**MARLIES HEINZ**

# Sargon of Akkad: rebel and usurper in Kish

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## Chapter 3

# *Sargon of Akkad: Rebel and Usurper in Kish*

Marlies Heinz

When Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2340–2280 B.C.) seized power in Kish, it was the beginning of a reign that would restructure the entire political landscape of the Near East. Legend has it that Sargon was the son of a high-ranking priestess who immediately after his birth placed him in a basket and abandoned him to the Euphrates.[1] A man named Aqqi discovered the baby, pulled him out of the river, and adopted him. Sargon became a gardener at his father's estate. It is not known in detail how he ended up at the royal court in Kish. Traditionally it is believed that he was taken there by the town goddess, Ishtar, who had seen him in his father's garden.

Sargon did not belong to the traditional elite of Kish; he did not know anything about his origins. At court he became the king's cupbearer. From this position, he rebelled against the authorities and deprived the legitimate (!) king, Urzababa, of his power with the approval of, and by the will of, the deities An, Enlil, and Ishtar. Sargon became Urzababa's successor and sealed his accession to the throne by taking the title Sharru-kin (= Sargon), which means 'the legitimate king'.

At the beginning of his reign, Sargon changed most of the traditional political structure of Kish. The "old ones" (intimates of the former king?) and the temple priests were deprived of their power, and the palace took over the economic domains of the temples. The economic importance of the temples was thus noticeably marginalized (Steinkeller 1993: 122). Private individuals were now allowed to buy land, including land previously owned by the temples. A number of loyal families became increasingly powerful (Steinkeller 1993: 553ff.), influencing politics, the economy, and the military. Sargon paid special attention to the military, and when he claims in his military reports that he catered to "5,400 men" daily, researchers take this as an indicator of the special attention that Sargon bestowed upon this special unit.[2]

The reforms in personnel structure and the specific development of loyal troops were followed by changes in the organization of the town, its architectural appearance, and the makeup of its population. Kish, according to Sargon's inscriptions, was

*Author's note*: Translated from the German text by Bettina Fest; language editor: Ymke Muler.

1. See Westenholz 1997 and Lewis 1980.
2. See Gelb and Kienast 1990: 167, Text Sargon C1.

remodeled; that is, its urban structure was changed. Reminders of the old were modified if not removed, and the new order was made highly visible. These far-reaching changes culminated in the settling of new citizens in the town, people who were not in any way connected to the original population.[3]

One of the changes Sargon made "at home" was probably both the biggest in terms of organization and the most influential when it came to political importance: Sargon founded Akkad, the new political "capital," the precise location of which remains unknown to this day. Whether this city completely took over the role of the traditional residence of Kish is not known, but its great importance was underscored by Sargon's title "Sargon, King of Akkad." Sargon did not identify with Kish but with Akkad, and it was as king of Akkad that he wanted to be seen and remembered.[4]

Sargon heavily intervened in the existing order "at home" in Kish with his takeover and his political goals. This was also the case in the neighboring countries he attacked: they faced the complete breakdown of their political systems, both locally and regionally, by the end of Sargon's military incursions. Sargon's campaigns into southern Mesopotamia (today southern Iraq)—the region where his most important enemy, Lugalzagesi of Uruk, lived—left behind chaos and destruction.[5]

Uruk, Ur, and Lagash, the big cities of the Sumerian union of cities, were conquered, their walls (city-walls?) demolished, and their elites deprived of power. Lugalzagesi's hometown of Umma also fell into Sargon's hands, and he went on to gain control over Elam in the south of Iran, and Mari, in what is today Syria. Mari, an important harbor and trading center on the Euphrates, was spared destruction by Sargon. Akkadian conquests reached beyond Mari to the northwest and to the Mediterranean Sea. The area of the "Upper Sea," as the Mediterranean was called then, was, by his own account, bestowed on Sargon by the local god Dagan. This area included the region between Mari and Lebanon with its cedar forests, the southwest of Anatolia, and the coast. In the north, the Akkadians progressed as far as the fertile regions of Assyria, where they took over the local agricultural resources as well as the well-developed infrastructure, roads, and communication networks.

From the "Upper Sea" to the "Lower Sea," from the Mediterranean in the west to the Persian Gulf in the southeast, Sargon waged war, conquered cities, plundered and destroyed, robbed local elites of their offices, and replaced them with loyal Akkadian administrators. The economic resources of these regions henceforth primarily increased Akkadian wealth, and by controlling the conquered territories, the Akkadians secured a new distribution system. Sargon established his daughter Enheduanna as EN-priestess in Ur, in what was perhaps the most important strategic step in his political life, thus securing Akkadian control over the spiritual and religious life of the conquered south alongside economic and political dominance.

3. See Gelb and Kienast 1990: 161, Text Sargon C1 and 173, Text Sargon C4.

4. See Franke 1995: 94 and n. 47 for a reference to the Sumerian list of kings, in which Sargon is listed as the founder of Akkad.

5. For the texts of Sargon, see Gelb and Kienast 1990; Westenholz 1997; and Lewis 1980.

### *The Rebel Seizes Power*

As a rebel and usurper, Sargon came to power in a way that could be considered almost classic. In Kish, as in the south of Mesopotamia, established structures were in the process of dissolving. The gods prophesied that the legitimate king of Kish and "lord" of Sargon, Urzababa, would soon lose his power (Cooper and Heimpel 1983; Afanas'eva 1987). Urzababa, who was then still ruling, recognized Sargon as a threat. He unsuccessfully tried to keep him from becoming his successor and to rid himself of the danger to his life and rulership.[6] In the south of the country, Lugalzagesi continued on a grander scale what the rulers of the Sumerian city-states had begun on the local level a generation earlier, from at least the time of Eannatum of Lagash.[7] Eannatum had enlarged the economic sphere of his city as far as Iran by means of warfare and had thus threatened the balance of power among what used to be equally strong city-states. During Lugalzagesi's reign, the union of early dynastic cities had already ceased to exist. The interests of Uruk's ruler lay in the north and thus potentially threatened the realm of Kish as well. The traditional roles in Kish and the surrounding region were destabilized. As cupbearer at court, Sargon was familiar with the politics and personnel there. The problematic situation in the country, the dissolution of the old order, as well as Lugalzagesi's activities presented new opportunities that could not have escaped him. From his privileged position, Sargon took advantage of the situation in order to initiate a takeover in Kish.

Like all rebels, Sargon theoretically had several ways in which he could establish his new position. If he broke all the rules and traditions of the former social community in all domains, a change in the system would be possible as a result of a change in leadership at the top. If he only broke the traditions in select areas of the system, this would lead to changes in broader circles of society and not just the elite and the government apparatus. The system as such and the social, cultural, and economic structure, however, would remain unharmed. Rebellions, according to one common definition, are to a greater or lesser extent the result of hierarchical conflicts in which a group of attackers sees a possible alternative to the ruling system and tries to put this into place by rebelling.[8] Hierarchical conflicts, according to this model, are seldom associated with further consequences to the social system, and usurpation is more or less seen as just a change in leadership at the top of the system, a change that does not necessarily affect the whole community and its concerns. According to Moore (1963: 85), a rebellion is a major change in politics that normally does not result in far-reaching structural changes in the governmental, power, and ruling system. This third type of rebellion would have been a possibility in Kish as well.

Every rebellion causes critical instability in the society concerned. No matter which strategy the rebels choose, they have to succeed in gaining control over the parameters that form the identity and self-definition of the community. In ancient Near

6. Afanas'eva 1987: 244, with a reference to lines 37–48: Urzababa tries to put Sargon into a furnace; and line 53 (p. 245), in which a letter addressed by Urzababa to Lugalzagesi of Uruk is mentioned: the letter suggests that the death of Sargon be arranged; this attempt also fails.

7. For the activities of Eannatum, king of Lagash, see Steible 1982: 143, Text Eannatum 1.

8. See, for example, Giesen 1991: 104ff.

Eastern societies, these parameters were often linked to religion. In addition, the community had to be convinced that only the new order could secure the "good life." Therefore, control over life-sustaining resources was as important as control over the military. The latter formed a guarantee of protection against threats from the outside and in many cases also served as protection for the ruler from internal opposition. Control of religious life and control of economic and military resources provided the means for securing the "superstructure" and the basis for society—that is, provided the connection between symbolic values and real events.

Success, according to the traditional theory of rebellion (Maurer 2004: 107ff.; Eisenstadt 1982), must be achieved quickly in order to demonstrate power while the rebellion is still ongoing. Opposition forces must not only be frightened by threats but must also be confronted with the results of their resistance by actual punishment. Loyal groups and potential supporters, on the other hand, are given material rewards immediately and are promised more in the future in order to secure their support.

With his takeover in Kish, Sargon destroyed the ruling order. With wars against the "others," he destroyed the political system in the south. He disregarded cultural and religious rules and destroyed the organization of the autonomous city-states.

The precise course of Sargon's takeover cannot be gleaned in detail from the written sources. It is only known that the takeover was not desired by the local elites. After the takeover, Sargon's management of the religious traditions of Kish and the surrounding regions became apparent. It was strategically cunning and probably was culturally unavoidable. Taking control of the religious traditions was presumably for the purpose of (and definitely suited for) legitimating his reign, winning supporters, and securing his position.

### *Rebellion and Religion*

The change in the ruling order gained legitimacy by its association with the deities An, Enlil, and Ishtar. According to written sources, these gods had decided on the dethronement of the king. "Not Sargon but the gods are the agents of change" was the ideological message. Sargon did not plan the rebellion; he just benefited from it and at the same time fulfilled the will of the gods—he left his father's house for the court by the will of Ishtar.

The claim that the local deity, in this case Ishtar, clearly welcomed the takeover by a new ruler was part of the tradition of political renewal in the ancient Near East, irrespective of whether the new ruler gained power legitimately or not. The claim that An and Enlil were active in Kish is at first more surprising; their domains should have been in the south and not in northern Babylonia at the beginning of Sargon's rule. This surprise, however, vanishes in light of Sargon's political intentions and gives rise to admiration for his cunning ability to evoke the right gods at the right time and in the right place. He did not just intend to change the system in one city; he planned to change the entire societal system from the "Upper to the Lower Sea" to fit Akkadian ideas. In the third millennium B.C., An was the head of the Sumerian pantheon; he was the father of all the other gods and of all creatures and therefore the ultimate authority in the south. Enlil was not only his son and a second-rank god but also the

god responsible for order and royalty in the country. The involvement of these two deities in Kish's political situation was strategically clever in two ways. In order to legitimate his expansionist goals and to secure his hegemonic struggle for power, Sargon needed the support of the gods of the region concerned, just as he had needed Ishtar's support in Kish. If Sargon wanted to legitimate his power in the new areas and find loyal allies among the local people, he needed to offer potential supporters an identification with a new order that appeared attractive. Consequently, Sargon's support by the most powerful deities in the south of Mesopotamia was publicized. Quite rightly one would not choose a city god as partner if one wanted to change the order of the whole country, because a city god's responsibilities were only to the city and did not extend to the country as a whole.

It is doubtful whether Sargon had the support of the religious elites. The propagation of Ishtar's help, which meant the de facto approval of the priests, may just have been a traditional proclamation at the beginning of the reign. This assumption is based on reports on Sargon's treatment of temple property. Land owned by the temples was overtly given to the palace and private individuals, and the priests were thus robbed of their economic base.[9] Trade, which was traditionally an aspect of the economy in which the temples were involved, was now entirely controlled by the palace. The local priests thus appear to have lost rather than profited by the change. By evoking the gods to legitimate his takeover, Sargon showed the priests the limits of their influence in no uncertain terms.

By naming Ishtar as a supporter of the new order, Sargon continued the traditional religious custom and thus evoked a sense of continuity in a time of change. At the same time, he interfered drastically in the local religious organization by marginalizing the priests and by evoking "foreign" deities. Sargon was a master at playing with traditions. Where they furthered his cause, he formally continued them, yet he also deprived them of meaning and subverted them. The management of traditions was crucial for the fate of the whole community as well as the rebel. He had to be wise when deciding what to continue and what to change. How subtle these changes could be is shown by, for example, the religious titles he used to describe his relationship to An, Enlil, and Ishtar (Franke 1995: 96ff.). He appeared as Ishtar's trustee, Enlil's governor, and An's priest, thus assuming roles that were only possible and successful when there was cooperation between humans and gods. In the real world, trustees and governors were installed by kings; in other words, these offices could only be gained by royal approval. Just as the officials were dependent on the king in acquiring a position, the king was dependent on their loyalty in exercising his governance effectually. Only in cooperation with the officials could the reign be successful. Sargon imposed the same relationship on his interaction with the gods. The king was no longer primarily a servant of the divine will but a potentially active and creative part of the divine plan. This new and powerful position of the king, in both the world of humans and the realm of the gods, once again underscored the priests' loss of power and influence.

9. For the Akkadians' treatment of occupied land, see Foster 1993: 25ff.

### *Rebellion and the Local Political Elite*

In the political field, the change in the status quo was much more radical than in the religious sector. The dethronement of Uzarbaba was followed by the impeachment of the "old ones," presumably the counselors of the old king, and their removal from the sphere of the new ruler. When the established elite openly opposed the new order, the most important act of every rebel (once the elite had been removed) must have been the establishment of a new, loyal clientele. These new supporters were not recruited from the religious or the existing political elite of Kish, as has already been demonstrated.

Sargon found a trustworthy and strong clientele within the ranks of the military. According to his own statements, 5,400 men ate with him on a daily basis. The military was an essential and crucial part of his politics and must have worked as a protective force at home, as well as a powerful means of expansion abroad.

### *Rebellion and the Control of Resources*

An important way of demonstrating to a wide audience that the new order had brought the "good life" to the community was to secure its economic needs. In ancient Near Eastern societies, the economy played a crucial part in constructing and sustaining the community, and its representatives were accordingly powerful. The control of resources also meant the far-reaching control of the present and future state of society.

Sargon of Akkad used the field of economics to establish a loyal clientele in Kish. The concentration of control over all resources at the palace made it possible to give temple lands to private individuals. The new landowners who profited from the new order were probably Sargon's first followers. The break in political tradition was followed by a break in the traditional organization of the economy (and later also in the organization of trade). Control over economic aspects of society was especially important to Sargon. Unlike religion, economics was an area in which he broke radically with tradition (just as in the sphere of politics) and distinguished himself with innovations that were probably essential for the approval of the new order by new social groups and were absolutely necessary for the stabilization of his reign.

### *Rebellion and Structural Change in the Ruling Order*

With his interference in the political, religious, and economic order of Kish, with his disposal of the old clientele and establishment of a new clientele, Sargon secured his reign and changed the structures of the political and social community much more profoundly than traditional research into rebellions normally dictates. While most researchers postulate just a change in leadership at the top as the usual result of rebellion, the changes brought by Sargon's takeover went much further and were not limited to the elites. Although one cannot speak of a change in system in Kish itself, the measures taken after the takeover meant profound changes in the cultural and social conditions that were particularly visible to the population of the town.

Giving land to individuals implied that Sargon consciously addressed circles beyond the traditional elites in order to recruit new supporters. In Lagash, the usurper and outsider Urukagina had already pursued this strategy of allowing a wider audience to profit from the new order and thus turning them into its supporters.[10] The structural change in the elites should thus have been enforced by a change in the privileged social groups.

### *Resettlement as a Political Means of Establishing a Clientele*

These measures were seemingly not sufficient in Kish to safely establish the new order in the minds of the people. To achieve this, a new strategy was put into action and a relocation campaign was begun that resulted in the settlement of new groups in Kish.[11]

The relocation of human beings and their integration into a new and strange social system are a huge intervention for all concerned—the old population as well as the newcomers. Relocation means the destruction of established social bonds, not just where people are removed from their familiar environment, but also in the areas where the resettlement takes place. In the new place, the strangers are at first isolated, torn from their familiar relationships and power structures; they have not yet established structures to organize their community. The new settlers are dependent on the protective power of the leaders responsible for their relocation in order to orient themselves. Although the reasons for the resettlements in Kish are not explicitly stated in the sources, one can assume in this particular case that the newcomers (who would have been in need of protection) were established there in order to create a new loyal clientele for Sargon.

The political aims and the impact of resettlement activities on the established population as well as on the resettled population can be seen in the structural changes in Tibet as enforced by the "protective power," China. By relocating and giving preferential treatment to the new population in their new home, the rulers try to establish a stable, long-term, and irreversible basis for their power abroad. This intervention in the status quo is ambivalent and risky for the protective power as well, because the new population might form an alliance with the old one and oppose the new order. Sargon must have been aware of this potential danger; nevertheless, relocation and restructuring of the population in Kish were part of his political program.

### *Spatial Order as a Visible Sign of the Ruling Order*

By the time the resettlements began, the innovations in Kish must have been obvious to everybody. But Sargon did not stop at intervening in the social structures of Kish as a visible sign of his rule. The remodeling of the political and social order was followed by a remodeling of the public space, in order to impose the new order on

10. For those privileged by Urukagina's reforms, see Steible 1982: 311, Text UKG 4–5.

11. For the remodeling and resettlement of the city, see Gelb and Kienast 1990: 161, Text Sargon C1.

the cultural memory of the inhabitants of Kish and surrounding areas. The traces of the old order had to be removed from Kish's appearance. Every ruler in ancient Near Eastern societies used architecture and the design of public space as a political means—as a way of presenting his reign as successful.

Sumerian kings usually dedicated their architectural endeavors to the gods, but this is not something known from Sargon's reign. Designing public space demonstrated both economic power and the power of the ruler over the availability of space—and it allowed the ruler to associate symbols of power with the memory of his particular reign. That this measure was by nature very visible made this strategy just as ambivalent as resettlement was: the construction of representative architecture was a sign of power and was visible to everyone, yet at the same time, its destruction clearly demonstrated political decline and could also be observed by everybody!

It is reported that Kish (as the only place in the region) was remodeled, but we do not know how and to what extent this was done. The officials of Akkad must have known that changes in the spatial order—the concealing of old architectural orders and the destruction of old symbols of power—were an important and powerful strategy in removing the old from memory and postulating the new as relevant. The message of a changed architectural and spatial order was intended to make the new obvious but also to document the economic and political power of the new ruler. This potential was used to transfer the traditional center of political power, Kish, into a place that demonstrated the ideas of a new ruling class. The fact that it was Kish, the capital of the former kings, that underwent a structural remodeling is striking and indicates once more that it was necessary to a establish a highly obvious sign of the new order.

### *Sargon of Akkad, Founder of a City*

Whether the many measures taken to establish Sargon's reign were successful in Kish is not reported explicitly. We do know, however, that Sargon, apart from the reforms already mentioned, intervened profoundly in the existing religious, social, and cultural structures for a second time when he decided to found another political residency alongside Kish and built the city of Akkad.[12] Whether the old networks in Kish remained powerful and obstructive in the establishment of the new order or whether it was politically opportune to place a new city next to the redesigned Kish remains open to debate. The development, however, has to be regarded as a major break with tradition that potentially meant more than just a break in using one place continuously. The traditional places of worship and ritual were located in Kish, as were presumably the cemeteries of the ancestors, and according to the beliefs of the time these could not simply be abandoned and left behind.[13] Sargon, however, saw in this

12. The location of Akkad and its appearance remain unknown. The site of the town has not been identified and excavated. That Sargon founded Akkad is reported in the Sumerian list of kings, which calls Sargon the "King of Akkad, the man who built Akkad" (Franke 1995: 94).

13. The care of the ancestors even after their death was the imperative duty of the living. Neglecting this duty meant bad luck for the dead and the living.

tradition no obstacle to building a new city, a fact that is not really surprising given his biography and the attitude of the traditional elite toward his reign.

### *The Political Titles of Sargon and Their Identity-Constituting Effects*

Whether Sargon considered himself to be within the traditions of Kish at all and identified with them is doubtful. The titles with which he is recorded and with which he wanted to be remembered do not indicate this! Akkad was clearly more important to him as a symbol and as a sign of royal identity than Kish was. Sargon bore the title "King of Akkad." He identified with the new order. The old political order was no longer commemorated with highest priority, while the new order was aggressively promoted and there was a clear break with the old traditions of political order. Whether Sargon's second title was "King of Kish" or "King of the Country" is heavily disputed.[14] It would have been strategically wise to add the new next to the old—King of Akkad and (!) King of Kish—and thus make the new acceptable via the old, to refer back to the old customs of society and to make the new ones appear less threatening. To integrate the new via the old would also fit into the building program for the city: a new city is built in addition to the old center of power.

### *Conclusion: The Rebellion of Kish and Its Local Consequences*

The break with tradition in the political field at first needed a powerful façade that glossed over the break and suggested a continuity of tradition. What would have been more appropriate than the use of religion? This was precisely what the rebel and future king Sargon had in mind when he made the gods responsible for the changes. From a modern perspective, this was a strategically clever move that at the same time obscured the next break with tradition. Referring responsibility and agency to the gods should theoretically strengthen the priesthood after a political rebellion, yet the priests were de facto robbed of their power. The newcomer Sargon cleverly used tradition. The only possible way to gain ultimate legitimacy for the takeover and thus also gain approval for a change in government was by not challenging religious customs openly but continuing them. The subtle measures that initiated the change in religious traditions have already been mentioned.

In politics, however, radical interference with the traditions of cooperation was necessary. The rulers in the south had, according to the rules, acceded to the throne as successors to their fathers, and thus the continuation of tradition had secured success. Sargon, however, could not rely on such a tradition. Instead he challenged this "defect" and created his own tradition. A new clientele was established, and the old networks were broken up. Interventions in the spatial order and the makeup of Kish's population made the change in power in the traditional center visible to everyone, while the founding of the new residence of Akkad and the new ruler's clear identification with this new center emphasized the manifestation of the new far beyond the immediate area. Sargon followed the classic steps to success that a rebel at the center

14. For the reconstruction of the title "King of Kish," see Franke 1995: 95–96.

of a rebellion should take: oppositional forces are heavily punished by the loss of property and responsibilities, while potentially loyal groups are established by bestowing material privileges upon them.

Structural change occurred where Sargon allowed new population groups access to influential positions. He also transferred control over resources and access to resources to new institutions. In particular, he concentrated responsibility for the control of the resources of several institutions in one administrative unit—the palace. The consequences of the rebellion in Kish affected broad circles of society and were not limited to a change at the top of the government, as postulated by some researchers in rebellion theory. Sargon recognized the need to make his political activities visible. By remodeling Kish, relocating new inhabitants there, and founding Akkad, he demonstrated his seemingly unlimited power over space, people, and resources. The building activities could have been read as a sign of political and economic power, but they could also have been intended to gloss over weak spots and to distract the subjects' attention from problems and divert it to prestigious operations of success.

The ambivalence shown by his building activities must have been clear. Architecture is both a witness to and sign of a ruler's power, yet in its decay and destruction it also mirrors the precariousness of the prevailing order.

After his takeover, the rebel and usurper Sargon established unmistakable and highly visible signs that symbolized the new order and gave the old order a new position. The founding of Akkad, the title that emphasized Sargon's connection with Akkad and not Kish, the emphasis on the military and the "5,400 men" he fed daily, as well as the relocation of the population to Kish provided Sargon with a geographical space and a social clientele that expressed the new order, an order that was radically different from the older traditions and customs in Kish. The danger or the goal of this strategy—that it risked, or even intended, a split in society—was inherent to Sargon's activities. He offered opportunities for identification that at first appeared like the establishment of a privileged elite rather than a way of achieving conciliation within a population that was facing the manifold changes brought on by the takeover.

## *Expansion and Invasion: Sargon the King of Akkad, Sargon the Conqueror*

Sargon's rebellion "at home" was followed by "foreign" domination over the south and the expansion of control and dominance over parts of northern Mesopotamia, and over what is today western Syria. The principle of structural change that Sargon applied in Kish was continued "abroad." By removing the local elites in the conquered cities, Sargon secured political control over the occupied territories once his military actions were over.[15] The destruction of cities and the political dethronement of enemies were followed by the next step necessary for securing his rule: establishing control over the losers' economic resources and concentrating the means of survival

15. "From the Lower Sea [the Persian Gulf] citizens of Akkad are governors, even Mari and Elam serve Sargon, the King of the Country" (see Gelb and Kienast 1990: 161, Text Sargon C1).

in the hand of the usurper and foreign ruler. Imports from Tilmun, Maggan, and Meluhha in southern Mesopotamia reached Akkad. This means that the wars in the south had opened up new trading routes to Akkad that transcended regional boarders.[16] Northern Mesopotamia was a transit region for Akkadian trade and also provided Akkad with the necessary agricultural resources. Via the Euphrates, and using Mari as a trading center, the Akkadians reached and controlled the west and from there extended their power to the Levant and Anatolia in order to secure supplies of wood and metal. The direct interventions in the conquered communities' political and military systems were accompanied by more subtle measures, which may not have been immediately visible to everyone but which may have led to profound changes in traditional conditions. Once the Akkadians controlled the politics and the economy of a region, they also took over the cultural realm by dethroning the priests in the most important religious centers and replacing them with intimates of Sargon. In Ur, for example, Sargon's daughter Enheduanna became EN-priestess.[17] By integrating religion into his politics and by using the gods of the conquered to legitimate these events, the Akkadian ruler potentially contributed to a split in the communities concerned, which had to decide whether to remain loyal to their own elite or to embrace Sargon and the new order.

With the restructuring of the old political center of Kish and the founding of Akkad, Sargon made it impossible to overlook the new order "at home" on an architectural level. The interventions in the visible "public" order made Sargon appear as a "constructive" and economically and politically potent ruler. In the occupied regions of the south, to begin with it was the destruction of the cities that made the new order visible,[18] and thus Sargon may have appeared more as a ruthless military leader than a constructive ruler there. With the loss of their architectural environment, these communities also lost the order of their *Lebenswelt*. The razing of city walls documented in equal measure the very obvious defenselessness of the cities and the loss of political autonomy (which, while not directly visible, was certainly discernible to everyone). The loss of order and the symbolic meaning of a destroyed city must have had a deep impact on its citizens' concepts of their own identity. The loss of architectural order was followed by the loss of political order due to the removal of the traditional elites.

Controlling the cities that were most important to the reign of the Akkadians in the occupied areas in the south was the responsibility of trustworthy followers of Sargon. This was a dramatic change in the political tradition of the south, where rulership was traditionally organized dynastically. The dissolution of the autonomy of cities in the south benefited the establishment of a new territorial ruling system based on a concentration of power in Sargon and his political center, Akkad. This was another serious break with tradition, which was begun by Lugalzagesi (Sargon's contemporary and main rival) and completed by Sargon.

16. Gelb and Kienast 1990: 167, Text Sargon C2.

17. See Gelb and Kienast 1990: 64, Text Sargon A1.

18. See Gelb and Kienast 1990: 16, Text Sargon C1: "He has conquered the city and demolished its walls."

Whether the Akkadians conquered the west and the north with their military or whether they "only" controlled it politically and exploited it economically is not reported in the written sources. That access to the resources of both regions was essential for the establishment of an Akkadian realm is shown in the case of the north by archaeological sources. For the west, written documents also exist.

The rebellion in Kish and the reorganization of the political systems in central and southern Mesopotamia had serious and far-reaching consequences. Ebla and Mari were especially affected by the increasing strength of the Akkadian superpower. Located on the Euphrates, Mari had always been an important trading center between the Levant and Mesopotamia and a harbor for the shipping of goods to the south. The Akkadians took advantage of the easily accessible and controllable junction and managed to dominate this place as well.

Ebla was the economic and administrative center of the west, with a focus on wool and textile production as well as the processing of metal, wood, and gemstones. These were imported as raw materials and were then turned into high-quality luxury goods before finally, like the wool and the fabrics, being exported. Highly specialized craftsmanship as well as the import of raw materials and export of finished goods formed the economic bases that guaranteed the city's wealth. A far-reaching network of trade relations (Pettinato 1991: 83) connected the city with autonomous urban centers both near and far, including Tell Brak and Tell Leilan in the northeast and the city of Assur in northern Iraq, and with areas rich in raw materials, such as the Amanus and Taurus Mountains and northern Lebanon, as well as with Palestine and Egypt via Byblos.

The changes in the internal organization of southern and central Mesopotamia were followed by a new direction in foreign politics under Akkadian rule. The far-reaching contact of the formerly independent city-states with more-or-less equal trading partners that extended from Mesopotamia to the Levant was replaced with an aggressive Akkadian policy of territorial expansion through a centralized control of resources.

Tell Leilan and Tell Brak were major trading partners with Ebla. With their fertile hinterlands, they were well suited for agriculture and cattle breeding and were also easily reached and controlled from all directions through the integration of a good road system. In order to enrich the capital, Akkad, the Akkadians placed the fertile agricultural zone around the two cities under their own administration and made them part of their realm. It is not known whether the Akkadians replaced the local elite or just controlled it. Particularism and independence, in any case, gave way to Akkadian centralism. Massive tax duties kept a stranglehold on the cities and made the Akkadian center even richer. The Akkadians controlled the well-developed network of roads that connected the Khabur region with the south and with the neighboring regions in the north and west. They also used the roads for the transport of regional products to the center, Akkad.

The western Levant with its powerful economic and administrative center in Ebla, the Amanus region, northern Lebanon as a provider of cedar wood, and the Taurus with its source of silver were more difficult to access and control than the north and

the Euphrates region, but they were very much desired by the Akkadians. Sargon boasts in his inscriptions of not only having seen the west but of having ruled it. A detailed analysis of the reports shows that another scenario was more plausible. By sporadic campaigns directed at the sources of raw material, the Akkadians secured the necessary goods without being constantly present in the west. Both written and archaeological sources document this short-term occupation, control, and plundering of the periphery by the Akkadians. The consequences of their expansive rule, however, went far beyond these activities. They intervened profoundly in the infrastructure that had developed during the second half of the third millennium B.C. in Syria/Lebanon, and eventually caused its destruction. The occupation and control of the north and east resulted in a structural change in the relations of the formerly autonomous cities of the Levant. Trade was now replaced by an exchange of goods between center and periphery that was controlled by the Akkadians and that had only one taker—the Akkadians. Where the well-developed road and communication networks were useful for the foreign occupants, they were maintained; where they could not be controlled, they were destroyed. With the change in the organization of trade, the trade routes also altered. The new routes and the forced structural changes that also took place in the west of the Levant must have robbed Ebla of its economic base. Due to the interregional interventions by the Akkadians, Ebla lost control of the wood and metal sources and thus also lost the ability to provide its own highly specialized artisans with raw materials. At the same time, the formerly independent trading partners and consumers of luxury goods produced in Ebla had vanished due to Akkadian occupation of the north, their control of the city of Mari, and the change in the political organization of Mesopotamia itself. The intervention of the Akkadians in the trade and communication system of the autonomous city-states led to the destruction of this system first in Mesopotamia and later also in Syria/Lebanon. The removal of goods instead of trade and the central political control instead of autonomy of the "Syrian" towns were of greatest benefit to the center of the new order.

The restructuring of the political organization from a decentralized to a centralized system was by necessity followed by a concentration of the control of resources in the center, Akkad. Access to the resources that were not directly available in Akkad and its surrounding area was blatantly put under Akkadian control. The formerly independent and wealthy trading cities of Ebla, Mari, Brak, and Leilan lost their power and autonomy and, just like the regions on the Gulf, came under the domination and control of Akkad. Trade profits were asymmetrical, concentrated entirely on the needs of the political center of Akkad.

### *Direct and Structural Violence: Politics and Religion*

The rebellion of Kish was followed by a drastic change in the political and economic organization from southern Iraq to northern Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean in the west. Interference in the political and economic organization of the conquered region, supported by the military, led to changes in traditional conditions, customs, and rituals. But in the long term, securing Akkadian dominance abroad was

not possible by the establishment of military, political, and economic control over the region alone. Cultural integration was essential if Sargon was to find loyal supporters in the conquered population, supporters who would identify with the new order and accept it. However, attempts to gain broad approval of his politics are not immediately discernible in the various forms of Sargon's self-image that have survived. He only provided for certain groups, such as the military, the citizens of Akkad, the clientele that he had established abroad, and possibly the people who had been relocated to Kish.

The image of the "good shepherd" providing the "good life" for all of his subjects was not propagated by Sargon, and in this he differed from the rulers in southern Sumeria before him as well as from the rebel Lugalzagesi, who broke with the political system yet fulfilled traditional cultural and social obligations. The self-representation of Sargon, on the other hand, also showed a break with the traditions of the social community of ruler and population, including—by the removal of the priests in the most important temples of the south—the handling of the conquered people's religious customs and rituals. In order to gain approval and support as the legitimate ruler in spite of these breaks with social and religious rules, Sargon was forced (despite the realities) to present his own actions as beneficial to everyone and to make the changing of traditions and customs appear not only necessary but the only and right way to the "good life." He had to present his attitude as universally valid and as normatively "natural," to harmonize divergent opinions and conditions, and to establish a system of meaning that included the potential of creating a new tradition in which everyone would find his or her place.

One of the most important measures Sargon had to take was to integrate his actions in the realm of the religious. It was culturally essential to secure divine approval. However, this does not mean that the rulers in ancient Near Eastern societies were unaware of the strategic potential of the use of religion in politics. Religion was the major parameter used to legitimate actions in these societies and was probably especially relevant when it came to its fluctuating use by foreign rulers: religion legitimates and stabilizes order and promises security. At the same time, it is a threat to people who do not act according to the divine will. This ambivalence was used by Sargon as legitimation for his actions abroad. Seemingly free of traditional, religious bonds, he also proclaimed at any time the support of the gods who happened to be particularly appropriate for his political needs.

The god An, who resided in Uruk, was, as already mentioned, the head of the Sumerian pantheon, and thus the ultimate authority in the whole country, while his son Enlil was responsible for order in the country. In Kish, according to the legend, both were involved in the divine conspiracy against the ruling king; Enlil bestowed the territory from the Upper to the Lower Sea upon Sargon and made sure that Sargon was not confronted by an equal opponent.

In the western periphery, Sargon used the god Dagan to legitimate his actions. Dagan, the king of the country, leader of the gods, and the highest deity in what is today Syria (his position in the hierarchy of gods is comparable to Enlil) had made the conquest of the foreign territories Armanum and Ebla possible in the first place, according to Sargon's propaganda.

The manipulation of religious responsibilities abroad against the personnel concerned developed into a system of structural and cultural violence, in which the "others" were more or less ideologically defenseless against the Akkadians. With their takeover of the religious system, the Akkadians attacked the most basic religious and political norms and thus also the basis of social community. At the same time, they attacked the conquered elites ideologically in what was politically one of the most powerful fields: religion—which was also the grounds for legitimating their power to their own people.

Only after Enlil pronounced his verdict and gave his order did Sargon conquer Uruk.[19] By showing the conquered that it was their own deities who caused the political change (or at least supported and legitimated it), the Akkadians must have managed to legitimate their victory almost "automatically" even in the eyes of the conquered. The Akkadians therefore put further pressure on the conquered elite and population, who were not only conquered militarily but were also robbed of the divine protection and support of their own gods. Victims were thus turned into perpetrators; the conquered elites were themselves to blame for the violence they had to suffer. This powerful reversal of facts worked well wherever Sargon could demonstrate that the local elites had acted against the will of the local gods, and therefore also against their own culture and society, and had thus lost the support of the gods. The inhabitants of Nippur must have stood by powerless and watched Sargon put his most important opponent, Lugalzagesi, king of Uruk, in the pillory in front of the Enlil Temple, and they must have observed that Enlil did not intervene on Lugalzagesi's behalf.[20] With ideological and propagandistic ruses of this sort, the Akkadians effectively defined war and violence as necessary for reestablishing order in the conquered regions. The legitimacy of the Akkadian actions, according to the ideology of Akkadian propaganda, was not to be questioned because, through the active support of the deities of the conquered societies, the actions of the victors and the new order in the conquered societies could be postulated as happening by the will of the gods. The Akkadian claim to be the legitimate preservers of the traditional order also carried an enormous potential for splitting society. The aim of Akkadian propaganda was to turn the conflict between Akkadians and conquered societies into a conflict within the society and thus destabilize the solidarity that the conquered population felt with their elites.

However, Akkadian ideology went beyond "sowing the seeds of discord amongst their enemies" and thus destroying the solidarity between them. By presenting themselves to the conquered as the preservers of their traditions and values, they pretended to be integrated into the norms and beliefs of the local religious field and in the realm of divine responsibilities. Thus the otherness of the Akkadians was ideologically hidden, and their political dominance was more deeply anchored in the cultural system of the conquered societies. This is a masterful application of the old rule of perfidy, according to which, after a reversal of facts, the victims become the causers of the suffering and the oppressors become the saviors. The appropriation of the

19. Gelb and Kienast 1990: 175, Text Sargon C5.
20. Gelb and Kienast 1990: 171, Text Sargon C4.

local deities by the Akkadians left the conquered population literally "god-forsaken." This transgression of the fundamental pillars of cultural and ideological order was exacerbated by the fact that Sargon replaced not only the political elite in the politically most powerful places but also the leaders responsible for religion and cults and placed the control of matters of cult in the hands of close intimates. He installed his own daughter Enheduanna as EN-priestess in Ur, the most important place of worship in the south, and this symbolic destruction of the old and the traditions was perhaps even more serious than the removal of the worldly elite. Sargon managed to get away with an open break with tradition in politics, yet it was advisable to legitimate it. The political "use" of religious traditions was an influential and powerful tool that was not to be underestimated and a tool that Sargon applied cleverly. He subtly used the tradition of Sumerian religious values that stabilized the community while he destroyed the traditions and propagandized this very destruction as the salvation of the religious, cultural, and social order. All the activities of the Akkadians appeared to be accepted and ordered by the gods who represented law and order in southern Sumeria.

By breaking down the social systems of the conquered—by attacking the spatial order through territorial conquest, by breaking the political order it was connected to, by dethroning the elites, and by interfering with the cultural and religious order and the values and norms of the conquered, which convinced them that they were being punished by their own gods, Sargon had chosen a powerful ideological weapon. He beat the enemy with the enemy's frame of order; he took away the enemy's acknowledged preservers of order and used them against the conquered and showed them how the gods that used to be their own from now on would protect the Akkadian—that is the new, legitimate—order.

The selective and well-aimed interventions of Sargon in the basic, identity-giving cultural and religious parameters of the others—and at the same time their replacement by his own cultural and religious values and norms—were an important part of the ideological manipulation of the conquered nations with which the Akkadians handled conflicts and stabilized and legitimated their power.

## *Conclusion*
## *Sargon—Ruler and Usurper:*
## *The Ruler Who Caused Disorder and "Globally" Enforced the Establishment of a New Political Order*

A revolution (rebellion) can be expected, says Andrea Maurer (2004: 107ff.) in her study of the sociology of governance, "if on the one hand the power of the old rulers dwindles and on the other hand new ideologies, successful isolated actions and an intensive communication make a successful revolution more likely." The initial situation during Sargon's rebellion in Kish may have presented just such a scenario. A rebel has to be able to demonstrate his success quickly (as described above in the clas-

sic theory of rebellion)[21] in order to demonstrate his power while the rebellion is still ongoing. The opposition must be punished directly and thus be confronted with the consequences of their subversion, while supporters should be rewarded materially in order to reward and strengthen their loyalty.

A successful rebellion needs organizational skill as well as a subtle ideology, a concept that is based on the hypothesis that the rebellion against the existing order leads to a new and better social order (see Eisenstadt 1982: 16–17). The roots of rebellion often lie in conflicts between different elites; its consequences, however, often go beyond a mere change in leadership at the top. The consequences of Sargon's rebellion seem to reaffirm Eisenstadt's remarks comprehensively (1982: 85ff.).

With Sargon's rebellion in Kish, southern Mesopotamia, and the regions in the north and west, the political system, the basis of legitimating political actions, and the symbols of political power underwent a massive change. The top political positions were filled with new representatives, without any spontaneous coalitions between the old elites and Sargon appearing in Kish or in the conquered cities of the south. In fact, the opposite was true. Old social boundaries dissolved, both in Kish and in the occupied territories, which was especially apparent in the restructuring of the communities of Kish and Akkad. New social groups and lobbies formed or were established through Sargon's measures (new landowners, resettlers) and were integrated into the emerging political system. As a result of the rebellion, it is possible that a broader stratum of society now had an influence on politics (see Eisenstadt 1982: 96).

With the shifting of inner and outer boundaries of the community, the political system changed massively, especially in the conquered regions. The political system of the south disappeared (1982: 96) and was absorbed by the strongly centralized political organization of the Akkadians. At the same time, the economic sector was not exempt from drastic changes. The new landowners mentioned above formed a new economic group and frame of action (1982: 97), while the form and extent of economic distribution also changed. Akkad unremittingly drew resources from the periphery and used them to the benefit of the center. The result of these interventions in the economic maintenance of center and periphery was a break down in working communication and distribution networks, and cities formerly acting as economic centers of what was now the Akkadian periphery lost the basis of their activities. As Eisenstadt (1982) states in his discussion of a model of rebellion, the new center destroyed the established relationships in the periphery.

Sargon's rebellion thus led to a multifaceted, radical break with the social, political, cultural, and religious traditions of the societies in question (1982: 17), symbolized in a highly visible way by the founding of Akkad, the only political center in the new realm. The change from a peer system to a centralized government led to a fundamental redefinition of religious and cultural values as well as basing the different traditions in the realm of Akkad. Along with the control of immediate worldly concerns, the new rulers also aimed for control over the cosmic order. The restructuring by the

21. See also Eisenstadt 1982.

Akkadians seriously limited the authority of local city deities. The autocrat Sargon primarily communicated with the gods who held relevant and far-reaching positions in the pantheon of the conquered community! Thus the Akkadians destroyed the conquered societies' established structures and symbols collective identity and stated collective aims according to the new ruling order (1982: 104).

The center, Akkad, fashioned itself as—and actually became—the guardian of central order, symbolizing the ruling system, monopolizing the symbolization of the relationship between cosmic and social order, and linking these symbols with the political order.

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