

## CHAPTER 8

# THE WORLD'S FIRST EMPIRE BUILDER

## SARGON, KING OF AKKAD

**M**y mother was a high priestess; I did not know my father...

My mother... gave birth to me in secret.

She placed me in a reed basket; she sealed the hatch with tar.

She threw me in the river,  
which did not rise over me.

Who was this unwanted baby? When he was born, his unwed mother set him adrift on the river—he could easily have drowned. Perhaps, by launching him in a waterproof basket-boat, she hoped that someone would find him and give him a better life than she could. And that's what happened. He grew up to be Sargon the Great.

According to the “The Legend of Sargon,” an Akkadian story recorded on a clay tablet in the first millennium BCE, the baby Sargon was found by a laborer named Akki, a simple man who filled the canals in a rich man's garden with water:

The river carried me up and brought me to Akki, the water-drawer.

Akki, the water-drawer, lifted me up when he dipped in his bucket.

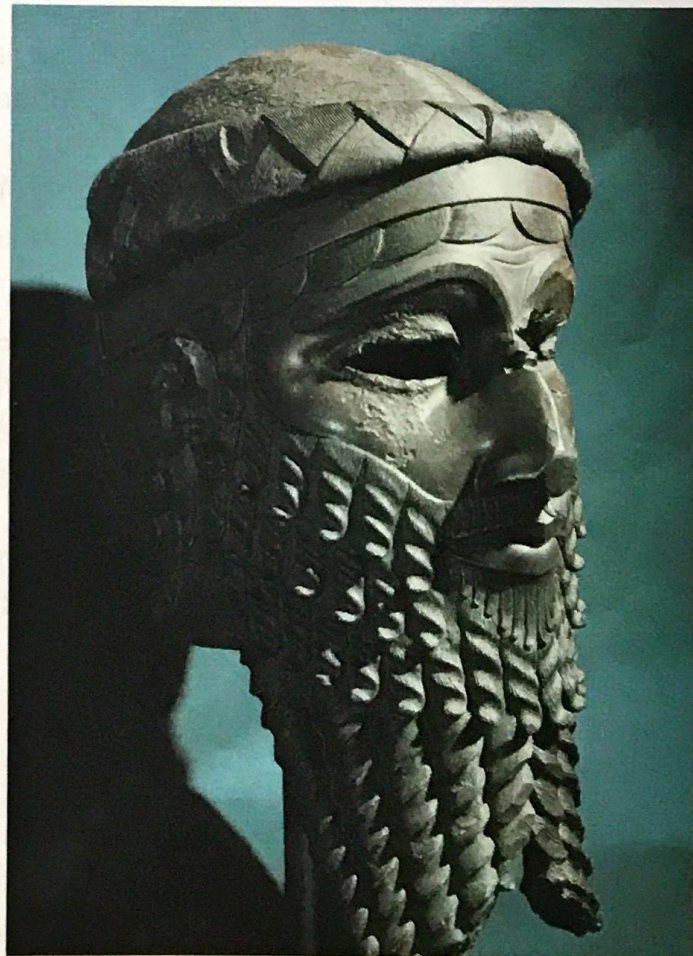
Akki, the water-drawer, took me as his son, and raised me.

Akki, the water-drawer, appointed me as his gardener,

and when I was a gardener, [the goddess] Ishtar took a liking to me.

“AN AKKADIAN LEGEND, SARGON'S INSCRIPTIONS, A SYRIAN LETTER, AND “THE CURSE OF AGADE”

“The Legend of Sargon,” Iraq, first millennium BCE



Kings often wore a braided band around their heads. Unlike earlier Sumerian kings, this one sports a long curly beard. He could be the great Akkadian King Sargon.

Sargon doesn't explain how he managed to trade a gardener's wagon for a royal chariot, except to say that, with Ishtar's backing, he became king over the "black-headed people." (The Mesopotamians always referred to themselves, and sometimes to all humankind, as "black-headed people.") Stories about Sargon, including the one about his birth, were written down hundreds of years after his reign. Historians consider them to be legends, not history. In addition to the legends about Sargon, surviving copies of his royal inscriptions prove that he did actually rule as king, that he came to power around 2340 BCE, and that he had one of the longest reigns of any Mesopotamian king: 56 years.

We don't know where Sargon grew up, but it must have been north of Sumer because Akkadian, not Sumerian, was his native language. His family is a mystery, too. We don't know his mother's name—only that she was a high priestess. And whoever his father was, he was probably not a king. Sargon almost certainly would have named him in his inscriptions, if he *had* been.

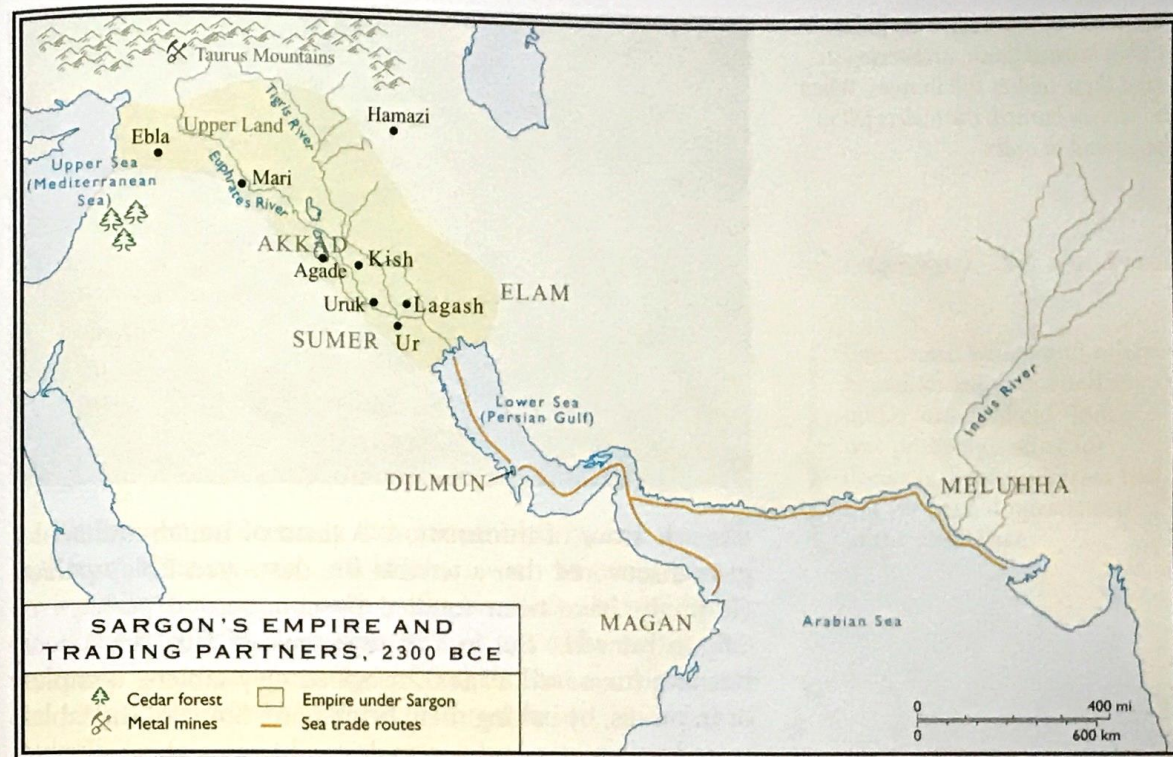
Sargon may have overthrown a ruling king and stolen his throne. We can't be sure. But the fact that he chose a new city, Agade, which was north of Sumer, as his capital supports the idea. Perhaps it was a way of saying that he was the new and rightful ruler of a brand-new kingdom.

During Sargon's long reign, he conquered all of Mesopotamia, from the Lower Sea all the way to the Upper Sea (from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea). He created the first **empire** in history.

One inscription, describing his victory over the Sumerian city of Uruk, brags that he "tore down its wall," and brought its king "in a dog collar to the gate of [the god] Enlil." Another one, copied from a statue that was probably made in Sargon's own time, boasted that "Sargon, . . . was victorious in 34 battles and destroyed walls as far as the edges of the sea." Tearing down a city's walls meant the end of that city's safety and independence. This same inscription later mentions Sargon as a trader: "He had ships from Meluhha, Magan, and Dilmun moor at the piers of Agade." We know that the inscription was not an exaggeration—

Empires are bigger than kingdoms. An empire includes not only people of the same nationality as the king, but people with different languages and different traditions as well.

66 Royal inscriptions, Iraq, about 2000 BCE



Mesopotamian objects have been found in all these faraway places. Traders would have traveled to Mesopotamia by boat through the Persian Gulf.

When Sargon fought foreign enemies, he prayed to their gods as well as his own. He believed a victory meant that the foreign gods had been on his side. One of his inscriptions bragged that the local gods had given him valuable lands in Syria and Lebanon: "the Upper Land, Mari, Yarmuti, and Ebla, as far as the Cedar Forest and the metal mines." After he conquered these regions that were rich in forests and mines, Sargon no longer had to depend upon trade for lumber and expensive metals. He could just order the conquered peoples to send these valuable goods as tributes to his greatness.

Sargon's capital city of Agade has never been found. But one of the cities that he claimed to have conquered, Ebla—in Syria, far to the north of Akkad—has turned out to be a

66 Royal inscription, Iraq, about 2000 BCE

Thousands of years after the palace at Ebla burned down, archaeologists found these tablets still in rows. When the shelves burned, the tablets fell to the ground in order.



treasure trove of information. A team of Italian archaeologists discovered that a terrible fire destroyed Ebla's palace. (It might have been torched by conquerors, perhaps by Sargon himself.) But in a strange twist of fate, the fiercely burning fire saved 17,000 inscribed clay tablets, complete or in pieces, by baking them brick-hard. Some of the tablets were big: squares and rectangles as big as a sheet of notebook paper. Others were no bigger than a postage stamp, crowded with tiny cuneiform writing. These texts propel us back to life in an ancient Syrian palace and give us the clearest pictures we have of life in the Near East during the third millennium BCE.

Many of Ebla's texts are just lists, and reading them is about as thrilling as reading a phone book. Some, for instance, list the clothing that was handed out to thousands of people in the kingdom. But taken together, these texts show that, in any given year, more than five thousand workers, craftsmen, and officials received food, drink, and clothing from their king. The palace's metal workshops alone employed five hundred men, and hundreds of women spun and wove flax and wool into cloth for the palace. Almost everyone in Ebla depended upon the king and the palace.

Archaeologists also found some more exciting items, such as a letter written by a scribe named Tira-il. Ibubu, the palace steward, had summoned him to write to the king's

representative in the distant town of Hamazi in northern Iran. When he received this message, Tira-il would have prepared a blank clay tablet and brought his stylus with him. He probably drew careful lines on the tablet before he left home and marked the columns in which he would later write. At the palace, Ibubu dictated, and Tira-il wrote:

Thus says Ibubu, the steward of the palace of the king to the envoy [of the city of Hamazi]: I am your brother and you are my brother. . . . Whatever desire you express, I shall grant you, [and] whatever desire I express, you shall grant. . . . May you deliver to me the finest quality equids. . . . I, Ibubu, have given you . . . ten wagon ropes and two . . . wagons.

Ibubu almost certainly didn't mean that he and the official from Hamazi were real brothers—it was just a way of saying that they should behave like brothers. Ibubu emphasized the friendship between the two towns by saying that not only were the messengers brothers, but so, also, were the kings: “the king of Ebla is the brother of . . . the king of Hamazi.”

Tira-il, like all the scribes at Ebla, must have been trained to write in a local school for scribes. Archaeologists have found 40 tablets at Ebla with lists of Sumerian words. Their excavations have also uncovered tablets listing Sumerian words with their Eblaite translations—the earliest dictionaries known anywhere in the world.

Tira-il may have delivered his letter personally, because the king of Hamazi probably didn't know how to read. He, like the king of Ebla, depended on scribes such as Tira-il to read to him. But first, the scribe made a copy of his letter to keep in the files at Ebla, so that the king could remember what was sent, and this is what the archaeologists found.

Sumerian words are translated into the local language of Eblaite on this tablet, which is one of the world's earliest-known dictionaries.

66 Letter, Syria, 24th century BCE

Equids are horses and other horselike animals, such as mules and donkeys. Ibubu was probably asking for donkeys, because horses had not yet been domesticated in the Near East.



Early diplomats wrote, traveled, and made deals between kingdoms or city-states. They represented the ruler, acting on his behalf.

Like the kings of Hamazi and Ebla, Sargon, too, must have sent his scribes to foreign courts. These messengers carried letters, luxury goods, and gifts—acting as ambassadors for their royal masters. They were the world's first **diplomats**, and Tira-il's letter, written on a clay tablet, is the first evidence of diplomacy in the history of the world.

Until it was destroyed, Ebla was a wealthy city. The lists show that huge amounts of silver, copper, gold, and clothing came into the palace every year. Ebla probably also grew rich from taxes on trade that passed through the city, which was on a well-traveled route from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean Sea.

The destruction of this thriving kingdom came quickly, around 2300 BCE. The scribes left no clues as to who was responsible. We know that Sargon brought his army to the region, but no one knows for sure whether or not he was the one who destroyed it.

Archaeologists have not yet found Sargon's own capital city, Agade. But in the "Curse of Agade," a document that archaeologists have pieced together from more than 30 fragments, ancient writers

describe it as a fabulous place:

[T]he dwellings of Agade were filled with gold, Its bright-shining houses were filled with silver... Inside, the city was full of... music... [and] Its quays where the boats docked were all a-bustle.

Will archaeologists someday find Agade? How many other cities and kingdoms lie hidden beneath the sands and soils of Iraq and Syria, waiting to be discovered and reveal their secrets?



This tall monument celebrates the military victory of King Sargon's grandson, King Naram-Sin. The king's horned helmet means that he was presenting himself as a god—usually only gods wore horned helmets in Mesopotamian art.

66 "The Curse of Agade," Iraq, 2000 BCE