

**Refereed paper presented to the
Australasian Political Studies Association conference
University of Newcastle
25-27 September 2006**

Re-thinking Middle Eastern Democracy: Lessons from Ancient Mesopotamia

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Abstract

The issue of Middle Eastern democracy has long inspired lively academic debate and research from across the ideological and political spectrum. Despite their differences, much of this work measures the successes and failures of Middle Eastern democracy against the Western model, with its antecedents in the political machinations found in Athens during the 5th century B.C. However, there is growing evidence to suggest that the history of democracy began on the other side of the Occidental/Oriental line and can be traced as far back as the early Mesopotamian myths of Enuma Elish, through to the grand empires of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians and Phoenicians. In the interest of fostering a liberal, democratic and egalitarian Middle East, this paper concludes by suggesting that one strategy for re-thinking the Middle East's democratisation is to engage the powerful discourses of the Middle East's ancient, and democratic, past.

Introduction:

The issue of Middle Eastern democracy has long inspired lively academic debate and research from across the ideological and political spectrum. Largely this work can be separated into two categories: those who believe that democracy will not succeed in the region and those who avidly support the 'shift'. Despite their differences, much of the work on both sides of this dichotomy has served to further entrench the binary oppositions between East and West by measuring the successes and failures of Middle Eastern democracy against the Western model. More recently scholars such as Jack Goody (1996) have argued that in order to eschew these discourses of opposition, humanities and social science research must instead emphasise the common heritage of both parts of the Eurasian land mass, namely the urban revolution of the Bronze Age and the subsequent development of the early city-states across ancient Mesopotamia.

Overwhelmingly, the history of Mesopotamia tells us of the megalomaniacal kings and their grand, menacing empires that rose out of these early developments to conquer and rule the region by fear, bloodshed and domination. However, there is also a growing understanding that the history of modern thought – usually understood to have begun around 400 B.C. in Greece – can be traced further back to early Mesopotamia. Of foremost relevance here is the governance of Mesopotamia's early city-states by a political system that Jacobsen has termed 'Primitive Democracy' where "...ultimate

political power rested with a general assembly of all adult freemen” (1977 [1951]-b: 128).

This paper therefore begins by reviewing the current literature on democracy and the Middle East from across the aforementioned political and ideological spectrum. It continues by detailing the extensive examples of ‘Primitive Democracy’ found throughout the region’s history, from early myths such as Enuma Elish through to the grand empires of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians and Phoenicians. In the interest of fostering a liberal, democratic and egalitarian Middle East, this paper concludes by suggesting that one strategy for re-thinking the Middle East’s democratisation is to engage the powerful discourses of Mesopotamia’s ancient, and democratic, past.

Middle Eastern Democracy

At least as far back as Huntington’s essay on ‘The Goals of Development’ (1987) has the issue of democracy and the Middle East in the late twentieth / early twenty-first century become highly contentious. In it, he argued that each region of the globe has its own individual religio-cultural essence that plays a large part in determining their receptivity to democratic systems (Huntington, 1987: 24). In his later work, Huntington isolated two such religio-cultural examples, namely Islam and Confucianism, and labelled them “profoundly anti-democratic” (Huntington, 1991: 300), claiming that they would “...impede the spread of democratic norms in society, deny legitimacy to democratic institutions, and thus greatly complicate if not prevent the emergence and effectiveness of those institutions” (Huntington, 1991: 298). Building on this early work, Huntington’s most influential book ‘The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order’ (1998) goes even further by claiming that the early twenty-first century will be marred by the battle – both physical and ideological – between these anti-democratic ‘civilizations’ and the West, as humankind heads towards what Fukuyama termed ‘The End of History’ (1992).

Although, as Kamrava rightly points out, the notion that “...social and cultural forces thwart democratic possibilities in the Middle East is not new” (1998: xiv), Huntington’s argument has certainly garnered wide support from neo-conservative foreign policy pundits and neo-Orientalist academics alike. One such example is Kedourie’s work on ‘Democracy and Arab Political Culture’ (1994) which details several democratic experiments that sprung up across the Middle East throughout the first half of the twentieth century (namely Iraq 1921-1938, Syria 1928-1949, Lebanon 1926-1975 and Egypt 1923-1952). The central reason these attempts at introducing constitutional rule to the Middle East failed, according to Kedourie, is that they were undermined by the fact that the people of the Middle East have historically been accustomed to “autocracy and passive obedience” (1994: 103). Kamrava takes this argument a step further by stating that “it is the forces of primordialism, informality and autocracy that have shaped and continue to shape the parameters of life in Middle Eastern societies...” (1998: 32). It is this fundamental lack of a democratic history, Kamrava argues, that has left the Middle East without the necessary social and cultural dynamics to foster various democratic movements, institutions and classes that make up a thriving civil society and give rise to democratic governance (Kamrava, 1998: 31-32).

However, there has also emerged a significant body of work running counter to these neo-Orientalists. On the issue of civil society, many scholars have challenged those who totally dismiss Middle Eastern developments and examples and the potential for democratisation across the region (Al-Sayyid, 1993; Hinnebusch, 1993; Ibrahim, 1993; Muslih, 1993; Norton, 1993; Richards, 1993; Tetreault, 1993), with one writer labelling

them as “orientalists and mongers of ethnocentrism” (Ibrahim, 1995: 30). Foremost amongst this body of work are the contributions found in the twin volumes of ‘Civil Society in the Middle East’ (Norton, 1995b), where the editor claims that “...civil society is today part of the political discourse in the Middle East...[it] is the locus for debate, discussion, and dialogue...” (Norton, 1995a: 25).

More recently, the Middle East appears to have experienced something of a ‘shift’ towards democracy. Algeria held their first elections in 1999 and the subsequent 2004 elections were heralded by one Western observer as “...one of the best conducted elections, not just in Algeria, but in Africa and much of the Arab world” (Ottaway & Carothers, 2004: 24). In Egypt, the 2000 parliamentary elections “...were for the first time supervised by a judiciary which is not always in line with the regime” (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004: 374) and, in 2005, President Mubarak called on parliament to amend the constitution so that he could be challenged for the leadership in the nation’s first multi-candidate popular vote (Zambelis, 2005: 91). In 2002, Qatar introduced a new constitution that permits, for the first time in the country’s history, the citizenry (including women) to partake in direct and secret voting (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004: 374). In addition, 2005 saw some extraordinary democratic developments across the Middle East. These included a successful series of public demonstrations across Lebanon that saw the ousting of Syrian troops and, subsequently, the first free election in many years (Rubin, 2006: 230). Saudi Arabia held municipal elections, the first of any kind in this nation for decades (Zambelis, 2005: 91). Furthermore, Palestine held its first election, leading to the ascension of the controversial group Hamas to power in early 2006 and Afghanistan held their first parliamentary elections in four decades. In addition, 2005 also saw the election of Iraq’s national assembly, the drafting of a constitution and its ratification via the polls as well as a further national vote which led to the formation of a permanent government in early 2006.

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars have addressed this recent ‘shift’ towards democracy across the Middle East (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Arjomand, 2004; Ben-Porat, 2005; Nasr, 2005; Ottaway & Carothers, 2004; Rubin, 2006; Zambelis, 2005). Parts of this work rightly criticise some of these developments, viewing them as either “sham elections” conducted to placate American calls for democracy across the region (for example, the developments in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, see: Rubin, 2006: 230; Zambelis, 2005: 90-91) or as having been directly manufactured by the United States following the toppling of pre-existing regimes (as in Afghanistan and Iraq). Mostly, this work seem to be premised on a recognition that there were significant problems inherent in the scholarly attention paid to the concept of Middle Eastern democracy in the 1990s. As Albrecht and Schlumberger point out, the question of why Middle Eastern regimes did not follow Huntington’s ‘Third Wave’ (1991) led many “...to examine what did not exist, instead of what was actually going on in the Arab world” (2004: 371). As they go on to conclude, this has seriously “...retarded investigations into other important changes” and engendered a “...profound misconception of the working mechanisms of Arab politics and state-society relations” (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004: 385-386). In addition, the work of the 1990s also led to misconceptions regarding the incompatibility between Islam and democracy (Hassouna, 2001: 50), with Zambelis noting that “...over half of the world’s Muslims live and thrive in democracies” (2005: 89). Finally, and as if to summarise the position of this body of work on Middle Eastern democratisation, Ottaway and Carothers state,

To ascribe the lingering Arab absence of democracy to some unique historic affinity for authoritarianism, stemming from Arab culture,

Islam, or anything else is thus factually incorrect. It is also politically defeatist, attributing a quality of inevitability that belies the experience of political change in other parts of the world. (2004: 25)

More specifically, the invasion of Iraq by the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ in 2003 and Iraq’s subsequent democratisation has become the subject of much scholarly investigation and debate from across the political and ideological spectrum (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004; Arato, 2003, 2004; Benomar, 2004; Braude, 2003; Byman, 2003; Darwisha, 2004; Diamond, 2005a, 2005b; Gilbert, 2004; Lawson, 2003; Nader, 2003; Telhami, 2003; Tripp, 2004; Zubaida, 2002). Unfortunately, much of this research retreats into the kind of rhetoric espoused by the neo-Orientalist scholars of the 1990s, offering reason as to why the establishment of democracy will at least be difficult, if not impossible in Iraq. Among these are claims that Iraq has “...little tradition of power-sharing...” (Byman, 2003: 57) or “...experience with democracy” (Benomar, 2004: 95). There is said to be no “...society in Iraq to turn into a democracy” and that the people have not “...learned democratic practices” (Byman, 2003: 59). Additionally, history is said to teach us that “...it is almost impossible to get Arab presidents to leave office” (Darwisha, 2004: 16) and that Iraq has been a nation of “...uneasy order maintained through rations of oppression and fear” (Benomar, 2004: 95). While this is arguably true of the recent history of Iraq – especially under the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein – it is interesting nonetheless that these authors have chosen to use words like ‘tradition,’ ‘society’ and ‘history’. Here, they have attempted to invoke the powerful discourses of the collective history and culture of the Iraqi people (or the perceived lack thereof) in so far as they might reveal reasons why democracy will not take root there.

Essentially, many of these works on Middle Eastern democracy – whether from the neo-Orientalist camp or from those who avidly detail and support the region’s democratic developments – is premised on a Western conception of democracy. This conception is the result of a discursive lineage that has its antecedents in the erroneous belief that democracy miraculously sprang out of Greek civilisation in the 5th century B.C. Following on, this superior system of governance was utilised by the Roman Empire and arguably gave rise to those great moments in the construction and propagation of Western civilisation. Democracy, in its modern, representative form, resurfaced later as a result of the major social upheavals that transformed Europe and America during the late 18th and 19th centuries.

However, a recent body of work, including Lloyd’s ‘Demystifying Mentalities’ (1990), Bernal’s ‘Black Athena’ (1991) and Goody’s ‘The East in the West’ (1996), has argued that many of the scientific methods, literary motifs and political systems that have formed the major cultural discourses of Western civilisation actually have their origins in the ancient Afro-Asiatic world. They point out that the Western scholarly cannon has

attempted to draw lines that not only overemphasized and deepened historically the differences...between the two parts of the Eurasian landmass, but also in my view those lines often overlooked the common heritage of the major societies of that region in the great Near Eastern civilisations. (Goody, 1996: 5)

Collectively, these authors go on to argue that by placing the emphasis on the common heritage of both parts of wider Eurasia in the urban revolution of the Bronze Age, we are not only able to undo the long-standing binaries between East and West, but are also

able to gain new insights into the origins of some of humankind's greatest achievements. Specifically, as is detailed below, these achievements include the earliest political mechanisms for human governance, namely 'Primitive Democracy.'

Ancient Mesopotamia and 'Primitive Democracy'

It is only in relatively recent times that we have come to understand the historical importance and influence of the region known as Mesopotamia in the Ancient World and currently known as Iraq. In fact, it was the early city-states that developed across this 'cradle of civilization' around 2700 B.C., which fostered the development of early farming practices and animal domestication, a sophisticated written language and a complex, urbane and cosmopolitan society (Seymour, 2004: 351). Overwhelmingly, history tells us of the megalomaniacal kings and their grand, menacing empires that rose out of these early developments to conquer and rule the region by fear, bloodshed and domination (Manglapus, 1987: 19). However, there is also a growing understanding that the history of modern thought – usually understood to have begun around 400 B.C. in Greece – can be traced further back to early Mesopotamia (Easton, 1974; Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson, Jacobsen, & Irwin, 1977; Kramer, 1959b; Manglapus, 1987; Oppenheim, 1964)

Evidence for such advanced philosophical thought is found in the early myths and legends of Ancient Mesopotamia, where – in the ethereal plane of the gods - we see the inner functioning of the Ordained Assembly of the Great Gods. This assembly was made up of 50 gods and goddesses in total (with both genders playing an active role in the deliberations, see: Jacobsen, 1970 [1943]: 164; Saggs, 2004: 131) and was the highest authority in the universe. Generally, it was called together when the gods needed to make a decision regarding any number of issues, and they would listen and debate until the pros and cons of each issue were clarified and a virtual consensus emerged (Jacobsen, 1977 [1951]-a: 150). Specifically, in the myth of creation, Enuma Elish (for a version of the myth in full, see: Storm, 2003: 39-50), the gods form such an assembly in order to elect a leader or 'champion of the gods' who will defeat their powerful enemy, Tiamet, the primal mother. After some deliberation, the Ordained Assembly of the Great Gods elected Lord Marduk as the new king of the gods (Roux, 1980: 109).

In much of his work, Thorkild Jacobsen (1970 [1943]; 1970 [1957]; 1977 [1951]-a; 1977 [1951]-b) stated that these myths are a form of allegory whereby ancient humankind projected the world around them onto the realm of the gods. Beyond this, many have speculated that these myths also reveal the actual systems whereby ancient humankind governed itself (see: Manglapus, 1987; Roux, 1980; Saggs, 2004), with Easton claiming "it is unthinkable that the Sumerians attributed such an assembly to their gods without having experienced it themselves on earth" (1974: 83). To describe these earthly versions of the divine assemblies, Jacobsen coined the term 'Primitive Democracy' (1970 [1943]). From what we know of these early days in Mesopotamian history, 'Primitive Democracy' seems to have functioned much like the aforementioned divine assembly. Although it was called together to make decision regarding matters as diverse as irrigation projects, trade missions, land surveying (Saggs, 2004: 131), administrative issues and to judge the serious offences of citizens (Jacobsen, 1970 [1957]: 138), it was primarily assembled when the security of the city-state was under threat (Adams, 1994: 16). Although this meant that the new "king" became the supreme leader of the people and was able to "...promulgate and carry into effect new law" (Jacobsen, 1970 [1943]: 158), the appointment was to be held for a limited term by each

incumbent and expired when the pending emergency had been resolved (Jacobsen, 1970 [1943]: 167; 1970 [1957]: 139; 1977 [1951]-a: 129).

The major excavations of the 20th century across Mesopotamia have revealed further support for 'Primitive Democracy' in the form of epics such as Gilgamesh (for a version of the myth in full, see: Storm, 2003: 62-99) which dates from around 2800 B.C. In this epic, we see a ruler who is "...scrupulously refraining from action in the matter of peace or war until he obtains the consent of the assembly in which, therefore, internal sovereignty of the state would seem to be vested" (Jacobsen, 1970 [1943]: 162). Uruk, the city of which Gilgamesh is ruler, is under threat from the armies of Kish and, instead of commanding the armies according to his will; Gilgamesh consults the bicameral congress of the city, which are striking in their similarity to those already discussed. Firstly, he consults with the conservative council of the elders who appear to have been made up of the heads of the powerful families within the state (Evans, 1958a: 11), who advise Gilgamesh against fighting the armies of Kish. However, Gilgamesh has the authority to veto their decision and appeal to a second assembly of all arms bearing men and enquire as to their opinion (Braude, 2003: 7; Easton, 1974: 83; Kramer, 1959a: 29-31). This assembly decides to fight and Gilgamesh – despite the advice of the elders – goes into battle for the freedom and liberty of Uruk.

However, the arguably tenuous notion that 'Primitive Democracy' existed in the early myths and epics from across Mesopotamia is also supported by extensive archaeological evidence that documents the political machinations of the regions early city-states and kingdoms. One such example is the extended kingdom of Ebla, the remains of which can be found today in north-western Syria. According to Manglapus (2004), excavations in 1976 revealed astonishing details about this kingdom of some 250,000 people, which had flourished in the East around 2500 B.C. The "...15,000 clay tablets or fragments written in Sumerian cuneiform" that were unearthed by archaeologists, exposed a sophisticated political culture involving some 11,000 public servants (Manglapus, 2004: n.p.). According to their law, the king of Ebla was "...elected for a seven-year term and shared power with a council of elders" (Manglapus, 2004: n.p.) then, after serving his first term, the incumbent was entitled to run for a second and, in the event that he was not re-elected to office, the former king was able to retire on a state pension (Manglapus, 2004).

Geographically closer to the early developments of Mesopotamia already discussed, the people of Kish (very near to ancient Babylon) held a general election to nominate their king around 2300 B.C. This particular king even took the "...throne-name Iphur-kish ('Kish assembled') to emphasise the popular basis of his rule" (Saggs, 2004: 132). At around the same time, the people of Lagash (which is further south, closer to the coastline of lower Mesopotamia) were embroiled in an early struggle against the upsurge of autocratic tendencies. It seems as if the power of the throne had seduced the authorities of Lagash to the point of bloodthirsty megalomania and that they were prepared to deny their citizens the basic political, social and economic freedoms that one generally expects from a free state. It is here in Lagash, according to Kramer, that we see a "...bitter struggle for power between the temple and the palace – the "church" and the "state" – with the citizens of Lagash taking the side of the temple" (1963: 79). Perhaps even more strikingly, it is in the context of Lagash's resistance to state-imposed terror and despotism as well as the growing animosity between the church and the state, that we find evidence of collective political action against oppressive systems of power and the first recorded use of the word "freedom" (Kramer, 1963: 79).

More generally, the grand empires of the time – namely, the Babylonian, the Assyrian and the Egyptian – also appear to have had democratic tendencies despite the common misconception that they were both centralised and totalitarian in nature. The Babylonian kings, for example, would often delegate the judicial duty of settling minor disputes to the “...town mayor and town elders” (Manglapus, 2004: n.p.). However, the more important and complex cases were brought before the whole town in the form of an assembly, who tried both civil and criminal cases and had the power to issue the death sentence, with their final decision being “...ceremonially confirmed by the king” (Manglapus, 2004: n.p.). As Jacobsen points out, this judicial system is democratic in nature, with the major decisions over right and wrong or life and death vested in the assembly, a forum open to the entire community of citizens (Jacobsen, 1970 [1943]: 161).

The population of the Assyrian capital, Ashur, were able to congregate in an assembly which reached agreement under the guidance of the more senior, wealthy and influential members of the community. Knowing all too well the popularity and power of the elders to influence the wider community of citizens, the kings of Assyria were “...always careful not to offend their high administrative officials, whose loyalty to the dynasty they at times had to secure by oaths and agreements” (Oppenheim, 1964: 103). When differences of opinion between the king and the elders did occur, they “...were quite ready to revolt against the king if they did not approve of his policies” (Oppenheim, 1964: 103), taking their case to the people. In particularly serious matters, the elders would convene an assembly of the free citizens and work with them in writing a letter addressed to the king (Oppenheim, 1964: 12). In this way, the citizens of Ashur were able to fight for exemptions and privileges,

...make legal decisions, sell real estate within the city that had no private owner, and assume corporate responsibility in cases of murder or robbery committed even outside the city, within a specified distance. (Oppenheim, 1964: 12)

Finally, the power of the Assyrian elders can be seen in the fact that the king was not able to directly appoint his own successor, but instead he nominated a potential heir who was then subject to the consent of the council (Oppenheim, 1964: 103). Similarly to Babylon and Assyria, the ancient Egyptian empire is all too often assumed to be the very epitome of Near Eastern autocracy. Instead, ancient Egypt was governed by a pyramid (pardon the pun) of councils who

...convened on the palace stairs, a place where all opinions expressed by courtiers, civil servants, and members of the king’s inner circle, all of whom met separately at the building’s four corners, could be easily conveyed and explained to the Pharaoh. (Schemeil, 2000: 104)

The individual charged with the rather prestigious but onerous task of liaising between the various councils and the Pharaoh was known as the Vizier. Originally, this position was occupied by a prince of royal blood (Frankfort, 1968: 84), but was gradually appointed to a noble man of considerable ability who became the head of every governmental department and therefore the most powerful officer of the state (Frankfort, 1968: 85; Gardiner, 2004: 101). “The administration which functioned under the vizier was divided into several departments” (Frankfort, 1968: 85) including the Treasury and the Ministry for Agriculture. Having strict guidelines to follow, a Vizier would call into session a ‘hearing’ or ‘council of the mat’ (Van den Boorn, 1988: 47)

made up of the leaders of these various departments from across the empire. During this council of the elite, the Vizier would sit with his numerous advisors, curators and scribes by his side. In front of him were scrolls filled with the laws of Egypt (Schemeil, 2000: 113) and beyond them were the forty senior officials, each of which was to be heard in due course (the higher ranking officials spoke first, followed by those of less importance) (Van den Boorn, 1988: 13). Although usually made up of well educated men, government positions were not limited to those of a particular blood lineage, class or colour (Frankfort, 1968: 90) but were made up of promising young men who had been specifically groomed for the role (Frankfort, 1968: 85).

Even this council of the elite could not bring new laws into effect without them being duly debated and deliberated across a myriad of separate councils and assemblies before garnering either the approval or denial of the Vizier (Schemeil, 2000: 113). As Schemeil also notes, such systems were moreover employed for the discussion of military campaigns which were "...full of lively debate on strategy, [and]...sometime[s] resulted in the amendment of a royal view, as in Tuthmosis III's and Ramses II's expedition to Syria" (2000: 104). Beyond this, the various separate councils appear to have wielded considerable power over the day-to-day agricultural affairs of their individual regions. Interestingly, an individual citizen could appeal directly to the Vizier regarding decisions made by a council on rural affairs. The Vizier would then consult with the relevant officials and usually suspend the decision so that it could be reconsidered for a designated period of time before the final decision was put into action (Van den Boorn, 1988: 168). Although this is not democracy in the pure sense of direct participation in decision making, it certainly provides avenues through which the common Egyptian could "participate" in regional politics (Van den Boorn, 1988: 170-171). This kind of sophisticated appeal process reveals an egalitarian bureaucracy concerned with the individual rights of citizens and an aversion to corruption.

Apart from these examples where democratic practices formed part of the centralised authority of the major empires of the Ancient Near East, one also finds examples from across their colonies. Here Kanesh, one of the outlying merchant colonies of the Assyrian empire, serves as a near perfect case study. Kanesh was located in central Anatolia (in today's eastern Turkey), quite some distance from Ashur. It had its prominence around 2000-1800 B.C. (Saggs, 2004: 416) and appears to have been of a respectable size with evidence suggesting that a number of Assyrians moved there, purchased land and settled for long periods. Evans (1958a) finds parallels between the governmental machinations employed in Kanesh, and those used by the people of Uruk during the time of Gilgamesh – some 800-1000 years earlier.

It appears that because these remote and generally wealthy citizens of the Assyrian empire preferred their governance to be closer to home, they were able to retain significant autonomy until surprisingly late periods. The more successful and influential among them formed the council of the elders and there can be no doubt that oligarchic and expedient tendencies emerged within the group. Although they remained the subjects of the king and therefore subscribed to his law, the elders presided over many domestic issues, some of them political (Manglapus, 2004: n.p.) but most of them judicial (Evans, 1958a: 3). In these assemblies, there appear to have been rather advanced forms of voting whereby the congregation would divide into three groups and each group would deliberate and vote independently before reconvening in a plenary where the final votes were counted (Larsen, 1976: 319-323; Schemeil, 2000: 104). However, when the elders failed to agree, matters were brought before the full assembly of all adult males (Evans, 1958a: 9, 11), which was "... called into session by a clerk at

the bidding of a majority of [the elders]” (Jacobsen, 1970 [1943]: 159; Manglapus, 2004: n.p.). There is also evidence to suggest that once this assembly had convened, the citizenry of Kanesh also voted, although perhaps in a far less sophisticated manner than was practised by the elders (Evans, 1958b: 114). Although Evans (1958a) himself is reluctant to cite these practices as democratic, this seems to be more of a semantic issue than a procedural one. In an addendum, published later the same year, Evans notes that the various democratic procedures practised in Kanesh at the very least “...strongly suggests a liberal and democratic spirit among this small group of local dignitaries. In such an atmosphere, democratic procedures within the group might easily arise” (Evans, 1958b: 114).

En route between Ashur and Kanesh, caravans of traders, individual travellers and the messengers of the Assyrian empire passed through Mari (Saggs, 2004: 218). A much smaller empire that came to importance and prosperity after the turn of the second millennium B.C., Mari dominated that part of the western Euphrates that now falls just inside Syria’s modern border with Iraq (the city of Mari is now known as Tell Hariri) (Saggs, 2004: 63-64). The ancient city of Mari was excavated by French archaeologists from 1933 onwards uncovering, amongst other things, “...an archive of over twenty thousand cuneiform tablets, mainly administrative and economic documents and letters” (Saggs, 2004: 64). It is these clay tablets that Fleming has claimed provide the “...ideal resource for the study of many aspects of ancient political life” (Fleming, 2004: 19).

In Mari, as in Kanesh, there seem to have been few who would openly and directly challenge the authority of the king. However, Mari kingship was not the simple autocratic despotism that is so often supposed of Near Eastern authority, but instead “actual power seems to be a matter of constant negotiation, as he [the king] engages a panoply of traditional leaderships, each with its own constituencies and assumed prerogatives” (Fleming, 2004: xv). The reason for Mari’s dispersed power structure was due to the fact that it was a rather loose collective of various nomadic, tribal and village peoples which resulted in a number of sheikhs, chiefs, officials, elders, assemblies and governors who vied for power and influence under the authority of the king (Saggs, 2004: 191). Although collective decision making appears to have occurred mostly in smaller groups of the elite, there were occasions where “...both the pastoralists of the steppe and the residents of towns did sometimes gather, not only to receive word from an outside king but even to speak for the group” (Fleming, 2004: 234). Ultimately, these antediluvian governmental systems evolved from simple tribal gatherings to incorporate decision-making aspects (Fleming, 2004: 207) and wield influence over the higher authority of the king. It is therefore conceivable that a king wanting to genuinely unite this heterogenous region would encourage such collective decision making and accept the inherent challenges of a kingdom consisting of various systems and sites of power.

Another example of the complex matrix that is early Middle Eastern politics can be found among the Hittites. These peoples are referred to in the Old Testament several times, originally as one of the many tribes that the Israelites encountered when they entered Palestine (Gurney, 2004: 1). Over time however, the Hittites gradually moved north into Anatolia, forming their state and later empire out of Hattusas that ruled from approximately 1600-1200 B.C. This burgeoning and lively city was just north of (the now former merchant colony of the Assyrian empire) Kanesh, also situated in today’s central western Turkey (Gurney, 2004: 15). As the Hittite empire grew out of a complex web of parochial townships and villages, each with their own loose systems of collective governance, towards a central authority under the king, these earlier systems of power would have had little choice but to streamline and offer their auspices to the

new ruler. This does not in any way mean that the 'Elders' forfeited their power but rather that the position of king did not equate to absolute control. In fact, Gurney proposes that the Hittite monarchy was originally elective, citing one of the earliest recorded events in the history of Hattusas which tells of the 'Elders' dissatisfaction with King Labernas and their nomination of a rival king to replace him (2004: 61). This struggle between the 'Elders' and the king seems to have resurfaced many times, particularly when a king passed away and his heir had been appointed without the legal approval of the 'Elders', therefore rendering the appointment invalid.

Beyond the power of the 'Elders', a more general assembly seems to have convened irregularly throughout Hittite history. Although this council was made up of the higher echelons of the state's bureaucracy (Beckman, 1982: 442), it appears to have wielded enormous power as a judicial body. Much like the Babylonian assemblies before them, these gatherings at Hattusas dealt with the more complex cases and had the power to convict even the most influential citizens (including the king) and condemn the guilty to death (Gurney, 2004: 66-67).

Perhaps the latest examples of democratic practises found in the Near East prior to Greek developments are those of the Phoenicians. These peoples had been residing in the Levant (a geographical region today divided between Lebanon, Syria and Israel) since as far back as the third millennium B.C. and throughout their long history they fell under the governance of the Assyrians, Babylonians and later the Persians and Macedonians. However, it wasn't until 1100 B.C. that they emerged as a significant cultural and political force (Gore, 2004: 34-36). From the ninth to the sixth centuries B.C., the Phoenicians went on to become vigorous sailors and traders, establishing colonies across much of the Mediterranean, including Cyprus, Italy, North Africa and as far west as Spain. In this way, the Phoenicians came to act as cultural middlemen, disseminating

...ideas, myths, and knowledge from the powerful Assyrian and Babylonian worlds in what is now Syria and Iraq to their contacts in the Aegean. Those ideas helped spark a cultural revival in Greece, one which led to the Greek's golden Age and hence the birth of Western civilisation. (Gore, 2004: 36-37)

One such idea – that has since become regarded as quintessentially Greek (and therefore Western) – is that of democratic governance. Throughout the few early Phoenician documents that remain (such as the Report of Wenamun, see: Markoe, 2005: 100-101; and the Amarna Letters, see: Moran, 1992: 138, 157) we see references to an assembly of elders with which the king consults regarding the important matters of the state. Later, in a seventh-century treaty between the kings of Assyria and Phoenicia, this council appear to govern alongside the monarch (Markoe, 2005: 101). It is precisely because these councils were made up of the wealthy merchants who had gained their fortune, and subsequent status, from their extensive trade networks that stretched from Mesopotamia to Western Europe, that they garnered such municipal power and authority (Markoe, 2005: 105). However, power was not simply vested in the king and the wealthy. As with the developments discussed in detail above, the ancient Phoenician texts also recount the existence of a 'people's assembly' found on the mainland and constituted of the entire free male citizenry (Markoe, 2005: 101).

Later, in the outlying colonies established by the Phoenicians across North Africa and the Mediterranean, we find even more sophisticated democratic practices. Essentially, these settlements were governed by two chief magistrates, or 'suffetes', who supervised both the senate and the people's assembly (Markoe, 2005: 103). Here, the senate was made up of thirty-plus key members who readied and collated details of foreign policy matters (such as a declaration of war or proposals to resolve external conflict etc) before presenting them to the elected body of 100 officials (Markoe, 2005: 103-104). Even in these remote settlements, the power of the senate was mitigated by the people's assembly who not only elected its members, but also withheld the right to deliberate and debate over the decisions reached by this higher body. In 'Black Athena Writes Back', Bernal not only illustrates that these sophisticated models of Phoenician democracy were influenced by the long traditions of collective governance found throughout the ancient Middle East, but that they also had a specific impact on the rise of the Athenian polis (2001: 345-370).

Conclusion

Democracy can therefore be seen to have a lineage tracing back as far as civilisation itself. Its ancestry lies in the ancient myths recounted by the early Mesopotamians as the region developed its first sophisticated human settlement and governance. Not surprisingly, the democratic system employed in myths such as Enuma Elish came to serve as something of a blueprint for the early city-states that developed across the region, including Uruk, Ebla and Kish. Eventually, the early city-states of the Near East gave way to the emergence of grand empires such as those of the Babylonians, Assyrians and Egyptians. Despite the common misconception that these empires were the very epitome of centralised power under autocratic rule, democratic practice can be found at the very heart of their governance, forming an influential power structure behind the authority of the king. Similar models of democratic governance are evident in the outlying colonies of these empires, such as Kanesh and are found further abroad in the smaller, independent states of the Mari and the Hittites. Later, in both the Phoenician capital and its outlying colonies, we find strikingly similar democratic practices to those used in Mesopotamia for over 2000 years. These developments cannot have helped but influence the models of governance that arose across Greece and culminated in the rise of Athenian democracy around 400 B.C.

However, the notion that 'Primitive Democracy' existed in Ancient Mesopotamia is not only useful in terms of understanding the era's contribution to modern thought and as a precursor to the development of the Greek polis, it is also particularly poignant when viewed in relation to the current situation in the Middle East. As has been detailed in the introduction, contemporary scholarship, opinion and foreign policy regarding the issue of Middle Eastern democracy seems to eschew the ancient Near Eastern ancestry of this political system. In this way, whether the argument favours or negates the possibility of democracy in the Middle East, the work is underpinned by a construction of democracy that is not connected to the region. In other words, much of the work on the democratisation of the Middle East, measures its successes and failures against Western conceptions and models of democracy. These notions of Western democracy are largely founded on those devised in the wake of major social upheavals across Europe and America throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries. Where a connection to the ancient world is made, it is to the developments of Greece, which are generally viewed as unique and miraculous in their resistance to autocracy and their establishment of unprecedented procedures that enabled a bridge to be made between governance and the will of the people. Further connections are made to the Roman Empire, which is generally idealised as the very model of a sophisticated and cosmopolitan society

governed by a complex matrix of bureaucracy that is deemed unparalleled in the ancient world. In this way, democracy is constructed as historically and ideologically Western, a sophisticated political system developed at the dawn of European civilisation and carried forward through adversity to become the pre-eminent method of political process across the globe.

Arguably, it is this same model of democracy, with its historical and ideological lineage planted firmly in the West, which is now surfacing across, or being exported to, the Middle East. It is little wonder then that this Western model of democracy has met with staunch resistance from a myriad of political and religious factions, many of whom are unable to relate to its associated Eurocentric narrative and understandably view its dissemination across the region as an example of the West's ongoing hegemony over the East. Alternatively, this paper argues that future scholarship, foreign policy and opinion regarding the Middle East's democratisation, from both within and without the region, needs to emphasise the Middle East's ancient and democratic past. By connecting modern democratic trends across the region to its own ancient past, the powerful discourses of history can be used to bolster support for, and create unity behind, the democratisation of the Middle East.

The notion of invoking the Middle East's ancient past as a political tool for promoting unity and garnering political support has some precedent in the region. For the Shah of Iran, the iconography of ancient Persia fulfilled a vital function in justifying his authority and providing discourses of national unity (Seymour, 2004: 355). More dramatically, after seizing control of an ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse Iraq in the military coup of 1968, the Ba'ath Party asserted Mesopotamian history as the common heritage that would unite the people (Baram, 1991: 55; Seymour, 2004: 355). To do this, the Ba'ath Party devised a cultural campaign consisting of a boost in Iraqi folklore (such as music, folktales, poetry, dances and arts somehow linked to the early Near East), the funding of extensive archaeological excavations and museums as well as grandiose reconstructions (such as Saddam's attempt to re-build Babylon in the late 1980s), and creating a modern version of the ancient Mesopotamian spring festival that included, among other things, a play based on the Epic of Gilgamesh (Baram, 1994: 302-303). What complicates the examples of Iran and Iraq's use of their respective ancient history for political ends is their tendency to be used, not only to unite the people, but to serve as significant justification for autocracy and despotism. There is, however, one example where the powerful discourses of the ancient past have been used to provide support for modern democracy in the Middle East. It appears that very shortly after Egypt had gained formal independence from the British in the early 1920s, the nation's secular and political elite discovered the power of Egypt's Pharaonic past in developing national pride. Indeed, the official opening of Tut-Anhk-Amon's tomb was timed to coincide with the inauguration of Egypt's first ever democratically elected Parliament, which "combined to create a mood of enthusiasm and hope and a sense that Egypt's great past was tightly linked to its promising present" (Baram, 1994: 280).

In the interest of establishing analogous sentiments among the people of the Middle East towards the current democratic developments throughout the region, this paper argues that Mesopotamia's ancient and democratic past could be used as a similar political and discursive tool. By engaging Mesopotamia's 'Primitive Democracy', academics, policy makers and opinion leaders can serve to educate many about the origins of this sophisticated political process and thereby help to shift the popular conception that democracy is a Western construct that is being imposed on the East. Potentially, with the stigma of being Western removed and the education of

democracy's Eastern origins complete, the people of the Middle East may feel a sense of 'ownership' over democracy and take pride in endorsing it. This would undoubtedly go a long way to abating the conflicts across the region and restoring democracy to its rightful centre at the heart of Mesopotamia.

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