

ENGAGING “PRIMITIVE DEMOCRACY”: MIDEAST ROOTS OF COLLECTIVE GOVERNANCE

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The issue of Middle Eastern democracy in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century has been controversial from at least as far back as Samuel Huntington’s 1984 essay “Will More Countries Become Democratic?” In it, he stated that “among Islamic countries, particularly those in the Middle East, the prospects for democratic development seem low.”¹ Huntington later argued that each region of the globe has its own individual religio-cultural essence that plays a large part in determining receptivity to democratic systems.² He isolated two examples, Islam and Confucianism, and labeled them “profoundly anti-democratic,” 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.”³ Building on this early work, Huntington’s most influential book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*,⁴ 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.

Although, as Mehran Kamrava rightly points out, the notion that “social and cultural forces thwart democratic possibilities in the Middle East is not new,”⁵ Huntington’s argument has certainly garnered wide support from neoconservative foreign-policy pundits and neo-Orientalist academics alike. One such example is Elie Kedourie’s *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*,⁶ which details several democratic experiments that sprang up across the Middle East throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Iraq 1921-38, Syria 1928-49, Lebanon 1926-75 and Egypt 1923-52). 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.”⁷ Kamrava takes this argu-

ment a step further, 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.”⁸ 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.⁹

This scholarship has had an impact on various studies of democratization in the non-European world. For example, works such as the four-volume *Democracy in Developing Countries* included extensive studies of Asian, African and Latin American democracies but precluded much of the Islamic world and certainly all of the Middle Eastern and Arab states on the premise that they “generally lack much previous democratic experience, and most appear to have little prospect of transition even to semi-democracy.”¹⁰ Similarly, Robert Pinkney’s *Democracy in the Third World* examines the developments of Latin America, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, but eschews the Middle East on the premise that “most of the discussion of democratic transitions and consolidation in this book would find few echoes in Middle Eastern politics.”¹¹ Even the 1997 World Development Report, as Sreberny and Mohammadi point out, “suggests that, of all the world regions, the Middle East and North Africa is the most resistant to formal democracy.”¹²

Furthering Huntington’s assertions on the incompatibility of Islam and democracy,¹³ other scholars have targeted the doctrine of Islam itself, claiming that the absolute authority of the Quran as the only source for political, moral and legal guid-

ance for the *ummah* (the Islamic community) is inherently antithetical to democratization. In addition, the implied inequalities between the believer and the non-believer, the rich and the poor, the learned scholar and their subordinates as well as men and women are also seen to justify the perceived rift between Islam and democratic governance.¹⁴ Along these lines, Antony Black’s *History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* concludes that

the very idea of a constitution, the rule of law, procedures which precisely define legitimate tenure of power, presupposes a separation of authority from the individual. In the Islamic world, authority remained tied to the outstanding individual and dynasty.... This affects political culture and practice today, making a peaceful transfer of power and the introduction of new blood through elections very difficult.¹⁵

Here Kamrava acknowledges that, while the debate over the inherent democratic potential of Islam is theoretically and theologically significant, it is the actual “...manifestations of Islam in the Middle East, especially in the contemporary era, [which] have turned it into a decidedly antidemocratic phenomenon.”¹⁶ Indeed, Ernest Gellner¹⁷ has elaborated that the inseparability of Islam and the state across the Middle East has been a contributing factor to the region’s purported inability to produce a functioning civil society. Heather Deegan sums up this view (which she later argues against), by stating that the countries of the Middle East have largely been viewed as

weak institutionally; divided ethnically; tethered to authoritarian structures of government; lacking in unity, political legitimacy and tolerance of opposition; exploited by the external factors of the Cold War and, recently, in thrall to fundamentalist religion...[and thus are] regarded as possessing elements inimical to any form of democratization.¹⁸

However, there has also emerged a significant body of work that challenges this Orientalist picture of the Middle East and its supposed inability to democratize. On the issue of civil society many scholars have challenged those who totally dismiss Middle Eastern developments and the potential for democratization across the region. Arguably, this dates back as far as 1966, when scholars such as Shelomo Dov Goitein were arguing that the fundamental tenets of civil society — such as civic movements, solidarities, groups and institutions — were not only evident in the Islamic Middle East but remained a critical force for change across the region.¹⁹ More recently, a gamut of research has been at least optimistic about the growing civil-society movements and the potential for democratization across the entire region.²⁰ Foremost among this body of work are the contributions found in the twin volumes *Civil Society in the Middle East*, in which 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.”²¹ Here A.R. Norton also notes that there is no reason Western models of democracy should be adaptable to other regions and that the Middle East is more likely to “evolve its own characteristic style of democracy, no doubt with an Islamic idiom in some instances.”²²

Another contributor argues more forcefully against the Western neo-Orientalists, stating,

Some Orientalists and mongers of ethnocentrism may go as far as to totally dismiss even the potential for the evolution of an Arab civil society, and hence any prospect of genuine democratisation. Propagators of this point of view often forget the long, arduous, and occasionally bloody, march of civil society and democratisation in their own Western societies.²³

In addition to this, a wealth of recent research from both Islamic scholars and Western political scientists has emerged that is optimistic about the democratic potentials found within the traditions, practices and doctrine of Islam.²⁴ Some have pointed to the earliest stages of Islam, when Muhammad and his followers developed the “Constitution of Medina” to manage a heterogeneous population shortly after their move to that city from Mecca.²⁵ Later, in the rapidly expanding Muslim theology of both the Umayyad (661-750) and Abbasid (750-1258) caliphates, the *ulama* (scholars of Islam) were called upon to devise the premises and parameters of Islamic law, forming the major schools of thought that govern the Muslim world to this day.²⁶ For example, the reign of the Abbasids witnessed the establishment of an active religious public sphere of “learned scholars, schools of jurisprudence, and their supporters,” who were “often autonomous from the official sphere of [their] rulers.”²⁷ It was this body of Islamic scholars that went on to develop the machinations of *shura* (consultation), stipulating that Muslim leaders must consult with their subordinates and acquire their

consent.²⁸ This evolved into a consultative council which was elected by the people and whose support the leader (*emir*) legally required in order to administer the affairs of the state.²⁹ In larger states, the shura took the form of a *majlis al-shura* (national assembly), which was designed to be truly representative of the entire community, and "...therefore the members of the majlis must be elected by means of the widest possible suffrage, including both men and women."³⁰ At the very least, the shura was intended to secure "...the people's right to choose their government freely, openly and fearlessly from among themselves at all levels from the lowest to the highest."³¹

Further to this, John Esposito and John Voll also point to the prevalence and centrality in Islamic law of concepts analogous to the fundamentals of democracy such as *ijma* (consensus), *itjihad* (independent interpretive judgment), the concurrent condemnation of *fitnah* (civil disorder) matched with the tolerance of *ikhtilaf* (disagreement) and *dhimmah* (the protection of Jewish and Christian minorities under the authority of Islam).³² In addition, Syed Pasha notes that under Islam *al-naas* (the people) also have the right to live, to own property, to chose their beliefs and behavior, to know, to read, to write, to speak, to have power and — most important — to choose their government.³³ Indeed, in *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, Abdulaziz Sacedina has argued that the Quran itself explicitly advocates a model of democratic pluralism that includes a thriving civil society in which both Muslim and non-Muslim are accorded equal rights.³⁴ Building on this, one of Iran's foremost Islamic political philosophers and theologians, Abdolkarim

Soroush, has noted that democracy itself "does not require believers to abandon their convictions, secularize their creed, and lose their faith in divine protection."³⁵ To the contrary, he states that "a religious government over a faithful and alert society that respects liberty and dynamism of religious understanding cannot help but be a democratic society."³⁶ Along these lines, Esposito and Voll have asserted that Islam and democracy are incompatible "only if 'democracy' is defined in a highly restricted way and is viewed as possible if specific Western European or American institutions are adopted, or if important Islamic principles are defined in a rigid and traditional manner."³⁷

While the academic debate continues over the future and likelihood of democracy in the Middle East, on the ground, the Middle East and the broader Islamic world have experienced some extraordinary developments in recent years. First, the Moroccan local and parliamentary elections of 1992-93 "were more open than earlier ones," with the 1997 elections being even more so.³⁸ Algeria held its 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."³⁹ In Egypt, the 2000 parliamentary elections "were for the first time supervised by a judiciary which is not always in line with the regime;"⁴⁰ and in 2005, President Husni 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² In addition, 2005 saw some extraordinary democratic developments across the Middle East. These included a successful series of public demonstrations in Lebanon — dubbed the “cedar revolution” — following the assassination of Rafik Hariri, which saw the ousting of Syrian troops and, subsequently, the first free election in many years.⁴³ Saudi Arabia held municipal elections, the first of any kind in that nation for decades.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Palestine held its first election, leading to the ascension of the Islamist Hamas to power in early 2006; Pakistan had local-body elections; and Afghanistan held its first parliamentary elections in four decades. More recently, Kuwaiti women made history in June 2006, when they not only voted, but also ran for parliament in the national elections (no women were elected despite representing more than 50 percent of the voters).

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars have addressed this recent “shift” towards democracy across the Middle East.⁴⁵ Some rightly criticize what they view as “sham elections” either conducted to placate American calls for democracy across the region (Egypt⁴⁶ and Saudi Arabia⁴⁷) or directly manufactured by the United States following the toppling of pre-existing regimes (Afghanistan). Nonetheless, these scholars seem to acknowledge that, not only is political reform “percolating again in the region,”⁴⁸ but that these developments may have “emboldened reformers in the region and placed more pressure on the incumbent regimes to implement reforms.”⁴⁹ Mostly, this work seems to be based on the recognition that there were significant problems inherent in the Huntington-inspired scholarship of the 1990s. As Halger Albrecht and Oliver

Schlumberger point out, the question of why Middle Eastern regimes did not follow Huntington’s “Third Wave”⁵⁰ led many “to examine what did not exist, instead of what was actually going on in the Arab world.”⁵¹ 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.”⁵² In addition, the work of the 1990s also led to misconceptions regarding the incompatibility between Islam and democracy,⁵³ with Chris Zambelis noting that “over half of the world’s Muslims live and thrive in democracies.”⁵⁴ Finally, and as if to summarize the position of this body of work on Middle Eastern democratization, Marina Ottaway and Thomas 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.⁵⁵

Although each of the aforementioned elections has attracted both the attention and criticism of academics around the world, it is arguably Iraq’s democratization that has been the focus of much scholarly investigation and debate from across the political and ideological spectrum.⁵⁶ Since the handover of Iraq’s sovereignty from the U.S.-led coalition to the interim government in June 2004, the country has set about making the transition from despotism to democracy. Most significantly, on January 30, 2005, some 8.5 million Iraqis

voted to elect a national assembly charged with the onerous duty of drafting the Iraqi constitution. After much deliberation and after missing the original deadline on August 15, 2005, the committee approved a final draft on August 28. Following this, on October 15, 2005, Iraqis again took to the polls, effectively ratifying the proposed constitution; and a permanent government has recently been established following a further national vote on December 15, 2005.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, much of this research is pessimistic about Iraq's democratization and is accompanied by stark warnings that the failure to build a democratic Iraq will make the place "a breeding ground for terrorism [that] might once again attack its neighbors or seek WMD, destabilizing the region,"⁵⁸ as well as having implications for the fate of democracy in the Arab world and beyond.

In addition, many authors retreat into the kind of rhetoric espoused by the neo-Orientalist scholars of the 1990s, offering reasons 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"⁵⁹ or "experience with democracy."⁶⁰ There is said to be no "society in Iraq to turn into a democracy" and that the people have not "learned democratic practices."⁶¹ Additionally, history is said to teach us that Iraq has been a nation of "uneasy order maintained through rations of oppression and fear."⁶² While this is arguably true of the recent history of Iraq — especially under the tyrannical rule of Saddam Hussein — other research points out the complexities of twentieth-century politics in Iraq, including the myriad democratic movements and political parties.⁶³ Nonetheless it should be noted that many

authors have chosen to use words like "tradition," "society" and "history" in their pessimistic reading of Iraq's democratization. Here, they have attempted to invoke the powerful discourses of the collective history and culture of the Iraqi people (or the perceived lack thereof) insofar as they might reveal reasons why democracy will not take root there.

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, are based on a Western conception of democracy. This is the result of a discursive lineage that has its antecedents in the erroneous belief that democracy miraculously sprang out of Greek civilization in the fifth century B.C. This superior system of governance was later utilized by the Roman Empire and arguably gave rise to those great moments in the construction and propagation of Western civilization. Democracy, in its modern, representative form, resurfaced later as a result of the major social upheavals that transformed Europe and America during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is in these later developments that Homi Bhabha identifies the "major cultural discourses and identities [that] came to define... Western society and the critical rationality of Western personhood."⁶⁴ One such cultural discourse was that of "Orientalism,"⁶⁵ which not only did much to define personhood and civilization in the West, but also in its binary opposite, the East. Specifically, Edward Said found that the Orient had generally been constructed in terms of "its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, [and] its backwardness."⁶⁶ This representation has led to the assump-

tion that Middle Easterners — even when offered democracy and freedom — either cannot rise above their cruel, brutal “nature” or that they are simply unable to grasp the complexities of this Western concept.

In order to eschew this opposition between East and West, some recent work such as G.E.R. Lloyd’s *Demystifying Mentalities*,⁶⁷ Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*⁶⁸ and Jack Goody’s *The East in the West*⁶⁹ have pointed 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...those lines also often overlooked the common heritage of the major societies of that region in the great Near Eastern civilizations.”⁷⁰ Collectively, these authors go on to argue that many of the scientific methods, literary motifs and political systems that have formed the major cultural discourses of Western civilization ironically have their origins in the ancient Afro-Asiatic world. By placing the emphasis on the common heritage of both parts of wider Eurasia in the urban revolution of the Bronze Age, these scholars are not only able to undo the longstanding 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, “primitive democracy.”

PRIMITIVE DEMOCRACY

It is only in relatively recent times that we have come to understand the historical importance and influence of the region known in the ancient world as

Mesopotamia and currently as Iraq. In fact, the early city-states which developed across this cradle of civilization around 3200 B.C. fostered some of the earliest advances in farming practices and animal domestication, sophisticated written languages and complex, urbane and cosmopolitan societies.⁷¹ Overwhelmingly, history tells us of the megalomaniacal kings and their grand menacing empires that rose out of these early developments to conquer and dominate the region by fear and bloodshed.⁷² 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.⁷³

Evidence for such advanced thinking is found in the early myths and legends of ancient Mesopotamia, where we find the inner functioning of the Ordained Assembly of the Great Gods. This assembly was made up of 50 gods and goddesses (with both genders playing an active role in the deliberations⁷⁴) and was the highest authority in the universe. Generally, it was called together when the gods needed to make a decision; they would listen and debate until the pros and cons of each issue were clarified and a virtual consensus emerged.⁷⁵ When the council reached full agreement, the seven senior gods would announce the final verdict, and each of the members would voice approval with a “let it be.”⁷⁶ This unified command meant that the will of the assembly had become divine law. Specifically, in the creation myth of Enuma Elish,⁷⁷ the gods form such an assembly in order to elect Lord Marduk, the leader or “champion of the gods,” who goes on to defeat their powerful enemy, Tiamet, and create the known universe, including the first slaves — human beings.

In much of his work, Thorkild Jacobsen stated that these myths are a form of allegory whereby ancient humankind projected the world around them onto the realm of the gods.⁷⁸ In this way, the myths come to reveal more than the political machinations of the council of the great gods; they indicate just how long the will to democracy has been alive in human society and that “the egalitarian values of the primitive population were successfully translated into religious legend.”⁷⁹ Beyond this, many have speculated that these myths also reveal the actual systems whereby ancient humankind governed itself.⁸⁰ The general consensus is that, in order for the people of ancient Mesopotamia to have attributed such complex democratic systems to their gods, they must have experienced analogous assemblies themselves.

To describe these earthly versions of the divine assemblies, Jacobsen coined the term “primitive democracy.”⁸¹ 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 decisions regarding matters as diverse as irrigation projects, trade missions, land surveying,⁸² administrative issues and judging the serious offenses of citizens,⁸³ it was primarily assembled when the security of the city-state was under threat.⁸⁴ This formed the nucleus of municipal administration and allowed the collective resources of the community to be pooled in order to reach consensus for concerted action.⁸⁵ The council further mirrored that of the gods by functioning as a bicameral assembly, divided between “an upper house of ‘elders’ and a lower house of ‘men.’”⁸⁶

Although the elder men seem to have held most of the power, some research suggests that these assemblies also resembled those of the gods, in that “women as well as men took part in decision-making — sometimes with a dominating role.”⁸⁷ During an assembly each of the citizens had the right to express an opinion, and discussion would continue until virtual unanimity was reached; the final decisions were then announced by the elders.

In addition to the myths, many of the early epics from across the region detail the systems of governance employed in the ancient Middle East. These “epics reflect a period a century or two later than the myths, probably about 2800-2700 B.C.,”⁸⁸ and, as Jacobsen notes, they “differ formally from the myths by centering around a human or semi-human hero, [such as] Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh etc. rather than around a god.”⁸⁹ The most famous of these ancient Mesopotamian epics is that of Gilgamesh,⁹⁰ which dates from around 2800 B.C.⁹¹ 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.”⁹² Uruk, the city Gilgamesh rules, is under threat from the armies of Kish. Instead of commanding the armies according to his will, Gilgamesh consults the bicameral congress of the city, both parts of which are striking in their similarity to those already discussed. First, he consults with the conservative council of elders, who appear to be the heads of the powerful families within the state.⁹³ They 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.⁹⁴ This assembly decides to fight, and Gilgamesh goes into battle for the freedom and liberty of Uruk.⁹⁵ In this epic, we see, as Jacobsen concludes,

a state in which the ruler must lay his proposals before the people, first the elders, then the assembly of the townsmen, and obtain their consent before he can act. In other words, the assembly appears to be the ultimate political authority.⁹⁶

Over time, however, the deliberative and direct forms of democracy revealed by epics such as Gilgamesh began to fade for several reasons. First, the city-states of the ancient Near East grew in terms of both population and geographical size. This meant that not only was it difficult for all citizens to physically reach the assembly on a regular basis, but it also became harder for the people to come to consensus.⁹⁷ With this increase in population came a second factor in the dissolution of democracy across Mesopotamia: a corresponding increase in battles to determine control of key irrigated land and trade routes.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, this occasional warfare quickly descended into bloody and bitter cyclical violence.⁹⁹ This meant that military leadership was urgently needed and had to be relatively consistent in order to maintain the necessary strategies and defenses.¹⁰⁰ Therefore those who were elected to kingship became understandably disinclined to abdicate their positions.¹⁰¹ Not only was the king the supreme commander of the military, the sole creator of new laws and very wealthy as the administrator of the temple; he was also too often the victim of his own megalomaniacal lust, “striving to become the one who would

unite all of southern Mesopotamia into a single centralized state under a single ruling hand — his own.”¹⁰²

Once again, however, democracy — in one guise or another — seems to have survived this early political shift towards autocracy. Although there was no doubt that the king held the supreme authority of the state, there are a number of examples where the long tradition of assemblies continued throughout Mesopotamia and further abroad. One such example is the extended kingdom of Ebla, the remains of which can be found today in northwestern Syria. According to Raul S. Manglapus,¹⁰³ excavations in 1976 revealed astonishing details about this kingdom of some 250,000 people, which had flourished 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.¹⁰⁴ According to their law, the king of Ebla was “elected for a seven-year term and shared power with a council of elders.”¹⁰⁵ Then, after serving his first term, the incumbent was entitled to run for a second; in the event that he was not re-elected, the former king was able to retire on a state pension!

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 emphasize the popular basis of his rule.”¹⁰⁶ 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 Samuel Noah 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.”¹⁰⁷ 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 church and state that we find evidence of collective political action against oppressive systems of power and the first recorded use of the word “freedom.”

More generally, the grand empires of the time — the Babylonian, the Assyrian and the Egyptian — also appear to have had democratic tendencies despite the common misconception that they were both centralized 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.”¹⁰⁸ However, the more important and complex cases were brought before the whole town in the form of an assembly, which 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.”¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

The population of the Assyrian capital, Ashur, was able to congregate in an assembly that 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.”¹¹¹ 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,”¹¹² 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.¹¹³ 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 nominated a potential heir who was then subject to the consent of the council.¹¹⁴

Speaking generally about democratic developments across Mesopotamia during the time of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, Yves Schemel notes that “historical documents describe assemblies of citizens deliberating for days, each session including new members.”¹¹⁵ It appears that, due to the size of the community, it was often hard to reach consensus, therefore the circle of delegates became wider as deliberations continued, often involving commoners, teenagers and women. At every stage, the assemblies appear to have been lively places, with participants openly pointing out the contradictions and inconsistencies in their opponent’s argument. When all of the

participants had been given a chance to state their case at least once, the proceedings ended before debate became cyclical, emotional or counterproductive. When the time came for the citizens to vote, they did so by either kneeling or walking to the speaker to approve or by sitting to disapprove.¹¹⁶

Like 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 of councils that “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.”¹¹⁷ The individual charged with the rather prestigious but onerous task of liaising among the various councils and the pharaoh was known as the vizier. Originally, this position was occupied by a prince of royal blood,¹¹⁸ but it was gradually bestowed on a nobleman of considerable ability who became the head of every governmental department and therefore the most powerful officer of the state.¹¹⁹ A vizier oversaw an administration divided into several departments¹²⁰ 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”¹²¹ 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,¹²² and beyond them were the 40 senior officials, each of whom was to be heard in due course (the higher-ranking officials speaking first, followed by those of less importance¹²³).

Government positions were not limited to those of a particular blood lineage, class or color, but were usually held by promising young men who had been specifically groomed for the role.¹²⁴ Beyond this, the various separate councils appear to have wielded considerable power over the day-to-day agricultural affairs of their respective regions. In addition, 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 during a designated period of time before the final decision was put into action.¹²⁵ Although this was not democracy in the pure sense of direct participation in decision making, it certainly provided avenues through which the common Egyptian could “participate” in regional politics.¹²⁶ 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 centralized 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. Located in central Anatolia (today’s eastern Turkey), Kanesh was quite some distance from Ashur. It had its prominence around 2000-1800 B.C.¹²⁷ 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. Here, Geoffrey Evans¹²⁸ 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.

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 including both political and judicial decision making.¹²⁹ In these assemblies, there appear to have been rather advanced forms of voting whereby the congregation would divide into three groups, each of which would deliberate and vote independently before reconvening in a plenary session where the final votes were counted.¹³⁰ However, when the elders failed to agree, matters were brought before the full assembly of all adult males,¹³¹ which was "called into session by a clerk at the bidding of a majority of [the elders]."¹³² 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 practiced by the elders.¹³³

En route between Ashur and Kanesh, caravans of traders, individual travelers and the messengers of the Assyrian empire passed through Mari.¹³⁴ A much smaller empire that came to 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 is now known as Tell Hariri).¹³⁵ From 1933

onwards, French archaeologists began to uncover "an archive of over 20,000 cuneiform tablets, mainly administrative and economic documents and letters."¹³⁶ It is these clay tablets that Daniel E. Fleming has claimed provide the "ideal resource for the study of many aspects of ancient political life."¹³⁷

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."¹³⁸ Mari's dispersed power structure was due to the fact that it was a rather loose collective of various nomadic, tribal and village peoples. This resulted in a number of sheikhs, chiefs, officials, elders, assemblies and governors who vied for power and influence under the authority of the king.¹³⁹ Fleming studied in detail the small Mari towns of Tuttal, Imar and Urgish, concluding that collective forms of governance were most prominent in such small communities and that it was likely to have been this way since the third millennium B.C.¹⁴⁰ Although collective decision making appears to have occurred mostly in smaller groups of the elite, there were occasions when "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."¹⁴¹ Ultimately, these antediluvian governmental systems evolved from simple tribal gatherings to incorporate decision-making aspects¹⁴² and wield influence over

the higher authority of the king. It is therefore conceivable that a king genuinely wanting to 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.¹⁴³

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.¹⁴⁴ Over time, however, the Hittites gradually moved north into Anatolia, forming their state and later empire out of Hattusas, where they ruled from approximately 1600-1200 B.C. This burgeoning and lively city was just north of the former merchant colony of the Assyrian empire, Kanesh.¹⁴⁵ As the Hittite empire grew out of a complex web of parochial townships and villages, each with its own loose system of collective governance, 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, O.R. 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.¹⁴⁶ This struggle between the elders and the king seems to have resurfaced many times, particularly when a king died and his heir had been appointed without the legal approval of the elders, therefore rendering the appointment invalid.¹⁴⁷

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,¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ As is to be expected, however, the kings gradually set about establishing hereditary succession as the principal way of garnering authority against this backdrop of consensus and collective action.¹⁵⁰ Although the nobility remained and the general assemblies of the bureaucracy still convened to preside over important cases,¹⁵¹ the authority of the king was not subject to the election or approval of the elders. This eventually led to a succession of despotic dynasties.

Perhaps the latest examples of democratic practice found in the Near East prior to the rise of the Athenian polis are those of the Phoenicians. These peoples had been residing in the Levant since as far back as the third millennium B.C. 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.¹⁵² 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 Greeks' Golden Age and hence the birth of Western civilization.¹⁵³

One such idea, which 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 Wenamun¹⁵⁴ and the Amarna Letters¹⁵⁵), we see references to an assembly of elders with which the king consulted regarding important matters of state. Later, in a seventh-century treaty between the kings of Assyria and Phoenicia, this council appears to govern alongside the monarch.¹⁵⁶ It is precisely because these councils were made up of wealthy merchants who had gained their fortune and subsequent status from extensive trade networks stretching from Mesopotamia to Western Europe, that they garnered such municipal power and authority.¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸

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.¹⁵⁹ Here,

the senate was made up of more than 30 key members who readied and collated details of foreign-policy matters (such as a declaration of war or proposals to resolve external conflicts) before presenting them to the elected body of 100 officials.¹⁶⁰ Even in these remote settlements, the power of the senate was mitigated by the people's assembly, which 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*, Martin 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.¹⁶¹

CONCLUSION

The notion that primitive democracy existed in the ancient Middle East 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 above, contemporary scholarship, opinion and foreign policy regarding the issue of Middle Eastern democracy seems to ignore the ancient Near Eastern ancestry of this political system. In this way, whether the argument favors or negates the possibility of democracy in the Middle East, the work is underpinned by a construction of democracy that is disconnected from the region. In other words, much of the work on the democratization of the Middle East measures its successes and failures against Western conceptions and

models of democracy. Here, democracy is constructed as historically and ideologically Western, a sophisticated political system developed at the dawn of European civilization 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 myriad political and religious factions, many of which 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.

Thankfully there exist a number of examples where the Middle East's ancient past has been used for promoting unity and garnering political support. For the shah of Iran, the iconography of ancient Persia fulfilled a vital function in justifying his authority and providing discourses of national unity.¹⁶² More dramatically, after seizing control of an ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse Iraq in the military coup of 1968, the Baath party asserted Mesopotamian history as the common heritage that would unite the people.¹⁶³ To do this, the Baath devised a cultural campaign exploiting Iraqi folklore (music, folktales, poetry, dances and arts linked to the early Near East), funding extensive archaeological excavations and museums as well as grandiose reconstructions (such as Saddam's attempt to re-build Babylon in the late 1980s), and the creation of a modern version of the ancient Mesopotamian spring festival that included, among other things, a play based on

the epic of Gilgamesh.¹⁶⁴ What complicates the examples of Iran's and Iraq's use of their respective ancient history for political ends was the tendency to use them, not only to unite the people, but to justify 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 Tutankhamon's tomb was timed to coincide with the inauguration of Egypt's first modern 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."¹⁶⁵

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 the ancient and democratic past of the Middle East could be used as a similar political and discursive tool. By engaging primitive democracy, academics, policy makers and opinion leaders can educate many about the origins of this sophisticated political process and thereby refute the popular conception that democracy is a Western construct being imposed on the East. Potentially, with the Western stigma removed and the history of democracy's Eastern origins revealed, the people of the Middle East may feel a sense of ownership over democracy and take pride in endorsing it. This could go a long way toward mitigating the conflicts across the region and restoring democracy to its rightful center at the heart of the Middle East.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (1984), p. 216.

² Samuel P. Huntington, "The Goals of Development," in *Understanding Political Development*, ed. M. Weiner and S. P. Huntington (HarperCollins, 1987).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 300, 298.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Touchstone Books, 1998).

⁵ Mehran Kamrava, *Democracy in the Balance: Culture and Society in the Middle East* (Seven Bridges Press, 1998), p. xiv.

⁶ Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*. 2nd ed. (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1994).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸ Kamrava, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁰ Larry Diamond, J. Linz and S. M. Lipset, "Preface," in *Democracy in Asia* (Vol. 3 of the four part "Democracy in Developing Countries"), ed. L. Diamond, J. Linz & S. M. Lipset (Vistaar Publishing, 1989), p. xx.

¹¹ Robert Pinkney, *Democracy in the Third World*, 2nd ed. (Lynne Rienner, 2003), p. 206.

¹² Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, "The Media and Democratisation in the Middle East: The Strange Case of Television," in *Democratization and the Media*, ed. V. Randall (Frank Cass, 1998), p. 185.

¹³ Huntington (1991), *op. cit.*, pp. 307-309.

¹⁴ Shaykh Fadlallah Nuri, "Refutation of the Idea of Constitutionalism," in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, eds. J. J. Donohue & J. L. Esposito (Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 293-296.

¹⁵ Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Routledge, 2001), p. 351.

¹⁶ Kamrava, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

¹⁷ Ernest Gellner, "Civil Society in Historical Context," *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 43 (1991), pp. 495-510.

¹⁸ Heather Deegan, *The Middle East and Problems of Democracy* (Open University Press, 1993), p. 9.

¹⁹ Shelomo Dov Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (E. J. Brill, 1966).

²⁰ See the many contributions on civil society in the Middle East in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No.2 (1993) and Aryn B. Sajoo, ed. *Civil Society in the Muslim World: Contemporary Perspectives* (I.B. Tauris Publishers in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004); see also Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny, "The Iranian Press and the Continuing Struggle over Civil Society, 1998-2000," *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, Vol. 63, Nos. 2-3 (2001), pp. 203-223; Paul Kingston, "Patrons, Clients and Civil Society: A Case Study of Environmental Politics in Postwar Lebanon," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2001), pp. 55-72; Stephanie Eileen Nanes, "Fighting Honor Crimes: Evidence of Civil Society in Jordan," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2003), pp. 112-129; Loubna H. Skalli, "Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women and Information Technologies in the MENA," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 2, No.2 (2006), pp. 35-59.

²¹ Augustus Richard Norton, "Introduction," in *Civil Society in the Middle East*, ed. Augustus Richard Norton (E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 25.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²³ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Civil Society and Prospects for Democratisation in the Arab World," in *CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE EAST*, ed. Augustus Richard Norton (E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 30.

²⁴ Asad AbuKhalil, "A Viable Partnership: Islam, Democracy and the Arab World," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 15 (1992/1993); Said Amir Arjomand, "Islam, Political Change and Globalisation," *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 76, (2004), pp. 9-28; Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* (Dar al-Andalus, 1980 [1961]); G. W. Choudhury, *Islam and the Contemporary World* (Indus Thames, 1990); S. N. Eisenstadt and N. Levtzion eds., *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies* (State University of New York Press, 2002); John L. Esposito and James Piscatori, "Democratization and Islam," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 45, No.3 (1991), p. 427-440; John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford University Press,

1996); Hussein A. Hassouna, "Arab Democracy: The Hope," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2001), pp. 49-52; Robert W. Hefner, *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Vali R. Nasr, "The Rise of 'Muslim Democracy,'" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No.2 (2005), pp. 13-27. Syed H. Pasha "Towards a Cultural Theory of Political Ideology and Mass Media in the Muslim world," *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 15 (1993), pp. 61-79; Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

²⁵ Esposito and Voll, op. cit., pp. 39-40.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 40-47.

²⁷ Dale F. Eickelman & Jon W. Anderson eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (2nd ed) (Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 2; See also Eisenstadt and Levzion, op. cit.; Zaman, op. cit.

²⁸ Hassouna, op.cit., p. 50.

²⁹ Choudhury, op. cit., p. 45.

³⁰ Asad, op. cit., p. 45

³¹ Pasha, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

³² Esposito and Voll, op. cit., pp. 27-29, 41-47.

³³ Pasha, op. cit., pp. 67-71.

³⁴ Sachedina, op. cit.

³⁵ Soroush, op. cit., p. 135.

³⁶ Soroush, op. cit., p. 145.

³⁷ Esposito and Voll, op. cit., p. 21.

³⁸ Dale F. Eickelman, "Communication and Control in the Middle East: Publication and Its Discontents," in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (2nd ed), eds. Dale F. Eickelman & Jon W. Anderson (Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 39.

³⁹ Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, "Middle East Democracy (Think Again)," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 145 (2004), p. 24.

⁴⁰ Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, "'Waiting for Godot': Regime Change Without Democratization in the Middle East," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2004), p. 374.

⁴¹ Chris Zambelis, "The Strategic Implications of Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Middle East," *Parameters* Vol. 35, No. 3 (2005), p. 91.

⁴² Albrecht and Schlumberger, op. cit., p. 374.

⁴³ Barry Rubin, *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East* (John Wiley & Sons, 2006), p. 230.

⁴⁴ Chris Zambelis, op. cit., p. 91.

⁴⁵ The following is by no means an exhaustive list of the current research on democratization in the Middle East, but does provide a rich variety of scholarship that collectively covers the key issues: Albrecht and Schlumberger, op. cit.; Said Amir Arjomand, "Islam, Political Change and Globalisation," Thesis Eleven, Vol. 76 (2004), pp. 9-28; Guy Ben-Porat, "A New Middle East? Globalisation, Peace and the 'Double Movement'," *International Relations*, Vol. 19, No.1 (2005), pp. 39-62; Vali Nasr, "The Rise of 'Muslim Democracy'," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2005) pp. 13-27; Ottaway and Carothers, op. cit.; Rubin, op. cit.; Zambelis, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Zambelis, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

⁴⁷ Rubin, op. cit., p. 230.

⁴⁸ Ottaway and Carothers, op. cit., p. 22.

⁴⁹ Zambelis, op. cit., p. 90.

⁵⁰ Huntington (1991), op. cit.

⁵¹ Albrecht and Schlumberger, op. cit., p. 371.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 385-386.

⁵³ Hussein Hassouna, "Arab Democracy: The Hope," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2001), pp. 49-52.

⁵⁴ Zambelis, op. cit., p. 89.

⁵⁵ Ottaway and Carothers, op. cit., p. 25.

⁵⁶ For more on Iraq's democratization see Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictator-*

ship, Democracy, or Division? (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Andrew Arato, "The Occupation of Iraq and the Difficult Transition from Dictatorship," *Constellations*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2003), pp. 408-424; Andrew Arato, "Sistani v. Bush: Constitutional Politics in Iraq," *Constellations*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2004), pp. 174-192; Jamal Benomar, "Constitution-Making after Conflict: Lessons for Iraq," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2004), pp. 81-95; Joseph Braude, *The New Iraq: A Thought-Provoking Analysis of the Rebuilding of a Nation* (HaperCollins, 2003); Daniel L. Byman, "Building the New Iraq: The Role of Intervening Forces," *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (2003), pp. 57-71; Adeed Darwisha, "Iraq: Setbacks, Advances, Prospects," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2004), pp. 5-20; Larry Diamond, "Building Democracy after Conflict: Lessons from Iraq," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16., No. 1 (2005), pp. 9-23; Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (Times Books, 2005); Chappell Lawson, "How Best to Build Democracy: Building a Foundation for the New Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (2003), pp. 206-207; Laura Nader, "Social Thought and Commentary: Iraq and Democracy," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2003), pp. 479-483; Shibley Telhami, "After a War with Iraq: Democracy, Militancy, and Peacemaking?" *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 4 (2003), pp. 182-185; Charles Tripp, "The United States and State-Building in Iraq," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30 (2004), pp. 545-558; Sami Zubaida, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34 (2002), pp. 205-215.

⁵⁷ For earlier work by the author that includes a detailed analysis of media coverage of Iraq's shift to democracy, see Ben Isakhan, "Media Discourse and Iraq's Democratization: Reporting the 2005 Constitution in the Australian and Middle Eastern Print Media," *Australian Journalism Review*, Vol. 29, No.1 (2007a), forthcoming; Ben Isakhan, "From Despotism to Democracy: Reporting Iraq's January 2005 Election in the Australian and Middle Eastern Print Media" (paper presented at the annual Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference, Surfers Paradise, Australia, November 29- December 2, 2005: <http://live-wirez.gu.edu.au/jea.papers/Isakhan%20.doc>); Ben Isakhan, "Iraq's December 2005 Election: Reporting Democratisation in the Australian and Middle Eastern Print Media" (paper presented at the annual Australia New Zealand Communications Association (ANZCA) conference, Adelaide, Australia, July 5-7, 2006: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/anzca2006/>).

⁵⁸ Byman, op. cit., p. 68.

⁵⁹ Byman, op. cit., p. 57.

⁶⁰ Benomar, op. cit., p. 95.

⁶¹ Byman, op. cit., p. 59.

⁶² Benomar, op. cit., p. 95.

⁶³ Hana Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton University Press, 1982 [1978]); Adeed Dawisha, "Democratic Attitudes and Practices in Iraq, 1921-1958," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 59, No.1 (2005), pp. 11-30; Benjamin Isakhan, "Read All About It: The Free Press, the Public Sphere and Democracy in Iraq," *The Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* (Jordan) Vol. 9, No.1 (2007b), forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha [by Johnathan Rutherford]," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed J. Rutherford (Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).

⁶⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, 1978).

⁶⁶ Said, op. cit., p. 205.

⁶⁷ G. E. R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶⁸ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation. Vol. 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (Vintage Martin, 1991).

⁶⁹ Goody, op. cit.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

⁷¹ Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (Ernest Benn Limited, 1968), p. 49; Seymour, op. cit., p. 351; Marc Van de Mieroop, *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* (Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 36.

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⁷³ Henri Frankfort and H. A. Frankfort, "Myth and Reality," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: Essays on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A.

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⁷⁴ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. W. L. Moran (Harvard University Press, 1970 [1943]), p. 164; H. W. F. Saggs, *The Babylonians: A Survey of the Ancient Civilizations of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley*. 9th ed. (The Folio Society, 2004), p. 131.

⁷⁵ Jacobsen, 1977 [1951a], op. cit., p. 150.

⁷⁶ Thorkild Jacobsen, "Early Political Development in Mesopotamia," in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. W. L. Moran (Harvard University Press, 1970 [1957]), p. 138.

⁷⁷ For a version of the myth in full, see Rachel Storm, *Myths and Legends of the Ancient Near East* (The Folio Society, 2003), pp. 39-50.

⁷⁸ Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit.; Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit.; Jacobsen, 1977 [1951], op. cit.; Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Function of the State," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: Essays on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Henri Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen and William A. Irwin (The University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1951]).

⁷⁹ Raul S. Manglapus, "Mesopotamia: Earliest Formal Democracy?" *Perspectives on World History and Current Events: Asia Pacific Report 2004*, <http://www.pwhce.org/apr/apr66.html>

⁸⁰ Manglapus, 1987, op. cit.; Roux, op. cit.; Saggs, op. cit.

⁸¹ Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit.

⁸² Saggs, op. cit., p. 131.

⁸³ Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit., p. 138.

⁸⁴ Robert M. Adams, "The Origin of Cities," *Scientific American Special Issue: Ancient Cities* (1994), p. 16.

⁸⁵ Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit., p. 138; Oppenheim, op. cit., p. 114.

⁸⁶ Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character* (The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 74.

⁸⁷ Saggs, op. cit., p. 30.

⁸⁸ Saggs, op. cit., p. 131.

⁸⁹ Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit., p. 143.

⁹⁰ For a version of the epic in full, see Storm, op. cit., pp. 39-50.

⁹¹ Although evidence suggests that the tablets on which the story is written date from a period much later than when the events took place, see Kramer, 1959, op. cit., p. 3.

⁹² Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit., p. 162.

⁹³ Geoffrey Evans, "Ancient Mesopotamian Assemblies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (1958a), pp. 1-11.

⁹⁴ Braude, op. cit., p. 7; Kramer, 1959, op. cit., pp. 29-31.

⁹⁵ Although there can be no doubt that the assemblies held at Uruk during the time of Gilgamesh were more primitive than those held in later Greece or Rome, there are significant comparisons. In fact, as Kramer points out, the situation that brought about the convening of Uruk's bicameral assemblies is not dissimilar to the one that ancient Greece faced some 2400 years later (1959, op. cit., pp. 30-31). Sumer, like Greece, was made up of a number of independent city-states, each of them vying for power and supremacy over the region and its people. In a reversal of the veto power that the assembly of the arms-bearing men had over the elders in Uruk, the Spartan elders (a council of 28 men, all over 60 years of age) had the power to overrule any "crooked decree" that was passed by the popular assembly (Evans, 1958a, op. cit., p. 4). Indeed further parallels can be drawn between the epic of Gilgamesh and more modern instances. For example, the deliberative practices of Uruk are similar to those practiced by the Roman Republic (around 265 B.C.) in the prelude to their war against Carthage. Here, the senate refused to authorize the war and therefore the consuls summoned the Comitia Centuriata, or military assembly, which gave the final approval for war.

⁹⁶ Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit., p. 163.

⁹⁷ Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit., p. 146.

⁹⁸ Saggs, op. cit., p. 131.

- ⁹⁹ Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit., p. 143.
- ¹⁰⁰ Kramer, 1963, op. cit., p. 74; Saggs, op. cit., pp. 131-132.
- ¹⁰¹ Jacobsen, 1970 [1957], op. cit., p. 142; Saggs, op. cit., p. 132.
- ¹⁰² Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit., p. 158.
- ¹⁰³ Manglapus, 2004, op. cit.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid, n.p.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid, n.p.
- ¹⁰⁶ Saggs, op. cit., p. 132.
- ¹⁰⁷ Kramer, 1963, op. cit., p. 79.
- ¹⁰⁸ Manglapus, 2004, op. cit.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁰ Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit., p. 163.
- ¹¹¹ Oppenheim, op. cit., p. 103.
- ¹¹² Ibid.
- ¹¹³ Ibid, p. 12.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 103.
- ¹¹⁵ Yves Schemeil, "Democracy before Democracy?" *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2000), p. 104.
- ¹¹⁶ Mogens Trolle Larsen, *The Old Assyrian City-State and Its Colonies* (Akademisk Forlag, 1976), p. 323; William L. Moran, ed., *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture by Thorkild Jacobsen* (Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 401-402, n. 24.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁸ Frankfort, op. cit., p. 84. Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (Ernest Benn Limited, 1968), p. 84.
- ¹¹⁹ Frankfort, op. cit., p. 85; Allan Gardiner, *The Egyptians: An Introduction*. 9th ed. (The Folio Society, 2004), p. 101.
- ¹²⁰ Frankfort, op. cit., p. 85.
- ¹²¹ G. P. F. Van den Boorn, *The Duties of the Vizir: Civil Administration in the Early New Kingdom* (Kegan Paul, 1988), p. 47.
- ¹²² Schemeil, op. cit., p. 113.
- ¹²³ Van den Boorn, op. cit., p. 13.
- ¹²⁴ Frankfort, op. cit., pp. 85, 90.
- ¹²⁵ Van den Boorn, op. cit., p. 168.
- ¹²⁶ Ibid, pp. 170-171.
- ¹²⁷ Saggs, op. cit., p. 416.
- ¹²⁸ Geoffrey Evans, "Ancient Mesopotamian Assemblies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (1958a), pp. 1-11.
- ¹²⁹ Evans, 1958a, op. cit., p. 3; Manglapus, 2004, op. cit.
- ¹³⁰ Larsen, op. cit., p. 319-323; Schemeil, op. cit., p. 104.
- ¹³¹ Evans, 1958a, op. cit., pp. 9, 11.
- ¹³² Jacobsen, 1970 [1943], op. cit., p. 159.
- ¹³³ Although Evans (1958a, op. cit., p. 9, 114) 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 practice of various democratic procedures 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" (see, Geoffrey Evans, "Ancient Mesopotamian Assemblies — An Addendum," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 78, No.2 (1958b), pp. 114-115).
- ¹³⁴ Saggs, op. cit., p. 218.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid, pp. 63-64.
- ¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 64.
- ¹³⁷ Daniel E. Fleming, *Democracy's Ancient Ancestors: Mari and Early Collective Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 19.
- ¹³⁸ Ibid, p. xv.

¹³⁹ Saggs, op. cit., p. 191.

¹⁴⁰ Fleming, op. cit., pp. 223, 234.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 234.

¹⁴² Ibid, p. 207.

¹⁴³ It should be noted here that Fleming, like Evans (see note 133), is reluctant to use the nomenclature of democracy to describe the political machinations of the Mari. Instead, he prefers the term “corporate” to explain the governance of Mari (and other ancient Mesopotamian empires and cities) as opposed to “Primitive Democracy” which has been used by (and since) Jacobsen. Essentially, Fleming’s reluctance stems from his concern that the term “democracy” may serve as a “...barrier to understanding the diverse Near Eastern tradition of group-oriented decision making that may somehow stand behind the remarkable development of Athens” (Fleming, op. cit., p. 16). Beyond his concern over the loose application of the term “democracy”, Fleming also herein reveals that Greek democracy is not without precedent. While it is commonly assumed that Athenian democracy arose triumphantly out of a dark history of authoritarian rule, cases such as the Mari and other Mesopotamian examples suggest a cross-section of egalitarian and collective traditions spread over the wider region that cannot have avoided impacting upon later developments.

¹⁴⁴ O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites*. 9th ed. (The Folio Society, 2004), p. 1.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 61.

¹⁴⁷ It should be duly noted here that Beckman disagrees with this conclusion, arguing that the Hittite ‘Elders’ did not have the right to elect or negate the power of their king (see Gary Beckman, “The Hittite Assembly,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 102, No. 2 (1982), pp. 435-442.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Gurney, op. cit., pp. 66-67.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 61-62.

¹⁵¹ Beckman, op. cit., p. 441; Gurney, op. cit., p. 67.

¹⁵² Rick Gore, “Who Were the Phoenicians?: New Clues from Ancient Bones and Modern Blood,” *National Geographic*, October (2004), pp. 34-36.

¹⁵³ Ibid, pp. 36-37.

¹⁵⁴ Glenn E. Markoe, *The Phoenicians* (Folio Society, 2005), pp. 100-101.

¹⁵⁵ William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 138, 157.

¹⁵⁶ Markoe, op. cit., p. 101.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 105.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 101.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 103.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 103-104.

¹⁶¹ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena Writes Back* (Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 345-370.

¹⁶² Seymour, op. cit., p. 355.

¹⁶³ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (University of California Press, 2005); Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba’athist Iraq: 1968-1989* (St Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 55; Seymour, op. cit., p. 355.

¹⁶⁴ Amatzia Baram, “A Case of Imported Identity: The Modernizing Secular Ruling Elites of Iraq and the Concept of Mesopotamian-Inspired Territorial Nationalism, 1922-1992,” *Poetics Today*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1994), pp. 302-303.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 280.