from birth, although some earlier kings with Semitic names are recorded in the Sumerian king list. Victory was ensured, however, only by numerous battles, since each city hoped to regain its independence from Lugalzaggisi without submitting to the new overlord. It may have been before these exploits, when he was gathering followers and an army, that Sargon named himself Sharru-kin ("Rightful King") in support of an accession not achieved in an old-established city through hereditary succession. Historical records are still so meager, however, that there is a complete gap in information relating to this period.

Not content with dominating this area, his wish to secure favorable trade with Agade throughout the known world, together with an energetic temperament, led Sargon to defeat cities along the middle Euphrates to northern Syria and the silver-rich mountains of southern Anatolia. He also dominated Susa, capital city of the Elamites, in the Zagros Mountains of western Iran, where the only truly contemporary record of his reign has been uncovered. Such was his fame that some merchants in an Anatolian city, probably in central Turkey, begged him to intervene in a local quarrel, and, according to the legend, Sargon, with a band of warriors, made a fabulous journey to the still-uncolocated city of Burushanda (Purshahanda), at the end of which little more than his appearance was needed to settle the dispute.

As the result of Sargon's military prowess and ability to organize, as well as of the legacy of the Sumerian city-states that he had inherited by conquest and of previously existing trade of the old Sumerian city-states with other countries, commercial connections flourished with the Indus Valley, the coast of Oman, the islands and shores of the Persian Gulf, the lapis lazuli mines of Badakhshan, the cedars of Lebanon, the silver-rich Taurus Mountains, Cappadocia, Crete, and perhaps even Greece.

During Sargon's rule Akkadian became adapted to the script that previously had been used in the Sumerian language, and the new spirit of calligraphy that is visible upon the clay tablets of this dynasty is also clearly seen on contemporary cylinder seals, with their beautifully arranged and executed scenes of mythology and festive life. Even if this new artistic feeling is not necessarily to be attributed directly to the personal influence of Sargon, it shows that, in his new capital, military and
and extending as far away as Lebanon. Sargon based his empire in the city of Akkad, which became the basis of the name of his people. This great capital of the largest empire humans had ever seen up until that point later became the city of Babylon, which was the commercial and cultural center of the middle east for almost two thousand years.

But Sargon's ambitious empire lasted for only a blink of an eye in the long time spans with which we measure Mesopotamian history. In 2125, the Sumerian city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia rose up in revolt, and the Akkadian empire fell before a renewal of Sumerian city-states.

Attributing his success to the patronage of the goddess Ishtar, in whose honor Agade was erected, Sargon of Akkad became the first great empire builder. Two later Assyrian kings were named in his honor. Although the briefly recorded information of his predecessor Lugalzaggisi shows that expansion beyond the Sumerian homeland had already begun, later Mesopotamians looked to Sargon as the founder of the military tradition that runs through the history of their people.

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