

MESOPOTAMIA AND THE “NEW” MILITARY HISTORY¹

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1. FROM PRE-MODERN TO “OLD” TO “NEW”

For a moment, let us leave aside the “new” military history: Assyriology already had venerable theological and civic-historical purposes for military history when the “old” variety first came along in the nineteenth century A.D.² Fusty as it may seem today, the “old” military history was born out of the then novel early modern premise that war, like politics and statecraft, was a rational science which could be studied, mastered, taught, and distilled, not the enactment of destiny or the will of the divine. To our eyes, that “old” military history seems theoretically underdeveloped—focused on political elites, pedantic in its attachment to detail, and not-so-subtly fetishizing mass violence. Yet it was radical in its day, married to the civic-historiographic needs of emerging bourgeois nation-states, and not to the theological and classist ideals of Church and nobility. Most branches of historical study

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- 1 Bibliographic note: Abbreviated citations throughout this essay conform to sigla cited by the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (=CAD; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956-). Specific texts cited by sigla include: AbB 2 = Frankena 1966; AbB 10 = Kraus 1985; AbB 11 = Stol 1986; AbB 13 = van Soldt 1993; ABC = Grayson 1975; Mari texts denoted as ARM, F, or A = Heimpel 2003; SAA I = Parpola 1987; SAA IV = Starr 1990; SAA V = Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990; SAA XI = Fales and Postgate 1995; SAA XII = Kataja and Whiting 1995; SAA XIII = Cole and Machinist 1998; SAA XV = Fuchs and Parpola 2001; SAA XVI = Luukko and Van Buylaere 2002; SAA XVII = Dietrich 2003; SAA XVIII = Reynolds 2003; EA = Moran 1992; CH = Roth 1995; RIME 1 = Frayne 2008; RIME 2 = Frayne 1993; RIME 3/1 = Edzard 1997; RIME 3/2 = Frayne 1997; RIMA 1 = Grayson 1987; RIMA 2 = Grayson 1991; RIMA 3 = Grayson 1996. Electronic resources include references to ETCSL = <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>; BCHP and Walker Chronicle = <http://livius.org>.
- 2 All dates are BC unless otherwise noted; absolute chronological dates prior to 1300 follow the so-called Middle Chronology in which the accession of Ḫammurabi of Babylon is dated 1792.

busily professionalized themselves in these terms by the mid-1800's, but perhaps none was more resistant to civil-military history than Ancient Near Eastern studies.

Professional and popular historians in these fields continued to carry forward pre-modern Judeo-Christian and Classical historiographic traditions for generations. Under these formulae, the military histories of "Oriental despots" closely mimicked those of the ancient sources: armies and wars were either the instruments of a now wrathful, now redeeming god, or embodiments of the Oriental ruler's lust for power, his innate cruelty, his hubris. To muddy these lofty themes with discussion of mere tactics, strategies, and weaponry would have confounded nineteenth-century Assyriology's moral obligations to a) rescue the Bible from a creeping secularism and b) demonstrate relevance to Greek and Roman history.

The production of a "history of events" that old military history required, however, remained obstructed by basic issues of translation and chronology still being worked out well into the twentieth century. Only by that time did sufficient progress with respect to evidence open the floodgates of interpretation; only then did Ancient Near Eastern disciplines come to foster the study of the "old" military history no less than other fields, and these topics quickly took strong hold in the popular imagination.³

Like any other quarter of human history, the primary record of the Ancient Near East abounds with famous battles, marches, and military leaders: Sargon of Akkad's twenty-fourth century conquests of all lands from "the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea," Mursili I's lightning double-raid on Aleppo and Babylon in 1595, Ramses III's 1178 stand against the invasions of the "Sea Peoples," etc. Campaign accounts were among the earliest (though, significantly, not *the* earliest) forms of royal literature, beginning with terse reports of victories in third millennium inscriptions and gradually developing into lengthy and monumental literatures in annalistic, epic, and summary genres, each with its own rarified stylistic and narrative conventions. But warfare was hardly limited to royal sources—it leached out topically into every textual genre known to us: letters, hymns, economic documents, ritual-magical texts, administrative rosters, stories, poems, and date lists.⁴

3 The most successful social-historical treatment of the Mesopotamian military remains Sasson's (1969) short study of Mari.

4 For a discussion of sources and their historical use, see Van De Mieroop 1999; two recent compendia of sources in translation include Hallo, 2003 and Chavalas, 2006.

The militaries of early states were ubiquitous in non-textual media as well. Defense architecture was a highly visible element of the archaeological landscape, from the fortified site of eighth millennium Jericho to the real and fabled eleven-mile defensive walls of sixth century Babylon.⁵ War was a central subject in symbolic and representational art, best known from the mural reliefs of Egyptian and Assyrian palaces and temples, but also from battlefield stelae, divine symbols used as unit standards and weapons used as cult objects. Some artifacts seem to have the "whiff of gunpowder" still upon them: the mass of ivories and treasures pitched down a well during the destruction of Nineveh; the cuneiform letter containing desperate pleas for help from Ugarit's king shortly before the city's utter destruction ("the enemy's ships ... did evil things in my country");⁶ the skeleton of a mother clutching her child (*une tableau-vivante véritable*) found under the burned debris of the sacked lower town at Hasanlu.⁷ These and a thousand other details make clear that wars were not only the formal window-dressing of royal rhetoric and ideology, but also a nasty and brutish experience for those who lived through them.⁸

Histories of the Ancient Near East seem eager to demonstrate the quality and quantity of their evidence. Some military actions are enshrined in scholarship as much for their blow-by-blow particularity as for their historical significance. The Battle of Qadesh (May 12-13, 1274), for instance, is known for the Egyptian sources' detailing of field maneuvers of identifiable units: advance guards, mercenaries, infantry and chariotry, and a list of no fewer than eighteen contingents of Hittite allies.⁹ In a few cases, the sources are so numerous as to produce the kind of "thick description" necessary for *histoire événementielle*, as with the 1765 siege of Razama accounted for in the Mari letters. Some clashes are known from dual-accounts, such as the multiple sources for the fall of the city of Larsa in 1763, the historical and literary accounts (biblical, cuneiform, Greek, and Latin) of the "siege" of Jerusalem in 701, the divergent Assyrian and Babylonian claims about the Assyro-

5 See Burke 2008.

6 Nougaryol 1968, 87-90 no. 24.

7 Muscarella 1966.

8 See Vandkilde (2003) on violence as a theoretical problem for scholarly observation.

9 The Egyptian "Poem" and "Bulletin" describing the event are known in more than a dozen copies, with a few disparate Hittite sources adding small bits of information.

Elamite engagement at Halule in 691.¹⁰ But cases which demonstrate that the sources *could* be as detailed as we might want are in the minority. In the overwhelming majority of cases, we are forced to rely on singular, official, and laconic royal inscriptions concerning warfare. I have attempted partially to remedy this bias by drawing heavily in this essay from Mesopotamian letters, notably those of eighteenth century Mari and seventh century Nineveh, documents more reliable for their non-idealizing voice. There are methodological pitfalls in the use of letters as well, though, and these we should bear in mind: a) letters were problem-solving documents and usually described atypical predicaments, b) they often overstated problems in order to obtain resources from central authorities, and c) they tended to accentuate anecdote over context.

Royal inscriptions in the meantime have undergone scrutiny on theoretical grounds in the wake of the linguistic turn: it is not merely doubted whether such texts are accurate, but whether their intent was to produce narratives of historicity at all—rather, narratives of authority. Thus, although warfare was the beating heart of royal literature—if predictably inaccurate where it can be checked—even the enthusiasm of “drums and trumpets” historians has waned as the value of their “facts” has shifted like so much sand under their feet. For these reasons, a true military history of events will not emerge. Important work on Ancient Near Eastern military economies and strategies continues to be produced,¹¹ but one senses that new directions are necessary if we are to make much headway in understanding the social place and purpose of these earliest state militaries.

I will look at four areas of interest: two are social-historical (the military and society, the military *as* a society), and two are political-historical (the military and the state, the military and ideology). A proviso: though the pristine civilizations of the Ancient Near East provide just about the earliest forensic, structural, locational, artifactual,

10 On the Larsa episode, see Van De Mieroop 2005; on the latter two episodes, see Laato’s (1995) critical (if somewhat simplistic) essay.

11 E.g., the new volume edited by Vidal 2010, which aims “to consolidate the studies on Ancient Near Eastern warfare,” but is essentially a set of essays on disparate issues of military tactics and technologies; cf. de Souza ed. 2008. On sieges, see now Eph’al 2009 and Melville and Melville 2008. The important anthology by Raaflaub and Rosenstein (1999) unfortunately did not include a chapter on Mesopotamia. See Abrahami’s useful bibliographies (2005, 2009).

epigraphic, and iconographic evidence for warfare¹²—this abundance must be balanced against the enormous time span of three millennia of historical change, amidst which it is difficult to say anything normative or definitional. Given that comprehensive coverage is an unrealistic goal,¹³ I hope to proceed on five premises throughout a thematic study:

- Militaries and polities were mutually structuring and productive of cultural change, through ethnolinguistic contact, professionalization, gender construction, military means of production, and imperialism. I will touch on points of change including state formation, political economy, specialization and scale, ritualism, material conditions of soldiering, and political agency.
- The military historical issues which concern Assyriologists today relate mostly to state produced historiography and the role of ritual in warfare, placing less emphasis on social- and economic-historical questions.
- Though the possibilities for historicism regarding ancient Mesopotamian warfare are abbreviated by the types of written sources, they offer rich opportunities for social history studies.
- We should adopt a deep skepticism that royal literature touching on our topic reflects the concerns of civil society; mono-vocal state claims about political unity or security needs were not necessarily shared or culturally representative.
- Any definition of “the military” must account for the absence of any ancient, emic distinction between permanent states of war and peace. I understand a “military” to be a distinct, organized and permanent (though not necessarily “standing”) force of men, materiel and emplacements at the disposal of the state or its ruler or both. I will think of both “the nexus between armies and the societies that spawn them” and the “memory and culture” of war.¹⁴
- Our contextualization of war violence need not shy away from

12 Cioffi-Revilla 2000, 64-70.

13 It also seems unproductive to dilute this essay by covering other Ancient Near Eastern culture areas, such as Egypt or the Hittite lands. Among “old military” topics, I will not be addressing military technologies (especially as they regard metallurgy, fortifications, equids, etc.) or field tactics, as studies of these already abound in the secondary literature.

14 Citino 2007.

modern social-historical questions regarding the morality of violence and terror in warfare or the politics of the body.¹⁵

2. THE MILITARY IN THE TIME OF STATE FORMATION

Mesopotamia boasted one of the world's earliest state civilizations. Since Weber's famous axiom runs that states were entities maintaining a monopoly on legitimate violence, the development of the Sumerian city-state would presumably emerge at an historic juncture between feuding and warfare, between armed kinship groups and a true military. Insofar as the selection of permanent war leaders has been seen as the institutionalizing moment of early states, state formation and military organization seem inextricably bound up at the nexus of who sought legitimacy, how, and why.¹⁶ Yet Weber's definition has not stood the test of time very well: it is probably anachronistic to typologically differentiate "the military" from other purveyors of social violence in antiquity,¹⁷ since at no point did early states fully hold (or perhaps even wish to hold) Weber's talismanic monopoly.¹⁸ From the side of legal history, self-help under the law included recourse to private violence down to very late periods,¹⁹ and from the political science side, it has been doubted whether "legitimacy" necessarily distinguishes war-making from criminal violence in kind in any period.²⁰ A debate on the existence of prehistoric warfare has continued for more than forty years now,²¹ but in that time the Syro-Mesopotamian region has not produced unequivocal evidence for either widespread warfare

15 As Bahrani (2008) argues, warfare was an extension of the mechanics of state punishment, and its practices and representations informed one another on all cultural levels.

16 Cioffi-Revilla 2000, 71, "the protobellic period precedes the protopolitical period, but often not by much."

17 Though I will not address "warfighting as such," "warfare" could refer to everything from "small wars" to the "armed peace" of empires (e.g., the so-called *pax Assyriaca*), to the roles of and effects on non-combatants, to all processes of preparation, support or and prosecution of combat, the deep historical causes for war, and its long-term effects long after the shields were laid down.

18 Richardson 2011. Neither is this pattern confined to deep antiquity: as late and as centralized an empire as eighth/seventh century Assyria still saw the building of private armies not under state authority: see SAA I 11, and the prevalence of feuding and non-state force in the letters of SAAS IV, *inter alia*.

19 Whitman 1995.

20 Tilly 1985.

21 Anthropologists have extensively questioned both the categorical helpfulness and the evolutionary distinctiveness of legitimized, organized violence: Otterbein 1999. Hobsbawm (1959) already argued that the very concept of an internal "monopoly of

or state control of violence. One may point to possible examples of military architecture and perhaps military activity in the Chalcolithic,²² but the larger record points to early Mesopotamian state ideologies de-emphasizing warfare.²³

A comparison to early Egyptian civilization may be useful, since the formative role of the military there differed considerably from Sumer.²⁴ The Narmer Palette, one of the earliest Egyptian royal objects, depicts an almost fully formed visual repertoire: the pharaoh victorious in war along with military attendants, standard-bearers, conquered towns, and killed or captured enemies. It might be noted, however, that only the king is shown as dispensing violence. The highly conventionalized representative strategies and historical issues of the palette are typological for much of Ancient Near Eastern art-historical evidence: the central role accorded to the ruler, a focus on his (singlehanded) victory over the docile bodies of the enemies, with a minor role for the king’s actual fighting force. The Narmer and Scorpion mace-heads of the Dynasty 0 period (c. 3100-3000) also symbolically link early kingship to military power, and war thus seems virtually synonymous with state unification.²⁵

Uruk-period Mesopotamia (c. 3400-3000), however, was virtually devoid of symbolic evidence for military power, its rulers presented as priestly elites or hunters, its records focused on agricultural administration and scribal training, its urban architecture focused on temple complexes—walled, but not overtly fortified.²⁶ Not until a half a millennium later, around the twenty-sixth century, did Mesopotamian rulers begin to appropriate military symbols for themselves, including inscribed mace-heads, chariot burials, and objects bearing scenes of warfare, such as the “Standard of Ur” and shell plaque figures depicting soldiers and bound, nude captives. The largest known monument from

violence” never existed until the formation of early modern nation-states, thus a pure anachronism for pre-modern societies. For a review, see Simons 1999.

22 Reichel 2009, citing fortification walls at Mersin (ca. 5000) and both Habuba Kabira and Hamoukar (fourth millennium); his discovery of hoards of “sling bullets” in a destruction layer at the latter site have not met universal acceptance as evidence for warfare, see Oates et al. 2007, 593; Clare et al. 2008, 77.

23 On the relatively low incidence of warfare claims in early Sumer, see Richardson 2011.

24 Yoffee 2005.

25 See also Sanders (2006, 7) on early writing on weapons in Levantine contexts.

26 A lone seal impression from fourth millennium Uruk levels may depict a ruler figure supervising the execution of prisoners by soldiers, Dolce 2004, 124 and Fig 5.

the period depicting warfare, the “Stele of the Vultures,” stood less than six feet tall. The Royal Cemetery of Ur, dating to about this time, indeed contained elite and royal burials with a wide variety of weapons—spears, daggers, war-helms, and axes—but these were almost entirely made of gold—symbolic and ceremonial, and not functional.²⁷ The objects include the famous gold “Helm of Meskalamdug,” but even this supposed war-helm is modeled to appear as a royal coiffure, not a piece of armor. The military seems to have grown only gradually more central to kingship ideologies in the Sumerian case, which in its earliest symbology articulated the king’s role as a priestly figure, as fructifier of the land, and as hunter.²⁸

This slowly emerging military ideology coincides with an apparent expansion of interstate warfare in the Early Dynastic period (2900-2334). In their royal inscriptions, the kings of Kiš, Lagaš, and other city-states spoke of warfare commissioned by the gods for the protection of local lands and borders,²⁹ and boasted of the personal heroism of the kings.³⁰ Combatants were depicted in massed ranks, whether as advancing victors, as carpets of corpses of vanquished enemies underfoot, or heaped up in burial mounds; in all cases their compactness evoked the image of the city itself.³¹ Regionally, there is some evidence as well that city-states coordinated military forces to satisfy joint needs of defense and trade protection, such as the so-called Kiengi League, a confederated force of soldiers from 10 cities—as much forces of collaboration as of competition.

27 Weber and Zettler 1998, 163.

28 It is commonly assumed that the various hunter motifs alluded to the king’s function as war-leader, but this is a) hardly clear, and b) an allusion which is not clearly demonstrated until much later times, and may thus be entirely anachronistic to deep antiquity.

29 In Lagaš monuments, the tutelary god was depicted on the field of battle engaged in combat.

30 The motif of the king as battlefield hero unsurprisingly remained a staple of royal literature from earliest times, e.g., Šulgi’s boast that “I go ahead of the main body of my troops and I clear the terrain for my scouts,” etc. (ETCSL šulgi B, Text 2.4.2.02). This remained the image well into Neo-Assyrian times, when the annalistic accounts were often written in the first-person. While there is no doubt that the kings routinely went on campaign, their own prowess is less verifiable: one letter of that time, however, suggests the reality of the situation, as an exasperated general writes the king, saying: “Just as your royal fathers have done, stay on the hill, and let your magnates do the battle” (SAA XVI 77).

31 Compare to the war dead strewn across extensive landscapes in Neo-Assyrian times, more evocative of the lands of empire (Richardson 2007, 193-96).

But over-attention to any of this evidence would obscure the statistical rarity of warfare as a *topos*. Of 191 Early Dynastic royal inscriptions, only 28 mention 24 inter-city conflicts in a period of ca. 250 years; only nine of the conflicts involved bordering states, and only two did not involve Lagaš.³² Both representationally and topically, military action only moved closer to the center of state ideology and individual action in the succeeding Akkadian period (2334-2193).³³ A scholarly emphasis on military activity would overshadow the more urgent need of the early state to call up able-bodied males for corvée labor on public architecture and civic projects, such as canal digging, more routinely than for defense.³⁴ Even professional soldiers of later times could still be levied to carry out emergency harvests or other public works projects.³⁵ Sumerian and Akkadian terminology did not normally differentiate soldiers from workers in any case—both were just *eren₂/šābum*, normally non-agentive third-person subjects—even into the first millennium. This lack of distinction in manpower may have been matched on the technological side, since bronze weapons were unlikely to have been much more battle-worthy than agricultural tools made from the same metal. Thus, outside of the few elite, professional units—as certainly there were in Late Bronze and Iron Age states—the military in the Early Bronze Age was mostly made up of primary agricultural producers called away from their lands temporarily for war or defense.³⁶

However militarily unimpressive this might be, these occasional reprieves from the boredom of grueling subsistence fieldwork, supplemented as they were by guaranteed distributions of food, were crucial public exercises in polity building. The massive circumvallations of Mesopotamian cities in the Early Dynastic, for instance, enclosing areas as large as 400 hectares, were projects by which militias built their city-states in literal, visible, and performative terms. Since levied

32 Cooper 1986.

33 Even in Akkadian royal inscriptions, one is struck by the prominence of non-military themes such as piety before the gods and a focus on movement across wide patches of geography, not necessarily in connection with warfare.

34 On the low frequency of Early Dynastic warfare, see Richardson 2011.

35 E.g., ARM 26/362, “troops of the headpad contingent” drafted for earthworks building; ARM 27/27-37, an emergency draft of soldiers to harvest the lands of the palace and of “commoners”; AbB 11 116.

36 See, e.g., FM 269, in which a king is reminded that his commoners need to be provided with their seed-grain before they are sent out on campaign.

forces were formed and rewarded through clientage to the ruler, they also doubled as his (armed) political constituencies, and so the interests of the ruler and the polity gradually became indistinguishable. Later references in Sumerian literature to an “assembly of the able-bodied young men,” distinct from an assembly of city elders, may reflect this early and inchoate phase of military formation.³⁷ It is remarkable, at least, that Mesopotamian states seem to have been substantially formed well before they emphasized or even possessed large militaries.

3. LAND TENURE AND PAY: TILTH AND WEALTH IN TERRITORIAL STATES

How then were men induced to endanger their lives through military action on behalf of the state? As we see Mesopotamian polities changing from proto-historic urban communes into territorial states, their militaries become most profoundly socially integrated through the land-tenure regimes which tied primary producers through service obligations. The economies of these states remained overwhelmingly agrarian no matter how large they grew, their redistributive administrations harnessed to the incessant conversion of harvests into goods and services, of which defense was one. At their inception, state claims on military service were thus secondary benefits of a wider program to grow their base of agriculturally productive clients. For the soldier, the benefits of these arrangements included not only land-holding, but access to irrigation, community membership,³⁸ draft-animal power, and economic security and mobility,³⁹ not to be underestimated in a time and place in which landlessness or dependent status were less palatable alternatives. For the state, the distribution of service-land had the benefit of installing clients and promoting loyalism by making soldiers political stakeholders.⁴⁰

37 Jacobsen's (1943) contention that such assemblies formed the earliest democratic institutions has been widely questioned but even more widely quoted. In his view, though, the military constituted only one of several consenting state bodies.

38 There even existed a specific term for administrative lists of service-land tenants, *mudasû*-tablets: settlers on these tracts of state lands formed a community of property, at least in administrative terms.

39 At Mari, soldiers from poor families were provided with “good positions in the palace,” while well-to-do soldiers were expected to provision and quarter themselves in their paternal households (Sasson 1969, 24); notwithstanding, “only a free man (*awilum*) was considered worthy of entering the military” (*ibid.*, 22).

40 cf. the description of soldiers as *keš*₂ / *riksu* (the semantic root of which is “to tie, to bind”) is sometimes translated as “pledged,” connoting a military oath, but the appli-

Service-lands were known by different names according to period and region, and tenure regimes were only gradually integrated into the Mesopotamian political economy. “Ration” (**šuku**) and “leased” (**apin-la₂**) fields held by soldiers are known as early as the end of the Early Dynastic period at the city of Girsu, but it is not clear that military service was expected in exchange instead of corvée labor;⁴¹ most such allotments were for palace staff rather than soldiers.⁴² In the Akkadian period, **šuku**-lands were also allotted for soldiers, but in no especial concentration and under no terminology differentiating their tenancies from those of others,⁴³ though one surviving letter from a captain suggests that the state already protected the tenure-land of soldiers at this early time: “Luzah, the son of Azuzu, is serving in the army; Dada, the son of Nigar, has seized his estate, but he is to release it!”⁴⁴ Certainly by the Ur III period (2112-2004), the practice was well established.⁴⁵

The best-known of these forms of tenure was *ilku* (from *alāku*, “to come, to go”), a term from not only Mesopotamia proper, but Alalakh, Ugarit, Mari, and even exported to the Hittite realm. The term *ilku* survived well into the first millennium to designate arable plots of land given to soldiers, even when more specific names were developed to designate plots of service-lands for the specific types of soldier they supported. Soldiers’ land holdings in any event may be distinguished from other types of feuds (*šibtu*) and subsistence allotments (*šukūsu*) for which tenancy was either dependent on regular payments or as awards for certain classes of officials and priests. Although occasionally communal or corporately held lands of soldiers are known, the predominance of individual holdings suggests a general

cation of the term in most other contexts points towards something less political and more legal, e.g., “contracted.”

41 E.g., VS 25 70 and VS 14, 170, both from EDIIIb Girsu, list both types of fields held by the soldiers (**aga₃-us₂**) Ur-Ninmu and Di-Utu, but their plots sat alongside many more held by non-military personnel.

42 Nissen et al. 1990, 64.

43 E.g., Foster 1982, 17-18, who noted around 84 acres of “good land” given to soldiers (**aga-us₃ aga-us₂**) under the authority of a **nu-banda₃** captain, around 3% of a local royal estate’s holdings. Other references (Foster 1977, 32 n. 10, 35) suggest that soldiers detailed to imperial provinces were also given rations in bread or grain, and perhaps some pay in silver as well.

44 Michalowski 1993, 26 no. 20.

45 Studevant-Hickman 2008; Michalowski 1993, 118 no. 240, though the letter may be a “late fabrication.”

dispersal of soldiers throughout city-state communities. Service-land holdings near Old Babylonian (2004-1595) city of Sippar were typical of these arrangements, averaging around six hectares per soldier, in theory enough to provide basic subsistence for around 20 people.⁴⁶ These tenures were thus lucrative and desirable in general terms, and the state protected fields and obligations against alienation through legal sanctions and regular administrative inventories, sometimes tracking tenancies for centuries at a time, periodically reclaiming and reassigning fields.⁴⁷ Most of the contexts in which soldiers appear in the Code of Hammurabi have to do with the disposition of their *ilku*-lands, mostly prohibiting their sale or transfer, but also protecting them from seizure.⁴⁸ But in the generations after Hammurabi, service-lands were often treated as heritable and salable in practice, and the obligations as transferable by hire. The alienation of service-lands to non-military holders through inheritance, marriage, adoption, sale, and leasing created secondary markets for service substitutes, and further diversified the military's economic benefits well beyond the ranks of the soldiery.⁴⁹ The death of a tenure-holder in wartime, however, could spell economic disaster for his family.⁵⁰

The meaning of the term *ilku* was also as protean as it was durable: in different contexts, *ilku* could refer to the service-land itself, the work done on that land, the delivery of the yield of that land, the service obligations attached to it, the tenure-holder himself, or goods, animals, and services used to support *ilku*-service.⁵¹ In all periods, it is difficult to assess the degree to which *ilku*-tenancy in practice obligated actual military service instead of payments by the tenant to support the hire of troops by central authorities or provide substitutes (prohibited by the Code of Hammurabi, but well-honored in the breach).⁵² The further thorny question of how royal authorities came by land for distribution

46 See De Graef 2002, 155 n. 35, on plot size; Richardson 2005a, 21, for calculations of subsistence areas.

47 See Ellis 1977; DeGraef 2002.

48 CH ¶¶ 26-32, 36-41.

49 Charpin 2004, 371, however, implies that the increasing tendency to pay *ilku* in silver as the period went along also deteriorated political-economic relations between Crown and clientele.

50 For the forced sale of a family estate by a woman widowed in wartime, see Westbrook 2001, 25-26, 31.

51 For Old Babylonian *ilku*, see Stol 2004, 736-42, 747-57; for Middle Assyrian *ilku*, see Postgate 1982.

52 Charpin 2004, 371; see also CH ¶¶35.

in the first place cannot be tackled here; one may compare Old Babylonian administration of *ilku*-lands, for instance, which entailed reallocations of specific state lands, to the Middle Assyrian state, for which Postgate concluded that *ilku* intersected with a system of lots and shares in common land funds of the community: “it would not have entailed large-scale re-assignment of land-ownership, merely the acknowledgement ... of the *status quo*.”⁵³ If that was the case, then the Assyrian military was deeply integrated, if not identical to, the village community, and quite different from a two-sector economy of village and palace lands prevailing in Babylonia.

The ensuing Kassite and Middle Babylonian periods (c. fifteenth to eighth centuries) saw the development of a rural manorial system, under which land tenure tied to state service was mediated through local grandees.⁵⁴ The existence of their large estates or fiefs has often given rise to a rubric of “feudalism” for these times. This view has been criticized by scholars of these periods, but it is still true that military organization became diffused throughout Babylonia in these centuries by an overlap of estates and provinces which redistributed political identities formerly exclusive to contending city-states.⁵⁵ Perhaps because of this geographic dispersal, less is known about the military from the few central archives we possess. New terminologies—*ḫurādu*, *sakrumaš*⁵⁶—were added to older ones for types of soldiers—while some professional names related to equine care were borrowed to designate military offices (e.g., *kizû*, *kartappu*, both loosely meaning “groom”). This emphasis on heavy and then light cavalry in post-Ḫammurabi Babylonia generally increased over time,⁵⁷ with chariotry

53 Postgate 1982.

54 I have argued elsewhere (2005a) that the fortress communities developed by the end of the Old Babylonian period were the basis for the next period’s manors.

55 See Richardson 2005a 25-26: of more than 20 Kassite provinces, a minority were centered around cities.

56 *ḫurādu* was a type of soldier; *sakrumaš* was a title specific to chariotry; see Sasmannshausen 2001, 52-56.

57 Chariots had been in use since Early Dynastic times (really early war carts, probably drawn by donkeys rather than horses), but only began to assume real offensive capability towards the end of the Old Babylonian period, when light cavalry also emerged on the field (e.g., AbB 2 67, 10 150, 11 77, and 13 60; ARM 4/79; see Hamblin 2006, 145-47); for the Neo-Assyrian situation, see Dalley 1985 and Postgate 2000. But the denotation of chariots as “heavy cavalry” in all periods may be a misnomer, given that their principal offensive capability was to permit mobile archery fire, not the charging of massed enemy ranks.

rising to the forefront of battle forces and charioteers emerging as a top officer class. This required ever greater costs for specialists and stable staff—bowmen, drivers, “third men,” etc.—a military corps divorced from agriculture and anchored to palace centers.⁵⁸ Scholarship of chariot and horse technology is heavily trammled by a long historiography which trots onstage innumerable diffusionist postulates about Indo-European languages, peoples, and cultures which cannot be critiqued or treated here.⁵⁹ The importance of equine corps is reflected in the political and economic cultures of the day.

The Amarna correspondence between the Babylonian king and the Egyptian pharaohs reflects the prestige in which chariots, horses, and charioteers were held, since they were included among royal wives, households, and children in greeting formulae (“For you, your wives . . . etc. . . . your horses, your chariots, may all be well.”).⁶⁰ Consignments of gifts between the kings of Egypt, Babylon, and Mitanni included wooden chariots overlaid with gold, golden and bejeweled whips, bridles, reins, blinkers, and other tack.⁶¹ Chariot officers formed the core of the Babylonian feudal nobility, important enough to have been the subjects of monuments and heroic literary material. Such was the case of one Šitti-Marduk, celebrated by Nebuchadnezzar I as “he whose chariot did not lag behind the king’s right flank . . . he feared no battle but went down to the enemy and went furthest in against the enemy of his lord.”⁶² For this, Šitti-Marduk was granted rights to lands and villages, and exempted from providing taxes, including military ones.⁶³ At this time (c. twelfth century), the King of Babylon required the voluntary participation of his nobles to form large armies. The Neo-Assyrian state later used similar practices, granting tax exemptions

58 ABC 22 (=Babylonian Chronicle P III 2’-4’) makes one mention of the size of such forces, numbering horses captured by Kurigalzu II of Babylon at least in the several thousands.

59 See, e.g., Cline’s (1997) review of Robert Drews’ work on this and related subjects.

60 Military forces had a prominent position in greeting formulae for letters in all periods.

61 EA 14 and 22, *inter alia*; Morkot (2007) argues for these exchanges as part of an “international arms trade”; I do not, however, see the numbers of weapons traded as economically significant in scale.

62 Foster 1996, 297-98.

63 Granting relief from required military service was considered a kingly virtue, as when Išme-Dagan of Isin bragged “I have exempted [Isin’s] labourers from carrying earth in baskets, and I have freed its troops from fighting” (ETCSL, Išme-Dagan A, Text 2.5.4.01).

not only to the lands of military officers (many as absentee landlords), but often to dozens of client families holding smaller estates.⁶⁴

The soldier’s field, however, remained the bedrock subvention for the Babylonian military. Designations of service-land once again proliferated as Babylon regained political prominence after 600 Native Babylonians, colonies of foreign mercenaries, and tribal groups were all settled with military lands, some designated as chariot, horse, bow, or quiver fiefs (*bīt narkabti / sisê / qašti / azanni*), with much flexibility built into the range of types of military service.⁶⁵ It does not play too much on semantics, I think, to point out that these fiefs were denoted as “households” (*bītu* = “house”) rather than simply “fields” (*eqlu*), legally constituted to refer to the families who occupied the lands rather than simply the lands themselves. Many arrangements continued to exist from Kassite times as well, when larger fiefs granted to governors or other officials in exchange for providing military contingents gave them *de facto* rights over the inhabitants on those lands. The principle of land-for-service only intensified in Persian period Mesopotamia, when *ilku* obligations were extended to military colonists from other lands, e.g., Carians and Egyptians—resettled in Babylonia on military estates called *ḥaṭrū*.⁶⁶

4. FOR SILVER, LOOT, AND FAME: WAR ECONOMIES

As suggested above, land-tenure was not the only form of remuneration for military service, which could also be compelled through mechanisms other than land holding. An increasing reliance on professional soldiers, for one thing, bred a class of soldier with little connection to the life of the farmer. “Since being a child,” one eighteenth century soldier wrote his king, “I lived the life of a soldier; I was not able to hold the front of a plow.”⁶⁷ Professional soldiers were procured from allies, vassal kings, and tribal contingents, and sometimes even by state purchasing

64 *passim*, SAA XII, but for examples of grants on a smaller, everyday scale see, e.g., SAA V 109, fields for garrison troops, or SAA XI 36, the exemption of taxes on the estates of a cohort commander and his clientele.

65 See especially van Driel (2002, 226-73) for an exhaustive treatment of terms and forms.

66 Briant (2002, 75-76) feels that the *ḥaṭrū* system was more intensive than preceding Babylonian forms of service tenures, but the basis for this assessment is unclear.

67 ARM 26/333; see ARM 26/345, in which one Uštašni-El complains that he has been stuck in the same garrison for five years.

agents.⁶⁸ Foreign mercenaries also joined on to Mesopotamian militaries, alluded to (albeit disparagingly) as early as the twenty-fifth century.⁶⁹ Limited numbers of hired, professional soldiers were kept under garrison regimes as early as Akkadian times, provisioned by the state through rationing or with silver. The Mari letters of the Old Babylonian period then reveal a dizzying array of ethnically-denoted contingents, often billeted together with men of radically different backgrounds. A significant intensification of this practice only came under the Neo-Assyrian empire, when foreign military technologists were targeted for deportation and resettlement in Assyria, bringing with them families, slaves, and pack animals.⁷⁰ To choose just one example, Sennacherib boasted of incorporating 61,000 archers and shield bearers into his army from conquered lands, terming them “booty” (*šallatu*).⁷¹

Yet provisioning was hardly an uncomplicated affair: underprovisioning soldiers could lead to revolt or desertion,⁷² but overprovisioning could just as easily lead to theft of supplies or honest services.⁷³ Two Babylonian commanders had to caution a superior, after their troops had demanded a whole year’s ration “or we will not take anything,” that “if [you] give them their whole year’s barley ration, the troops will leave our control ... let them give it to them elsewhere ... either for one month or for two months.”⁷⁴ Letters tell us that troops could negotiate for better or worse quantities or qualities of rations. Provisioning systems also had to anticipate that unknown numbers of soldiers might need to be provisioned at multiple locations or on the move (or both) depending on the course of campaigns, and provide for both soldiers on the march and families left at home.⁷⁵ Even when

68 Neo-Assyrian treaties with vassals and allies lack provisions for the supply of troops, so we can assume that their access to these did not result from legal obligations as such, but simply as tribute due a hegemon. ARM 26/363 and 488 both refer to merchants supplying soldiers for the state.

69 RIME 1 9.4.2 viii 1 and 9.5.1 iii 1, “hired mercenaries of foreign lands.”

70 See SAA XI 174 for a sample list of military deportees; see also Dalley 1985.

71 The practice was as old, however, as Middle Assyrian times, e.g. when Šalmaneser I tells us that after his campaign against Uruaṭri, “I took a selection of their young men and I chose them to enter my service” (RIMA 1 0.77.1).

72 In ARM 26/29, unpaid troops looted the granaries holding their rations.

73 On desertion in the Mari letters, see Sasson 1969, 45f. Desertion was also a persistent drain on manpower in Neo-Assyrian times: see, e.g., SAA XV 294, XVI 105, and XVII 149.

74 AbB 11 194; see also ARM 27/1 and 44-45.

75 ARM 27/78, 80, and 81; 27/129 calls for 100 donkey-loads of provisions for men on the move. Postgate 1992, 241-44.

soldiers remained stationary and worked plots of land, accounting, political relations, and even translation issues complicated oversight of garrison towns by central authorities.⁷⁶ One long missive from a provincial governor to Zimri-Lim of Mari complains that he could not find men he was supposed to have; had men he did not know about; was accused of “oppressing” his troops; and did not have sufficient interpreters to speak with his men—none of which prevented him from assuring his king that he was doing a outstanding job as commander.⁷⁷

General levies (Sum. **zi g**, lit. “to rise”) are not documented until the twenty-second century,⁷⁸ when men could be called up under the banner of individual towns, clans, or gods. Literary references to levies retrospectively refer to the time of Early Dynastic Uruk and its hero-kings, such as in the Sumerian tale called Gilgameš and Huwawa B. Here, the king’s levy is characterized as calling to war only able-bodied young men without families:

O city! He who has a wife, to your wife!
 He who has a child, to your child!
 Warrior or not,
 He who has no wife, who has no child,
 Let such men fall in by my side, (as the companions
 of) Gilgameš.⁷⁹

A lack of contemporary references suggests, however, that early states were slow in actualizing their ability to compel wartime service on a mass scale; note that Early Dynastic references to “obligations” on the citizenry are made only on the occasion of their cancellation. The corpus of eighteenth century Mari letters make clear that the logistics of assembling, keeping track of, and even dismissing troops was a persistent challenge to authorities,⁸⁰ even though extensive service-rolls

76 ARM 27/107.

77 ARM 27/116.

78 RIME 3/1 1.1.7.Cyl A, xiv 7—xv 10, though this levy was for building, not war. One exception might be from the Late Early Dynastic inscriptions of Urukagina; see RIME 1 9.9.1 and .2, both **lu₂-zi-ga**, translated variously as “attendant” and “conscript.” For obligated landholders, however, the **kingal**-official called up service levies on Crown land as early as the twenty-fifth century.

79 Foster 2001, 117.

80 E.g., ARM 26/25-27 (Heimpel (2003, sub. ARM 26/27) proposes that long-range expeditions had trouble keeping troops together because they would disperse to visit relatives along the way); 26/266, on dismissals; 26/286, a soldier who had been AWOL

existed to track compliance. Long-term furloughs, runaways, deaths, and substitutes made human resources systems extremely difficult to administer,⁸¹ while tribal units were left to muster themselves clan by clan.⁸² An exceptional early case was Ḥammurabi's apparently total conscription of his population in the gathering storm of an Elamite war:

The conscripts of Ḥammurabi have positioned themselves for battle against [the enemy]. Brother looks at brother. The day I sent this tablet of mine to my lord, Ḥammurabi has set a total mobilization in his land. He called up troops of any merchant, any male, including releasing slaves, and they are ready.⁸³

Despite occasional and isolated references in earlier periods to drafted men or the like,⁸⁴ what few levy officers (e.g., *dēkû*, *kallû*) we know of were primarily responsible for levying corvée labor, not soldiers. It remained in most times a difficult or even dangerous business for state officers to compel service in peripheral communities.⁸⁵

Pay bonuses are attested as early as Ur III times, pointing towards avenues of meritocracy and competition.⁸⁶ A letter concerning Ḥammurabi of Babylon shows that he honored officers and regulars by taking meals in their company, bivouacking among them on campaign, and rewarding them with golden rings and fine garments;⁸⁷ even squads of common soldiers received silver medallions from him.⁸⁸

for two years; ARM 27/116. Even literary letters echo this bit of reality, as when a letter to Šulgi of Ur sheepishly admits, "I was levying troops for the expedition, my lord; but when Aba-indasa had inspected the troops, 2000 men of those troops were missing" (ETCSL, Text 3.1.05).

81 E.g., ARM 26/33, 126, 314 and 408, on furloughed and runaway (**b a - z a ḥ**₃) troops; 342, on dead troops; 353, on furloughs and troops seconded from their original stations; 147, in which a unit of troops is simply reported to have "quit."

82 ARM 6/28.

83 ARM 26/363; note also ARM 26/515, in which bonfires are lit "to assemble the entire land (of Mari)." A thousand years later, Assyrians also imposed a general levy in anticipation of an impending Elamite attack (SAA XVII 120).

84 In Ur III times, there were indeed, the **lu₂-nig₂-dab₅**, "requisitioned men of the army," which may have amounted to the same thing; see also Lafont 2009, 12-13 §§4.19-21.

85 E.g., AbB 10 150, in which Babylonian recruiters are scared off by reports of nearby hostiles watching the village they hoped to draw troops from, and SAA XVIII 183, in which an Assyrian recruiter is killed by "deserters" from the city of Dilbat—who then don his clothes and headgear to mock him.

86 Lafont 2009, 12 §4.19-20; at Mari, pay in silver was termed *qeršum*.

87 ARM 27/164.

88 ARM 25/815, 23/435, 24/94, 25/815; similarly, for Ḥammurabi, ARM 26/366 and 369, 27/161, and A.486+; see Van De Mieroop 2005, 23-25. Note also ARM 26/38, in

The familiarity of high officials with their troops was a necessity: one was scolded by King Šulgi of Ur: “You have made yourself too important! You do not know your own soldiers!”⁸⁹ Later Assyrian kings also rewarded individual battlefield valor with gold bracelets, jeweled scabbards, and distinctive military dress,⁹⁰ though praise for the army as a whole is spare throughout the large corpus of Assyrian royal inscriptions. Occasional epithets credit the army as “valiant warriors, who wage relentless war to the finish;” “[my] foot soldiers, who are mighty in battle;” “my battle chariot and cavalry, who never leave the place of danger(?) at my side;” “[who] expose themselves to the risks of battle.” Less often, specific acts were credited to the army: Adad-nirari II said that he leveled a city wall in Hanigalbat “with the help of my warriors,” and Tiglath-Pileser III credited his troops with “smiting the Aramaean contingent.”⁹¹ The credit extended to common soldiers in Assyrian texts was matched by the visual repertoire: palace reliefs across the ninth to seventh centuries showed a dramatic expansion of the space given over to images of common soldiers fighting, working, and parading, a presentation indicative of an expanded sense of military life as a collective imperial ethos.

The distribution of booty (*šallatu*, *hubtu*⁹²), which in all periods included captive prisoners of war (though it could also mean everything from sheep to divine idols), was also a staple of entrenched war economies such as that of the Ur III and Neo-Assyrian states. The Ur III king Šu-Sîn, for instance, reported that, of the prisoners from his eastern campaigns, he blinded the men and set them to fieldwork, and offered the women to the weaving mills, in both cases as gifts

which Zimri-Lim of Mari is urged to appear among the troops to “calm their frightened hearts”; but cf. ARM 26/176, in which he is warned away from walking amidst armed troops without his shock-troop bodyguard. For Ur III examples of direct rewarding of soldiers with war booty, see Lafont 2009, 4 n. 20.

89 Michalowski 1993, 66.

90 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/sargon/essentials/soldiers/warheroes/>; note the image from the Ninevite palace featuring a soldier receiving a commendation from an officer for his service. A land grant given to one soldier by the Assyrian king Aššur-nirari V praises him for his combat action, “by means of stairs and scaling ladder(s)” in capturing a city (Dalley 1976, 107). A letter (SAA XVII 121) discusses a silver sword to be made for an official; see also SAA XVI 207. See especially Postgate (2001) on Assyrian uniforms and Radner (2011) on the role of fame and rewards.

91 Luckenbill 1927, I 76, 113, 275, II 9, 32, 333.

92 Also *būšu*, “valuables,” but this term excludes human captives.

to the temple institutions of Nippur.⁹³ The public distribution of war booty as prestige wealth is attested as early as the twenty-second century, the Akkadian king Rimuš, who distributed vessels, lapis lazuli discs, shells, and other objects inscribed with his name to at least nine Mesopotamian cities, probably to celebrate his eastern victories.⁹⁴ One letter from eighteenth century Mari makes clear that the distribution of POW's to soldiers was a normal and ordinary post-campaign procedure, and that economies of scale were produced by warfare with human booty as their chief product.⁹⁵ Without doubt, this was true for Assyria as well: Šamši-Adad V gave “captured warriors ... to the soldiers of my land like grasshoppers,” Tiglath-Pileser III apportioned “horses and mules among my artisans ... like sheep,”⁹⁶ Sargon II boasted “in Assyria, people bought things at a price in silver like that in copper” and Aššurbanipal that “in my land a camel was sold at ½-1 shekel of silver.”⁹⁷ The Assyrians also practiced something like triumphal parades, publicly displaying war wealth, at least implying that the regular influx of war booty benefited the entire population: “I passed in review,” Esarhaddon exclaimed, “without cessation all the steeds, mules, asses and camels, arms and other implements of warfare of all the hosts of the conquered enemy.”⁹⁸ On the ritualistic aspects of these triumphs, see below (Ritualism and Intelligence).

Free looting was also among the incentives used to attract expeditionary soldiers as well as to destabilize enemy lands, especially under the Neo-Assyrian state: numerous images in Assyrian palatial art show soldiers carrying off weapons, metal goods, and jewelry, as in the burning of Mušašir shown in Sargon's Khorsabad palace, or the sack of Hamanu depicted in Sennacherib's Nineveh palace. Without doubt, throwing open a city to full looting was satisfactory reward to ancient armies; Sargon II of Assyria, on conquering one enemy city,

93 RIME 3/2 1.4.3.

94 RIME 2 1.2.20 and B. R. Foster, pers. communication (2010).

95 ARM 26/408; 26/421 refers to an elaborate treaty scheme to profit from the ransoming of POW's; 27/16 refers to POW's kept in handcuffs and “(neck)-ladders,” a form of stock depicted in Akkadian art.

96 Luckenbill 1927, I 259, 273, II 20, 98, 133, 137-38.

97 Ibid., II 13, 152, 338.

98 Luckenbill 1927, II 267. Sennacherib claims to have needed to “enlarge the outer courtyard (of my Nineveh palace) in order to review the vast booty taken from enemies” (CAD s.v. *šallatu* A s. 1b-2'). The so-called “letters to the gods” may have in effect been the transcripts of such parades.

boasted, “Its filled-up granaries I opened and let my army devour its abundant grain, in measureless quantities. Its guarded wine-cellar I entered, and the wide-spreading hosts of Aššur drew the good wine from the skins like river water.”⁹⁹ Yet it is difficult to distinguish with certainty in any given image or text passage when soldiers were looting on behalf of the army and the king, or filling their own pockets.¹⁰⁰ Though Mesopotamian kings probably had some interest in reducing military predation on civil populations, their ability to police these kinds of problems was quite low. One Assyrian official moaned to his king that “whenever the bodyguard sees the prospect of booty, he neglects [his work].”¹⁰¹ The great conqueror and lawgiver Ḫammurabi seemed to spend most of his post-conquest years sorting out claims and appeals from occupied cities in which Babylonians had appropriated local properties—yet there is no sense that confiscations were *a priori* unacceptable, only that the conflicts they produced were undesirable. On the contrary, it is clear in some instances that it was Ḫammurabi’s policy to license free looting, at one point complaining of a failed raid, “How can 5,000 troops return empty-handed to camp?”¹⁰²

Neo-Assyrian divinatory queries presuppose that looting and plundering of civilians was a regular option for military expeditions,¹⁰³ but this practice was not without its problems. One Neo-Assyrian letter, for example, complains that “the king’s bodyguard took advantage of the [Tabolean deportees’] oxen, sheep and women”—but the complaint was lodged only because the official writing the letter was responsible for settling those deportees in the first place, and wished to avoid being blamed.¹⁰⁴ In another case, one outraged official writes to another, “The king our lord says: ‘You must not take booty from them.’ But you are

99 Luckenbill 1927, II 16, 76, 77, 87, 90, 91. One Old Babylonian omen predicts that an army would be “sated with booty,” *šallatum šebûm*.

100 Some portion of booty was often redistributed to high officials, post-accounting, e.g. SAA 11 36, in which war booty is given to a wagon master, a scribe of the treasurer, a palace supervisor, and others.

101 Waterman 1930, 85.

102 ARM 27/141; raiding was enough of a regular practice at Mari to warrant a distinct verb, *sadādu*. However, one text (ARM V 72) outlines financial damages to be paid by a soldier convicted of illegally appropriating war booty, Ziegler 2000, 21-2.

103 See, *passim*, SAA IV, but, e.g., 271, a query asking whether Assyrian troops should loot and plunder the Gambulu tribe.

104 SAA XV 54.

assuredly coming and taking booty from our city!”¹⁰⁵ It becomes clear that both the king’s order and the official’s complaint have to do with the responsibility efficiently to allocate resources between units, not to protect civilians from soldiers.

The Code of Hammurabi addressed a similar concern in protecting, rather, soldiers from their captains, who might “oppress” them, hire them out, use them as scapegoats in legal proceedings, or “take a gift that the king gave to a soldier.”¹⁰⁶ A similar edict of Šamši-Adad I of Assyria at Mari warned, “the general, captain, or sergeant who deprives a soldier of his booty has committed a sacrilege against (the god) Dagan.”¹⁰⁷ The central authorities, of course, also intervened when abuses extended to outright insubordination and military indiscipline, as when an official complained to the king of a cohort commander, a “third-man,” and a bodyguard: “These three men are drunkards! When they are drunk, none of them can turn his iron sword away from his colleague!”¹⁰⁸ In another case, troops in the capital city of Kalḫu were reported to be “loitering in the center . . . riding [their] horses [around] like . . . common criminals and drunkards.”¹⁰⁹ Looting on foreign campaign was one thing, but discipline and the orderly division of spoils was to be preserved among the imperial ranks.

Recourse to all these incentives—land, rations, pay, promotion, and loot—reflected the fact that Mesopotamian militaries drew on manpower reserves from different sectors of society, and the military economy and the social order of the army were diversified accordingly. Can we then speak of a first-millennium “military economy” when endemic warfare and military land-holding had long been central features of the political landscape?¹¹⁰ The answer, I think, is yes,

105 SAA XVIII 72. Appeals against looting as problems of insubordination include ARM 26/436, 27/57, and SAA XVIII 175.

106 CH ¶34. Sasson 1969, 14 and 37.

107 V. Matthews 1981, 143; see also Sasson 1969, 48-49.

108 SAA XVI 115.

109 SAA I 154; see also SAA XIII 33, in which officers of mercenary troops are reported for goldbricking, eating stores, drinking wine, stealing toll monies, and “molesting” anyone who called them to account.

110 cf. Cioffi-Revilla’s (1996, 10-11) conclusion that Mesopotamia had very high onset rates for protobellum warfare in comparison to modernity: 871 wars in 2,190 years, about one every two and a half years. However, this is not appropriately considered in light of the multi-polity landscape. Even for the two cities most intensively identified (and actually prosecuting) regular warfare—Babylon and Larsa in the Old Babylonian period—we still find only an average of one conflict documented every 10.8 years:

insofar as military elites had increased influence on state policy and ideology, state economies were reorganized around tributary modes of production and economic rationalization, and where the performance of war became an indispensable function of kingship. “Militarism” denotes the point at which war was no longer the instrument of policy, but the policy goal itself, and a “military economy” where the mode of production pertained not just for soldiers in one economic sector, but at the level of the state as a whole. By these standards, the Neo-Assyrian empire following 745 (under Tiglath-pileser III) qualifies, for instance, since it was no longer possible for the state to do without the financial and ideological incomes produced by the execution of warfare—an “addictions model” of imperialism.¹¹¹

The consequences of this “addiction” are less clear. Some scholars tend to see Mesopotamia’s first-millennium empires as militarized political realms with a steadier diet of warfare with obviously negative consequences for millions of people. Others tend to see them as ushering in a period of armed peace under which local wars occurred less frequently and surpluses accrued in all sectors of society under a generalized security. It is often suggested that the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Achaemenid empires merely represented phases of a single process of imperialization—that the Assyrians did the heavy lifting in breaking the back of localism, with subsequent empires enjoying the fruits of those labors.¹¹² The resolution of these positions are based on unequal evidence, and the question of which state was “kinder” or “more violent” seems inherently wrongheaded—but it must at least be said that the insistent refrain of institutionalized violence continues to compromise the legacy of the millennium’s imperial floruit in comparison to previous epochs.

common, but hardly endemic. On the other end of the spectrum, the Ur III period, most frequently identified with bureaucratic institutionalism, in fact documented foreign warfare in most years of its existence. It is, among these observations extremely difficult to draw firm conclusions.

111 See Fuchs 2005 for a closer inspection of this issue. Melville (forthcoming) presents a compelling argument that the Assyrian empire collapsed so quickly in the face of invasions because it had become so habituated to offensive warfare that it had virtually forgotten how, why, and when to fight defensively.

112 This point lays behind much of what is examined in the papers assembled in Lanfranchi, Roaf, and Rolling 2003.

5. SPECIALIZATION, SCALE, AND DIVERSITY

In third millennium contexts, warfare was prosecuted by and for elites and the retinues of palatial estates, for whom we have evidence in the form of ration-lists and a basic hierarchy of titles (chiefs, subordinates, and ration holders).¹¹³ To the best of our knowledge, the early military was a relatively small segment of society and economy, and manpower units were often not functionally distinguished between civil-engineering work and military action—mostly termed *erim*, either “people” or “troops”—let alone by rank or military specialty.¹¹⁴ Neither was any soldier-class reflected distinctly in institutional documentary regimes, where military personnel often appeared in ration and personnel lists mixed in with priests, civil servants, and craftsmen.

The overall scarcity of military professional names and the rarity of their attestation in Early Dynastic times reflects the indistinction between soldiering and other types of mass labor. Among the Early Dynastic “Lu”-lists, enumerating hundreds of professions and titles, only a scant few are military in nature—the *šagina* (“general”), *ugula* (“overseer,” but more often a workers’ “foreman” in usage), the *nu-banda*₃ (“captain”), the *lu₂-en-nu* (“guard”), and *niġir* (“herald”)—among many more titles for priests, food processors, and shepherds. This distribution of evidence within these (at some level) idealized lists is more or less matched by the prosopography of early account texts. Thus in practice as well as in theory, military personnel were a distinct minority of the payrolls of early state institutions. Some sort of elite unit may be referenced in Lagaš inscriptions which speaks of an army’s “vanguard” (*sag mu-gub-ba*) and equid drivers (*anše eren*₂). There was always, however, a sizable gap between title and function with regard to military function; one of the rare Early Dynastic letters mentioning Elamite attack notes that the leader of the counteroffensive was to be a temple administrator.¹¹⁵ This situation altered only gradually, with full-scale professionalization emerging

113 The *ugula*, *šub-lugal*, and *lu₂-kur₆-dab₅-ba*, respectively; other known ranks in the Early Dynastic period included the *nu-banda*₃ (a “lieutenant”), and, quite late in the period, the *šagina* (“general”). The personal quality of military loyalty is alluded to in the twenty-first century text called “The Death of Ur-Namma,” in which the king’s soldiers weep for their dead ruler.

114 The craft specialization may be attested as early as the ED in the professional names *illar-dim*₃ and *pan-dim*₂, probably “weapon-maker” and “bow-maker.”

115 Michalowski 1993, 12.

under the empires of the first millennium. Thus, despite its military ideology, the Akkadian conquest state (2334-2093) introduced only a modest degree of military institutionalization, preferring relatively few innovations in titles and control through temple and private households where it directly administered annexed cities.¹¹⁶

Only with the advent of the Ur III state do we begin to find a wider array of references to specialized functions related to the army (**ugnim**)—not only soldiers, either, but military scribes, administrators, potters, attendants, and female food workers—the personnel of permanent army camps in the home provinces.¹¹⁷ The murky chain of command of the Akkadian state becomes clearer in this twenty-first century scene, since generals clearly served the Crown chancellor (**sukal-mah**) directly, and not as subordinates of the civil governors (**ensi**₂’s). Out in the conquered peripheries of this empire, the military had even more free rein: the system of taxation required all ranks of soldiers to deliver in-kind goods—probably with no questions asked—from the ten oxen and 100 sheep due from generals, down to the common soldiers, who delivered animals collectively in varying amounts.¹¹⁸ By this time, the permanence of military establishments produced communities of various kinds—households in the imperial core, and armed tax offices in the periphery—and service was no longer necessarily of the temporary kind. Old Babylonian states in turn could distinguish an even wider array of specialized troops, and the first references to *kišir šarrūti*, the “royal army,” a term which distinguished professional soldiers from regulars or occasional troops.¹¹⁹

The number of persons involved in these enterprises also grew over time, but probably attained a plateau by Old Babylonian times. Warfare in the Early Dynastic was occasional and seasonal, socially- and politically-formative with a lesser interest in the permanent destruction of enemy manpower or acquisition of territory.¹²⁰ Notwithstanding, the circumvallation of Early Dynastic cities indicates that large reserves of

116 Compare, e.g., Visicato 1999, 23-26 to Foster 1982, 36-38.

117 Lafont 2009, 4.

118 Maeda 1992.

119 Lafont 2009 refers severally to Ur’s “royal army,” but it is not clear what ancient term implies it; perhaps 11, the **eren**₂ **aga**₃-**us**₂ **lugal**. On the other end of the spectrum, one notes that even at the height of the Neo-Assyrian empire, fortress commanders could still complain that they were only supplied with young farm-boys, and not professional soldiers (SAA V 200).

120 Richardson 2011.

manpower could be mobilized for temporary, domestic projects. The modest scale of early forces can be appraised based on the boast of Sargon of Akkad that 5,400 men—apparently an impressive number—“ate before him daily.”¹²¹ By the Ur III period, units in the range of 5,000-10,000 men are attested at Girsu,¹²² and the eighteenth century Mari texts convincingly refer in many contexts to individual corps of 3,000-5,000 men,¹²³ and coalition forces numbering up to 60,000 troops.¹²⁴

Invariably, questions arise as to the dependability of such references, but the consistency of references in functional documents such as letters—i.e., not in propagandistic royal inscriptions—lend the weight of truth to their use of large numbers. This is not to say, of course, that writers always had a perfectly accurate count of troops at their command—several letters refer to the difficulty of estimating troop numbers, but it is clear that name-lists, censuses, and enlistment rolls existed as the basis for these numbers.¹²⁵ A thousand years later, Assyrian officials struggled to achieve results with essentially unchanged technologies.¹²⁶ What is remarkable in the Mari corpus, in fact, is the great amount of administrative oversight given to the disposition of smaller forces—400, 50, 25, or even a single soldier¹²⁷—in a pre-modern context in which personal identity could be almost impossible to verify.¹²⁸

In almost every case, these forces were identified by ethnonyms or cities-of-origin, not as belonging to the state; the forces were multi-ethnic and multi-national, yet not quite, one senses, a public institution.

121 RIME 2.1.1.11.

122 Lafont 2009, §§4.7 and 8.2.

123 E.g., ARM 26/29 permits the calculation of a force of ca. 3,928 men from allotted rations (Heimpel 2003, 193). Other references are more explicit of large numbers: 26/35 mentions 2,000 lance troops; 26/128, an ambush by 2,000 Turukkeans; 26/131, 4,000 “good troops” from Babylon; 26/171, “one or two thousand troops”; 26/217, 5,000 troops; 26/254, 1,000 men; 26/320, 2,000 troops at Šeḥna; 26/355, 5,000 troops at Šubat-Enlil; and so forth.

124 The high number of 60,000 is derived from an expected levy of troops by Šamši-Adad I of Assyria (Sasson 1969, 8). Enough other instances show that such high numbers were not at all fantastic: ARM 26/379 (40,000 men); 440 and 479 (20,000); 503 (34,000 total); 27/18, 145, 147 (all 30,000); see Van De Mieroop 2005, 35, 93. See also ARM I/42, describing the assembly of a 20,000 man force by various means.

125 E.g., ARM 3/19, 26/408, 26/500, 27/25, 46, 151 (for an overview of the registration system) and 153 for a glimpse of the system’s specificity.

126 See SAA XV 181 and the many census documents of SAA XI 123-40.

127 26/316, 260, 353, and 286, respectively.

128 Note the troubles with “imposters” in ARM 14/104+ and 26/515.

The size of and terms for forces suggest that the military by the Middle Bronze Age had become a public institution identified with individual *poleis*, rather than belonging to single rulers or palaces. Accordingly, soldiering took on the aspect of a mass experience without reflecting a national identity.¹²⁹ One is struck, for instance, by the fact that in the Code of Hammurabi, if a soldier was captured while on campaign for the king, the state would only pay the ransom for his return if merchants, the soldier’s family, and the city temple (in that order) could not.¹³⁰ The Assyrian army was not so different in this regard. Although Assyrian kings could claim to control forces as large as 120,000 as early as the mid-ninth century¹³¹—and total manpower reserves probably grew at least commensurately with the expansion of the empire over the next two centuries—such troops remained geographically dispersed and deliberately compartmentalized. Radner has written:

The Assyrian army was in reality many armies, each with its own command structure; its composite character can be seen as the intentional product of a royal strategy which aimed to neutralise the military’s otherwise unbridled power vis-à-vis the king in order to protect his sovereignty—a useful and successful approach that significantly contributed to Assyria’s internal stability and the

129 In the Mari letter A.4515, the writer urges the recipient to mix contingents of soldiers from different cities to promote a sense of common purpose on campaign.

130 CH ¶32; cf. the Neo-Assyrian letters SAA V 32 and 115, on negotiating for abducted soldiers.

131 Dezso 2006 has treated this question exhaustively, but it is worth a long note to give a sense of the problem. Šalmaneser III famously reported in 845 that he deployed 120,000 men against the so-called “Damascus coalition,” which itself put at least 50,000 troops in the field: RIMA 3 102.6 iii.24f. De Odorico 1995, 111 terms this a “marvelously high number [and] roaring in its roundness,” but still a “theoretical or conventional size of the Assyrian army” and, though unlikely for a single battlefield engagement, “after all possible.” Other individual references in royal inscriptions to troop strength rarely mention large corps of Assyrian troops—no larger than 50,000 and often smaller—but two factors argue in favor of a massive overall army: #1, consistent and believable references to enemy dead and captured, routinely numbered in the tens of thousands (though indeed inflated sometimes to “high-exact” numbers, e.g., 200,150); #2, a ubiquity of references in Neo-Assyrian letters to substantial forces of men in the individual contingents scattered in probably more than a hundred places throughout the empire (e.g., SAA XV 25, an expedition of 3,000 men in Zabban; SAA XV 142, a requisition for 2,000 men to man fortresses is deemed insufficient; SAA XVII 70, 20,000 archers in Babylonia; etc.). One large and fragmentary account (SAA XI 126) accounts for at least 33,700 troops; SAA V 250 is an order for a little over 7 million liters of grain to be stored for troops in Kār-Aššur, the equivalent of annual subsistence rations for about 10,000 men.

longevity of its royal dynasty. The different contingents which constituted the Assyrian army were allowed and encouraged to preserve and develop their own customs and idiosyncrasies: rather than being forged into a unified army, its individual components found themselves in intense competition with each other for royal recognition and favour.¹³²

The inertia of localism, however, came under centripetal pressures, too. Barron, for instance, has concluded that despite some differences, Assyrian weapons and armor reveal “a basic homogeneousness throughout the empire”; in terms of fortress-building, Parker has pointed to building corps that constructed emplacements on a common template empire-wide; in terms of ethnic contingents, Postgate showed the composition of Assyrian forces in Zamua to be of a mixed makeup, approximately 25% Qurraean, 31% Ituean, and 44% Assyrian, though the Assyrians clearly occupied the more elite positions of that unit.¹³³ Thus unit autonomy and idiosyncrasy was not an absolute rule.

It is worth pointing out that, in purely economic terms, an army of this size, stationed throughout the territory of the empire, would have obligated the empire to support costs normally dwarfing the investments made in its imperial capitals on preciosities and palace building. I estimate that the cost of basic subsistence provisioning for the army—i.e., its grain rations alone—would have required an input of 20.5 million labor-days per annum—more than five times the annual labor invested in building Aššurnaširpal’s Kalhu palace (maximum 4.7 million labor-days per annum). The investment in standing forces across a wide geographical area would de facto have redistributed imperial resources of all kinds away from imperial centers and out towards peripheries.

Imperial states also had to police, defend, and expand ever-larger borders, but they found their home populations numerically insufficient to the task, and looked to unhitch their military staffing needs from the confines of the agricultural cycle as military action became not only an annual, but a year-round obligation. Empires turned to admixtures of professional soldiers, mercenaries, and vassal armies of ethnically and linguistically diverse composition. From the time of the Ur III state, troops and even high officers bore Hurrian,

132 Radner 2010; cf. idem 2011.

133 Barron 2010; Parker 1997; Postgate 2000, 93.

Elamite, and Amorite names, and this diversity only expanded as time went by. By the time of the high Assyrian empire, the army included units from Nubia, Egypt, Samaria, Hamath, Ellipi, Kummuhu, Urartu, Karkamiš, Arabia, and other conquered places, though in many instances, these remained purely provincial forces, never brought to the capitals in any numbers.¹³⁴ The process was aided by programs of mass deportation and recolonization, which had been practiced by the Hittite and Assyrian states since the middle of the second millennium, and ultimately relocated millions of people across those empires.¹³⁵

The military was, through deportations, thus visibly associated with the death and birth of entire political cultures, through the wholesale destruction of cities, temples, and even gods—the entire cultural undergirding of targeted polities. These practices as much as the military itself have been credited with social mixing, economic mobility, and multilingualism, but also produced broader social disaffection and political instability at all levels as it became less clear by and for whom empires were built and maintained. This pattern included the imperial metropole, too, where substantial social distance was created between imperial militaries and the civil societies they served. One can discern the withdrawal of metropolitan elites from direct engagement in building and maintaining the empire, ceding some avenues of political advancement, and a corollary vertical and geographic integration of peripheral non-elites (arriviste, pluralist, *novi homines*?) into imperial structures. The price of building up an “imperial citizenry” or the like was the destruction of the mytho-ideological bases on which all local cultures were founded, to which the imperial cores were no exceptions.

6. RITUALISM AND INTELLIGENCE

The military was both the subject and site of ritual action. The theological dimension of Mesopotamian warfare is well-established and needs little elaboration here: the gods demanded and guaranteed military success for the king.¹³⁶ Royal ideology styled almost every war to some extent as a “holy war.” The successful prosecution of warfare was the crucial performative and constitutive act of kingship by the

134 Dalley 1985.

135 Oded 1979.

136 For issues related to monumental depictions of war, see Bahrani 2008; the book does not comprehensively treat, title notwithstanding, military rituals *per se*, as does, e.g., Beal 1995 for the Hittite world.

Neo-Assyrian period, and failure in this endeavor had always been accounted for as the withdrawal of divine favor—the historiographic rationale of major compositions from city laments¹³⁷ to restoration apologies.¹³⁸ Cosmological and theological problems were also narrativized by having war play out on the divine plane—in curses, omens, and most famously in Marduk’s triumphant campaign against an army of demons in the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*.¹³⁹

Within this context, a wide variety of ritual symbols and practices were deployed to signal the favor and protection of the gods. From earliest times, the divine weaponry of kings and gods were fixtures of song and legend: battle nets, axes, bows, spears, and three-, five-, and even fifty-headed maces with epithets of their own, such as “Mows-Down-a-Myriad” and “Floodstorm Weapon.”¹⁴⁰ Such weapons made their appearance on campaign as emblems carried before the troops (**šū-nir giš-tukul**), and were the subjects of offerings and rituals in their own right.¹⁴¹ Sumerian hymns saw the entrustment of such weapons to the king before campaigns;¹⁴² an Old Babylonian letter speaks of ritually “opening” weapons before battle;¹⁴³ armies which reached the Mediterranean or the sources of rivers often symbolically washed their weapons (or themselves) there. With divine weapons in hand, the conception was no less than, as one Assyrian letter put it, that “the king’s gods are ready to march into battle,”¹⁴⁴ processions accompanied by singers and musicians, with ritual performances

137 Michalowski 1989, 4-8.

138 E.g., the heroic literature surrounding Nebuchadnezzar I, Foster 1996, 290-301.

139 See Foster 1996, 350-401 for an accessible translation of this famous text.

140 A study of weapons in Sumerian literature has yet to be undertaken, but see Salonen 1966.

141 Lafont 2009, 6. Akkadian *kakkum* does not distinguish between “weapon” and “emblem” (not to mention weapon-shaped divinatory marks) except by context, and thus the extent of military symbology in ritual is not always clear.

142 ETCSL sections 2.4-2.5, *passim*, though note also an equally strong *topos* of kings’ puissance with weapons in non-ritual contexts, especially Šulgi’s proficiency with the mace, spear, bow and arrow, throw-stick, sling, lance, and the battle-axe, while his person, his luster, his city, and his words are also said to be his “weapons.”

143 ARM 26/205.

144 SAA XVI 132.

preceding¹⁴⁵ and following¹⁴⁶ battles. Images from obelisks, gates, and reliefs suggest that there may have developed a single comprehensive set of rituals to celebrate success in war upon the king’s re-entry into camp (*madaktu*) and city (*ēreb āli*), including animal hunts, re-enactments of tribute receipt, and the shooting of an enemy or his image with an arrow.¹⁴⁷ Rituals of protection also guarded campaign routes, city-walls, and gates,¹⁴⁸ and celebrated the fallen, including an Assyrian ritual close in spirit to the remembrance of the Unknown Soldier.¹⁴⁹ Weapon-emblems were used locally, too, in judicial and tax-collection contexts, the latter known at Old Babylonian Sippar by the practice of the “journey of the weapon of Šamaš.”¹⁵⁰

The sacralization of battle, however, was not the most emphatic aspect of ritual activity surrounding warfare; for this point, pride of place must go to the practice of divination, especially liver divination. Since divination was used to assess everything from the welfare of the army, to the efficacy of its weapons, to the suitability of rations and the availability of water—and since the army and things military form the single most common subject of divinatory inquiries—it may be said that the craft was essentially one of military intelligence. In the Old Babylonian period, divination was already an indispensable step in planning a campaign:¹⁵¹ “If the troops,” queried one diviner from Mari, “whom [Zimri-Lim] dispatched to Ḫammurabi, (arrive), will Ḫammurabi not catch, not kill, not cause to kill, not detain for evil or

145 Preparatory rituals at Mari, according to Sasson (1969, 36-37), included letters to gods, sacrifices, consultations of omens and prophecies, anointing of officers, gift-giving and pledging.

146 On the ritual cycle of Neo-Assyrian victories in both camps and capital cities, see May, forthcoming; ARM 26/391 discusses an *eššeššamma*, a shrine service for coalition troops.

147 May, forthcoming, on the so-called Field War Ritual K. 9923; elements of the ritual are depicted or described on the White Obelisk, the Balawat Gates, in the Nimrud palace of Aššurnāṣirpal II, and in inscriptions of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Aššurbanipal (also in room XXXIII of his Ninevite palace). She notes that one of Esarhaddon’s descriptions of the ritual included supposed passages of direct speech by the soldiers, nearly unique among the corpus of royal inscriptions.

148 E.g. SAA XVIII 164: “The Babylonians have several times performed the ritual on the city gate, and on the xth day they have locked it.”

149 Assyrian “letters to the gods” all include homage to “one charioteer, 2 cavalrymen, and three infantrymen.”

150 Harris 1965; Richardson 2010c.

151 ARM 26/96, 100, 101, and *passim*.

peaceful intentions those troops? Will those who went out through the gate of Mari alive enter the gate of Mari alive?"¹⁵²

By the Neo-Assyrian period, this procedure had been ornamented by further ritual procedures, but remained fundamentally geared towards gaining military information down to the smallest tactical detail—at what point an enemy might breach a city wall, whether the *avant-garde* or the rear guard was more vulnerable on the march, what were the prospects for booty at a campaign's conclusion.¹⁵³ Given the extensive network of spies, informers, and diplomatic specialists the Assyrians used to gather and verify what we might think of as actionable, i.e., "on the ground" intelligence,¹⁵⁴ however, it remains an unsolved question as to how they balanced these two sources of information, from both gods and men.

One unique historical problem related to ritual and warfare is the role of troops in the destruction of tombs, temples, and divine images in the first millennium. Accusations of depredations against the gods were sometimes leveled by Babylonian sources, as in the chronicle charging Assyrians with setting fire to the temple in the city of Šaznaku,¹⁵⁵ but most often Assyrian sources are informative about their own role in these cases. Assyrian campaigns resulted not only in the deportation of people, but also in that the deportation of divine images.¹⁵⁶ In these episodes, the gods were carted off—not destroyed—and presumably stored in Assyria. This practice began at least as early as the late Middle Assyrian period, when Tiglath-pileser I laconically reports of a conquered enemy king, "I carried off his wives, his natural sons, his clan, 180 copper kettles, five bronze bathtubs, together with their gods, gold and silver, the best of their property."¹⁵⁷

Assyrian royal inscriptions account for not only the abduction of divine images—depicted among the reliefs of Tiglath-pileser III's palace, among others—but their destruction by fire (most famously

152 ARM 26/100; this query, which received a favorable reply, has the distinction of having proven demonstrably false, since Hammurabi subsequently detained the army of Mari and later attacked that city. See Jeyes 1989; Richardson 2010a, 245-48.

153 Starr 1990.

154 On espionage in this period, see: Durand 1991; Dubovsky 2006.

155 ABC 2. The Judicial Chronicle (BCHP 17) accuses soldiers, among others, of having stolen from the garden of Bēl-Marduk; Hanean troops who had slaughtered civilians were said to have "not feared the gods" (BCHP 11).

156 Bahrani 1995, also on the abduction of royal images.

157 RIMA 2 0.87.1.

in the burning of the temple of Haldi at Muṣaṣir by Sargon II) and dismemberment, and their anticipated destruction through burial, drowning, or trampling by animals.¹⁵⁸ The number of abducted gods grew over the centuries and finally culminated in instances of deicide, reported with an equal lack of reflection. Consider, for instance, the unintentionally dark satire of Aššurbanipal’s description of his soldiers’ experiences in Elam, when he sent his troops into “... the sanctuaries of Elam their secret groves into which no stranger (ever) penetrates, whose borders he never (over)steps—into these my soldiers entered, saw their mysteries, and set them on fire.”¹⁵⁹ Aššurbanipal’s Ninevite palace also shows, in parallel, the execution of an Elamite king by foot soldiers—and in front of Elamite troops—a measure of the public exposure to these previously unthinkable acts. These cases may have engendered a disenchantment with representations of the divine, though at this early stage, kings tended to distance themselves from such acts by most frequently “crediting” them to their soldiers.

7. “I DON’T WANT NO MORE OF ARMY LIFE”:
COLD, HUNGER AND HARDSHIP

“My troops are scarce,” one Assyrian commander wrote, imploring his king for help; “(even) the horses of the king, my lord, had grown weak, so I let them go up to the mountain and graze.”¹⁶⁰ Another wrote that his troops would “die of hunger ... (they must be released) lest they starve ... (and yet) they cannot depart because of snow.”¹⁶¹ Conditions in one fortress on the Zagros frontier were so bad it was nearly deserted: “There is nobody there except 200 rounded-up soldiers, and no food except for the travel provisions which they carry with them. Moreover, (enemies) have cut off the water between us and the land...”¹⁶² From the extreme south of Babylonia, another fragmentary letter tells of dire conditions: “[The men] do not eat bread ... they have contracted ...

158 See Bahrani 2003, 174-84.

159 Luckenbill 1927, II, 310; in this campaign alone the king carried off nineteen divine images of named gods and 32 unnamed royal statues from Susa as well as destroying the royal tombs.

160 SAA I 241.

161 SAA V 126. The problem is echoed in an Old Babylonian letter (ARM 2/24+), pleading with Ḫammurabi to dismiss troops before winter: “A soldier must reach his house before the cold season!”

162 SAA XVII 152.

have not rested ... [The warriors of the] king, my lord, have pains in their legs ... and their eyes have become dark.”¹⁶³ These letters were all written during the years of Assyria’s greatest power, yet the many letters concerning the hardships of garrison life are enough to want for a Mesopotamian Bill Mauldin. In this respect, they form a welcome tonic to the interminable and untroubled narratives of victory purveyed by Mesopotamian royal inscriptions and images of happy and orderly camps (*madākātu*): Assyrian palace reliefs of this same period from Kalhu and Nineveh depict soldiers and even deportees under guard contentedly baking bread, grooming horses, cooking food and drinking wine by open campfires.

The Assyrian letters of discontent echo earlier Old Babylonian ones. In one town, an agent replies testily and sarcastically to a king who has breezily written repeated orders to distribute flour freely to the troops that the garrison commander “has become tired of all that writing” and that food was so low that “the division commander ... and the lieutenant under my authority receive grain rations like the (common) soldiers ... Now, from this day on, (why not) let the soldiers receive 21 liter grain rations, (and) I and the general will eat animal fodder.”¹⁶⁴ The incessant warfare of the early eighteenth century saw campaigns lasting far beyond the agricultural season, with troops absent from home for as long as three years and more.¹⁶⁵ Middle Assyrian letters from the lonely western fortress of Dūr-Katlimmu present a similarly bleak picture of garrison life. One letter back to Aššur reveals that grasshoppers had eaten what little food there was; then the troops had survived for a while on chickpeas; but finally they had reached a point in which they had to choose between food for themselves and food for their hundred prisoners; in a later communiqué, the same letter writer admits disgustedly that “all soldiers have made their provisions out of the dust.”¹⁶⁶ It was under such conditions that the Assyrian kings of the twelfth to tenth centuries spoke repeatedly of “rescuing” Assyrians who had long since gone native in their borderlands communities, melting back into the village-scape to farm as settlers.

163 SAA XVII 201.

164 ARM 26/314.

165 Ziegler 2000, 21.

166 Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996, Nos. 2, 3; notwithstanding, this was a place which nobles and foreign kings might visit periodically (No. 10).

It seems an eternal truth of army life that the tents should be too thin, the postings far and lonely, and the sergeants foul-mouthed and harsh. Mesopotamians were no strangers to the experience of battle trauma, either: In one Sumerian lament poem, low morale on the battlefield resulted in despair and flight, when “war veterans gave up, their brains were muddled.”¹⁶⁷ One should note, it is true, the occasional burst of *élan*: “It is all laughter and play [among the troops],” writes one captain. “Their hearts are content as if they were staying in their own houses. The(ir) hearts ... tell of their zeal for doing battle and killing the enemy.” (This zeal for battle was idiomatically known as the “dance of Inanna,” the battle goddess.) But mostly our letters provide a steady antiphonal response to the idealizing images of royal inscriptions on almost every conceivable topic. Where kings boasted of their triumphs over high mountains and raging rivers, commanders complained that the terrain was too difficult and the troops could not swim.¹⁶⁸ Where kings claimed that their troops would defend widow and waif against enemies, captains asked, “Who would go out to the rescue and face a raider to save boys and girls?”¹⁶⁹ Against the image of the seemingly boundless puissance of the king’s troops, one Assyrian officer has to explain to the annoyed king why a temple wall was peppered with the arrows of inept troops.¹⁷⁰

The boredom of military life, the seeming ubiquity of incompetence, the thematic refrain of insufficiencies are all here, but the emphasis in Mesopotamian letters is clearly on problems with the food supply. What is revealed by the insistent concern for food is that there seems to be a relatively low expectation on the part of commanders that other kinds of supplies—armor, weapons,¹⁷¹ wagons, etc.—were to be supplied to them by the central authority. This is not to say that arsenals did not exist—there is plenty of evidence to the contrary¹⁷²—but only that

167 ETCSL, Lament for Unug, text 2.2.5, l. 61.

168 SAA V 200.

169 ARM 26/171.

170 SAA XVII 158. Mari letters referred to incompetently-led armies as “blind snakes” (ARM 26/491).

171 In one Middle Assyrian letter, a frustrated commander asked to produce arrows disgustedly wrote his superior that “the little piece of iron my lord gave me is unfit for the manufacture of (so much as) a whip handle” (Cancik-Kischbaum 1996, No. 16).

172 See, e.g., Ziegler 2000, 17-18; and Richardson 2005b; see also, *passim*, the numerous mentions of supply depots and central arsenals in Middle and Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions.

these were occasional provisions, and that the true economic boundary on military costs was in sustaining manpower, not technologies (a boundary which has only relatively recently changed anyway).

In any event, one should not confuse reports of thin rations in garrisons for the genuine famines visited on besieged cities, in which starvation and even (according to Assyrian royal inscriptions) cannibalism resulted.¹⁷³ Even when sieges were unsuccessful, investing armies would steal supplies, cut off the water supply, burn growing crops,¹⁷⁴ or—perhaps worst of all—destroy orchards, economic products which took decades to rebuild.¹⁷⁵ The aftermath of raids found settlements licking their wounds, and enumerating the killed and captured.¹⁷⁶ Of course, situations existed in which the arrival of troops provoked joy and celebration,¹⁷⁷ but by and large most civilians were charity of men with weapons then as now.

This is hardly the place to consider all the potential directions in which an analysis of the Mesopotamian horror of war could be directed, so I will use just one example to suggest the profitability of such a study. Probably the most iconic literary depiction of war and its brutality in cuneiform literature is the Akkadian poem conventionally titled “Erra and Išum.” The text describes the rage of the god Erra and his war against mankind; it contains not only a critique of warfare violence (amidst a vivid narration thereof¹⁷⁸), but an almost ritually prophylactic conclusion. One aspect worth emphasizing is Erra’s deployment of seven terrible warrior-monsters, themed on terror, fire, a fearsome lion, a mountain, blasting wind, a deluge, and a viper.¹⁷⁹

173 ARM 27/156; Zaccagnini 1995; and see examples in CAD B s.v. *būru* C s., “starvation.” Notwithstanding, strongholds were seen as safe zones for civilians: ARM 26/515, 27/113.

174 A.3669, ARM 2/50, 27/141; cf. Richardson 2005b. Curtis and Reade 1995, 47 shows an Assyrian soldier cutting down a rope with a bucket meant to draw water into a besieged city.

175 E.g., ARM 2/33; for Neo-Assyrian examples, see CAD K s.v. *kašāṭu* v., “to cut down orchards”; the act is depicted in the reliefs of the Aššurnāširpal II palace at Nimrud, among other places. See Oded 1997; cf. Aufrère 2005.

176 For a rare and detailed look at such a history “written by the losers,” see Maidman 2008. 177 E.g., SAA XVIII 142.

178 E.g., of prisoners: “I cut the clothes from the bodies of men, the young man I parade naked through the city street, the young man without clothes I send down to hell” (Foster 1996, II 774); see ARM 27/151 for just such a display of naked enemies.

179 One might compare these monsters to the band of demons sent to seize the young god Dumuzi in the early Sumerian poem “Dumuzi’s Dream.” These demons take on the aspect of soldiers: “Those who come for the king are a motley crew, who know not

Their semblance as allegories of misery to the medieval "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" should be clear, but what is specific to the Mesopotamian conception of these forces is a) that they were charged with destinies, i.e., to perform their functions of warfare, but also b) that these functions were potentially reversible—by the gods, by ritual—precisely because of their written nature.¹⁸⁰ War, like so many other evils of the Mesopotamian world, was ultimately perceived as a construct which could be modified or averted; it was not, at its root, an unalterable fact to be endured.

8. ARMY POLITICS: ASSEMBLY, AGENCY, AND IDENTITY

Perhaps the most intriguing windows into military life afforded by episodes of hardship are the instances in which they provoked the non-compliance or rebellion of troops. Innumerable reports of desertion and malingering—not hard to find—could, by themselves, already be counted as a kind of exercise of agency. These kinds of discontent were incessantly corrosive of authority by their ubiquity, but their specific causes are not always clear: one garrison commander wrote to his king that his men were simply fed up, their "hearts are angry, and they will rise up and depart for somewhere else."¹⁸¹ But Mesopotamian armies were not only responsive to authority and lapses thereof along the axis of obeisance/dereliction; they exercised political agency through clear examples of assembly, deliberation, and decision-making.

Explicitly political behaviors in military groups can be located in the record: the occasion of muster as a form of assembly, cases of persuasive speech, independent negotiation, appointment to office, and even mass defections. Part of these independent behaviors were underwritten by the exigencies of communications in the pre-modern world: down the chain of command, officers and troops had to make decisions in the field without recourse to advice from above. Armies had to accept or reject terms of surrender in the field without specific

food, who know not drink, who eat no sprinkled flour, who drink no poured water, who accept no pleasant gifts, who do not enjoy a wife's embraces, who never kiss dear little children, who never chew sharp-tasting garlic, who eat no fish, who eat no leeks." ETCSL, text 1.4.3. See also Ziegler's (1997) contention that the parts of Mesopotamian armies—its forehead, wings, navel, and tail—were part of a metaphorical system designed to terrify enemies by imparting to armies the qualities of monsters.

180 See J. Cohen 1996.

181 ARM 26/356.

royal orders and on their own judgment.¹⁸² “Our troops were about to do battle with the Numheans,” the governor of Qatṭunan wrote Zimri-Lim, “but the Numheans retired, saying ‘Our brothers! What do you have against us? We are searching for our enemies...’”¹⁸³ Another letter seems to presuppose that armistices were agreements involving all participants: the oracle of the god Dagan asks “Have the kings of the Yaminites and their troops made peace with the troops of Zimri-Lim who came up?”¹⁸⁴ The delegation of authority is reflected in an early literary letter in which Šu-Sin, King of Ur, excoriates one of his generals: “Why did you not act as I ordered you? You were not (previously) empowered to kill anyone, to blind(?) people or to destroy cities, but I gave you authority to do so.”¹⁸⁵ The principle of command presupposes delegation of authority, and thus some degree of the heterarchy of power.

Our cases go beyond this, though, since political pressure emanated from the bottom up, too. Old Babylonian fortresses, for instance, are known to have developed some aspects of civic life over time—families, dependents, elders, and cult emplacements.¹⁸⁶ A sense of community developed over the decades: one garrison captain writes the king that he cannot punish two local criminals, or his troops would leave, prompting the commoners to rebel,¹⁸⁷ in another case, it was feared that the entry of troops into a city would spark a rebellion.¹⁸⁸ Even appointments from above had to take the political temperature into account: one high general wrote confidentially to his king that he had to defer to an inferior on the appointment of 12 division commanders instead of the 10 he thought necessary: “I considered it and said to myself, ‘Once I take away two among the division commanders, who were assigned, it will cause lips to turn against me.’”¹⁸⁹

In some instances, troops would hear speeches of potential commanders in assembly and accept or reject their leadership:

182 ARM 2/26, 26/385, 405.

183 ARM 27/68.

184 ARM 26/233.

185 ETCSL, text 3.1.16, ll. 24-7.

186 On elders, see AbB 13 107; on dependents, see Richardson 2010c, Texts 16-20; on institutional, family, legal, and religious life at a Babylonian fortress, see Joannès 2006, 27-33.

187 ARM 26/408.

188 ARM 26/155.

189 A.486+.

“Assemble the troops and hear their words (lit., ‘lip’): If the troops are willing to accept [their officer], he may keep his troops.”¹⁹⁰ After a lengthy denunciation of enemies in the assembly of troops at Qaṭṭara, an agent of Zimri-Lim’s reports: “These things and more Kakkutanum told the assembled men and caused the troops to change their minds. And he caused the opinion of the commoners to turn [as well] . . . and the commoners turned to the side of Kakkutanum.”¹⁹¹ One among a number of verbs for the gathering of an army for expedition in all periods was *pahāru*, “to assemble,” the same used for the gathering together of decision-making assemblies in Mesopotamian cities. Esarhaddon played quite deliberately on this coincidence in one inscription; of the surrender of an enemy army, he wrote that Ištar broke up “their compact line of battle, and in their assembly they proclaimed ‘This is our King!’ By her illustrious command, they joined themselves to my side.”¹⁹² The elective principle of the army-as-assembly suggested in the Gilgameš Epic seems thus to find some reflection in practice.

Sources for political voices other than the king’s are precious few; we cannot follow this thread about the soldier’s political agency too far. Yet we can note that Neo-Assyrian armies in several instances backed rival candidates for king—against Šamši-Adad V, against Aššur-nerari V, against the accession of Esarhaddon. Throughout the tumultuous centuries of the Neo-Assyrian state, field marshals rose to act as *de facto* rulers of large parts of the empire, and schemed against monarchs to whom they owed nominal allegiance. Of Esarhaddon, a Babylonian Chronicle laconically reports the suppression of a *putsch*: “The eleventh year [of Esarhaddon]: In Assyria the king put numerous officers to the sword,”¹⁹³ and we are aware of other successful army plots.¹⁹⁴

190 ARM 26/322-3.

191 ARM 26/412-3; the troops who remained loyal in this case were later re-assembled and forced to swear an oath of allegiance; similarly, ARM 26/344,

192 CAD Q s.v. *qabû* 1e-3’; see also Richardson 2010b on the ubiquity of Assyrian royal language delegitimizing speech and assembly.

193 ABC 14. Whether Esarhaddon’s death the following year was, as reported, due to illness, cannot of course be confirmed. Nebuchadnezzar II also put down an officers’ rebellion (as distinct from others blamed on rival lords, nobles, or the general populace); ABC 5 reports: “With arms he slew many of his own army.”

194 These include the assassination of Tukulti-Ninurta I (ABC 22), the seizure and delivery of Enlil-kudurri-ušur (Walker Chronicle), and perhaps another seventh century revolt (ABC 15). Babylonian officers’ plots include the overthrow of Karahardaš (ABC 21, and the appointment of the new king, Nazibugaš); late period examples include a supposed army rebellion against the Median Astyages (ABC 7) and an apparent reference to the

We may say this: professional soldiers and imperial officers were probably better traveled than many palace elites, and familiar with foreign people as deportees and auxiliaries, while residing apart from the traditional culture of the Assyrian heartland. Assyrian royal inscriptions make for colorful travel brochures of military life: the king's soldiers had climbed high mountains, seen far valleys, tasted the waters of distant rivers. The linguistic melting pot of camp life acquainted soldiers with peers from distant lands and with different social identities.

There have been arguments that the Mesopotamian military sustained and produced concepts of masculinity as well.¹⁹⁵ A Mesopotamian conception of “manhood,” on the one hand, could be said to have included the idea of man-as-warrior; on the other, one could note in the Neo-Assyrian context that eunuchs fought alongside bearded men on the battlefield.¹⁹⁶ Images of women in palace reliefs, Bahrani has argued, “signify the humiliation and destitution of the conquered land through the bodies of women”—while victory was always masculine.¹⁹⁷ In a few instances, it seems likely that the accusation that a fleeing enemy king “fled on a mare” was intended to strike at his masculinity by allusion to his feminine mount, but this specific image is restricted to a few cases in the late eighth century.¹⁹⁸ Be this as it may, it would also be impossible to maintain that defeat was marked among the same period texts and images as exclusively feminine—male bodies were in fact the much more common subjects of graphic abuse to the extent of producing a deliberately titillating pornography of violence.¹⁹⁹ What is all the more remarkable is the low incidence of feminizing metaphors in characterizing defeated enemies. For those who failed their essential duties as men in warfare, the much more common metaphors were borrowed from the animal world: an enemy who fled the battlefield “flew like a bird,” “escaped like a fox through a hole,” “like a crawling creature,” “like a mouse through a crack”—enemies fled like pigs, bats,

assassination of a Seleucid monarch by “generals with their troops” in BCHP 9 (time of Seleucus I Nicator).

195 E.g. Chapman 2004; Bahrani 2008, 107.

196 See Chapman 2004 on the construction of male identity in the context of Assyrian warfare; for a depiction of eunuchs in battle, see Curtis and Reade 1995, 67.

197 Bahrani 2001, 124-30.

198 Tadmor 1994, 101, 133-35; Luckenbill 1927, 8, 82.

199 See especially Bersani and Dutoit 1985, 52-56.

pelicans, and sheep.²⁰⁰ One can think that many elements common to all military experience—deindividualization; participatory violence; the celebration of the fit body—were also constructive of masculinity in Mesopotamia. Yet when one seeks out what seems particular to this culture’s sense of personhood with reference to the military, the dyadic divide is more strongly drawn along the divide of human or non-human than masculine or feminine.

Decades, even generations of garrison life would have imparted senses of community and identity to multi-ethnic, “borderlands” military units, with their own cultures of hierarchy and merit. It is not hard to see in Assyria’s insistent militarism the recasting of the empire as a whole along the lines of these nascently political communities. The era of city-states had ended in Mesopotamia around 1600, followed by the rise of so-called “national states” down to ca. 900, when an age of empires arose. This imperial period also saw the development of urban Chartism—legal exceptionalism—that emerged by the fourth century as a newly-dominant era of localism, largely conditioned by the cellular character of imperial military rule.

9. CONCLUSION

I have barely scratched the surface of what has been examined. Many more research areas remain under-explored: wartime trauma and the habituation to violence;²⁰¹ the production of gender identity through military life;²⁰² the economic analysis of war and “armed peace.”²⁰³ Other areas remain almost untouched: the long-term effects of war; its frequency; the role of non-combatants; treatment of the dead and the missing; the functions of the military’s police. Clearly, more studies are needed. It is true that military life is so thoroughly suffused throughout the sources and periods that it seems at first quixotic to consider it as a separate historical problem. Yet its ubiquity being a clear indication of its importance, we can look forward to ever-newer scholarship on this oldest of historical problems.

200 RIMA 1-3 and Luckenbill, *passim*. In a unique passage, one tribute-paying people is said to “do their hair like women” (RIMA 2.101.1 ii. 72b-76a), but the aside seems devoid of gendering intent.

201 On post-traumatic stress disorder and (literary) evidence, see Ben-Ezra 2004; *idem* 2010; on state promotion of violence, see Bonneterre 1997; Bersani and Dutoit 1985; Crouch 2009.

202 See especially Kuhrt 2001, but also Hammons 2008 (esp. Ch. 3); Philip 2002.

203 Spek 1993; Aperghis 2000.

