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Chapter 2

Democracy in Ancient Iraq

In comparison with Greek and Hellenistic cultures, Mesopotamian culture at first sight, undeniably, seems alien and strange. The better one has learned to understand it, however, the more it has come to resemble our own culture. Its strange and exotic features conceal within themselves an invisible world of ideas more familiar to us, which resurfaces in new garments but largely identical in content in classical antiquity. (Parpola 2000: 30)

The Political Significance of Ancient Iraq

In asserting an alternative history of Iraq – one that emphasizes rather than ignores its democratic potential – the analysis must begin well before the time of the ancient Greeks; a time which preceded the false binaries between Greece and Persia, between the Occident and Orient, between Christianity and Islam, between Europe and her colonies and between Western democrats and Oriental despots. Reaching back into the annals of the ancient past, a number of early city-states began to appear across Mesopotamia¹ around 3200 BCE. As is now commonly understood, this era witnessed the development of some of humankind's earliest agricultural and architectural feats, including early farming practices and animal domestication, complex irrigation networks, sophisticated artistic and structural wonders as well as a relatively complex, urbane and cosmopolitan society. Very early on, these complex societies – with their large hydraulic projects and complicated temple and city economies – prompted the development of the world's first written language. This involved using a split reed to create the distinctive wedge-shaped marks now known as cuneiform on clay tablets which evolved from early markings concerning systems of weight and measurement through to a rich body of literary texts (Oppenheim 1967, Silvestro, 1965). As time passed, a plethora of overlapping and

¹ The term 'Mesopotamia', as with the term 'demokratia', is a composite word that is thought to have first appeared in the work of Herodotus. The word 'Meso' translates to mean 'middle' while 'Potamia' means 'river', thus making 'the middle of the rivers' (more commonly translated as 'between the two rivers') in reference to the Tigris and Euphrates.

successive empires spread out across and beyond Mesopotamia, each bringing their own complex histories and cultures.

This rich history of the ancient Middle East became politically significant long before the birth of the modern nation-state of Iraq in 1921, as various early Pan-Arab and Iraqi nationalist groups utilized its symbology in their rhetoric to encourage unity amongst the ethnically diverse population (Davis 2005b: 13). This was to continue throughout the British occupation and the rule of the Hashemite monarchy from 1921–58, an era which also saw the creation of the Iraqi Museum and a vibrant archaeological scene. Throughout this period, as Magnus Bernhardsson has cogently articulated, the ruling elite utilized the country's ancient Mesopotamian past in order to build a sense of nationhood amongst Iraqis of differing religious persuasions and ethnicities (Bernhardsson 2005). Similarly, the Arab Baath Socialist Party underwent an extensive and sustained cultural campaign in which the successes of the nations past became a symbol of Iraq's potential as a united and prosperous state. One epoch on which the Baath focused much of their attention was that of ancient Mesopotamia. They attempted to 'Arabize' Iraq's ancient past by radically transforming it in the minds of the Iraqi people from *Al-Jahiliya*, the pre-Islamic period of 'ignorance', to that of the 'Arabs before Islam' (Davis and Gavrielides 1991: 134–5). To do this, the Baath ordered the annual re-enactment of ancient Mesopotamian spring festivals across the nation which included traditional music, folktales, poetry, dances and arts, all linked to the early Near East. The regime also funded extensive archaeological excavations, re-built the ancient city of Babylon in the late 1980s, decorated various buildings and monuments with Mesopotamian symbols, and constructed museums dedicated to great leaders of the ancient past, such as Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi.

In Amatzia Baram's studies of Baathist manipulation of Mesopotamian symbology and folklore he demonstrates the ways in which the Baath were able to re-appropriate and manipulate Iraq's ancient history in order to both encourage national unity and patriotism as well as to garner submission to the central ruling elite (Baram 1983, 1991, 1994). Baram's examination not only emphasizes the political significance of the ancient Middle East to

contemporary Iraqis, but also demonstrates the degree to which the Baath understood the maintenance and legitimation of hegemony via the manipulation of cultural and social artefacts to gain the consent of the people and maintain power. Here, Saddam and the Baath understood that by emphasizing Iraq's Mesopotamian heritage they could eschew many of the more contemporary schisms which divide Iraqi society such as those between the Kurds, Shia Arabs and Sunni Arabs (Isakhan 2011b).

What is particularly problematic about these contemporary invocations of Mesopotamian history as a political tool is that, aside from its role in fostering some degree of national unity, it has also been used to justify the ruling elite of the time via a vague connection to a long line of 'Oriental despots'. Take for example the grandiose murals and portraits that scattered Iraq in the time of Saddam Hussein in which he was frequently cast alongside infamous Mesopotamian kings such as Nebuchadnezzar in scenes riddled with ancient symbology and motifs (Al-Khalil 1991, Reid 1993). Up until recently, the political history of the ancient Middle East had long been assumed to reveal a lineage of autocratic tyrants and the grand, menacing armies they gathered together in order to conquer and rule the region by fear, bloodshed and domination. 'In the traditional view of Historians,' as Daniel Bonnetterre points out, 'Mesopotamia has stood out among the lost civilizations as a pessimistic world under the dark shadow of violence ... [which] emphasized terror and ferocious actions' (Bonnetterre 1995: 11). The result of this misunderstanding, which arguably dates back to ancient Greece, 'is a simplistic book image of the ancient Near East civilizations as naturally despotic and most savagely cruel' (Bonnetterre 1995: 11).

So pervasive is this perception of the ancient Middle East and its tendency to despotism that commentators such as Sandra Mackey invoked several of the key assumptions about Oriental despotism and its ancient origins by claiming, in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, that

the kings of Assyria never accepted the reality that empires, like modern states, survive only through a measure of consent by the governed. Like a

series of ancient Saddam Husseins, each failed to lay the basis of a durable state. (Mackey 2002: 37)

Another example of this can be found in Mark Etherington's *Revolt on the Tigris*. Etherington was the British governor of the Wasit province under the authority of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) during 2003–04. Etherington's legitimate concerns about the prospects of democracy in Iraq are connected to its ancient society – or lack thereof:

Iraq's 'otherness' had been accentuated by its political isolation ... There was no all-embracing society in Wasit to speak of, but rather a series of camps and cliques – miniature societies – each with its own place. Most were quick to denounce the others, and compromise was rare. Each clique was self-sufficient because it was built around a source or sources of power. Like ancient city-states they traded with one another, made alliances and broke them, declared wars and negotiated peace; and occasionally one vanished because the strength sustaining it had waned. When power was fed into Wasit's ancient system this great flotilla would tremble as it absorbed new realities – and then steadily re-align itself as it had done for centuries ... To speak of 'democracy' as a theme, or of 'Iraq' as a rallying point or social adhesive, was thus less than effective because few Iraqis saw the advantage of thinking in that way ... If the prospect of a democratic state is among the world's most potent political rallying cries, it meant little to most Iraqis who simply sought to transmute it into the old currency. (Etherington 2005: 84–5)

Here, Mackey and Etherington suggest that the key challenge facing Iraq's democracy is its ancient culture of stagnant tradition. In ways that ironically mimic the Baath, they use broad brush strokes to connect the 'kings of Assyria' or Iraq's 'ancient city-states' to more contemporary political problems such as the rule of Saddam or the political wrangling and violence of the post-Saddam era. This understanding of the ancient Middle East as the precursor to more contemporary instances of Oriental despotism is clearly problematic in that it serves to further entrench the view of a backward East.

However, the archaeological excavations and anthropological work that were carried out across the region throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have begun to uncover a

very different image of the processes of power and authority in the ancient Middle East. This has provided an understanding that the history of modern democracy, which is usually understood to have begun around 500 BCE in Greece, can be traced further back to early Mesopotamia. As is illustrated in some detail below, this work therefore provides evidence that

When the Mesopotamian state first emerged in the early periods, royal power did not play an important role and only many centuries later did it become despotic. Originally kings were merely the first among equals and were obliged by laws or by long social traditions to respect the rights of the various groups of the population. In addition, royal power was restricted by popular assemblies which sometimes had a real and even decisive influence and which made citizens proud of their civil rights. (Dandamayev 1995: 23)

Ancient Mesopotamian and Middle Eastern Democracies

The crystallization of Mesopotamian civilization from around the middle of the fourth millennium BCE, saw the development of the framework that these civilizations would use to formulate their deepest questions, evaluate the world around them and develop their cultural legacy and societal institutions. Evidence for such advanced thought is found in the early myths and legends of ancient Mesopotamia, such as the inner functioning of the Ordained Assembly of the Great Gods. This assembly was made up of 50 gods and goddesses in total, with both genders playing an active role in the deliberations, and was the highest authority in the universe. As Min Suc Kee notes, this body served as ‘a vital decision-making agency responsible for juridical judgements’, where the gods would listen and debate until the pros and cons of each issue were clarified and a virtual consensus emerged (Kee 2007: 259, n1). When the council reached a full agreement, the seven senior gods would announce the final verdict and each of the members would voice their approval with a ‘Let it be’. This unified command meant that the will of the assembly had become divine law. While this body largely served as the judicial court of the universe, passing judgement on the wrongdoings of gods and humans alike, the assembly was also vested with the authority to elect and depose the kings of both the divine and earthly realms.

A specific example which demonstrates such advanced forms of governance is the ancient Mesopotamian myth of creation, *Enuma Elish*. As recounted in the Prelude to this book, in this particular myth the gods form an assembly in order to elect a leader or ‘champion of the gods’ who will defeat their powerful enemy, the primal mother, Tiamet. After much debate and deliberation, the Ordained Assembly of the Great Gods elect Lord Marduk as the new king of the gods. Armed with an invincible weapon, Marduk is able to smite Tiamet and, after returning home to a reception worthy of such a powerful and victorious god, Marduk sets about creating the known universe including the first slaves: human beings, who are put on earth to do the bidding of the gods.

Such myths can be understood as a form of allegory, whereby ancient humankind projected the world around them onto the realm of the gods. This notion of myth is reinforced when Henri Frankfort and H. A. Frankfort argue that myth ‘is nothing less than a carefully chosen cloak for abstract thought. The imagery is inseparable from the thought. It represents the form in which the experience has become conscious’ (Frankfort and Frankfort 1977: 7). In this way, the myths come to reveal more than the political machinations of the council of the great gods; at the very least they indicate just how long the will to democracy has been alive in human society. Beyond this, many have speculated that these myths also reveal the actual systems whereby ancient humankind governed itself. 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 (Easton 1970: 82–3).

Following on from the myths and their likely connection to earthly assemblies, is the significance of the ancient Mesopotamian epics which reflect an epoch some one to two centuries later than the myths, around 2800–2700 BCE. These epics differ substantially from the earlier myths in that they centre ‘around a human or semi-human hero, [such as] Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh, etc. rather than around a god’ (Jacobsen 1970 [1957]: 143). The most famous of these ancient Mesopotamian epics is the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which dates from around 2800 BCE (Storm 2003: 62–99). Uruk, the city of which Gilgamesh is ruler, 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, which are striking in their similarity to those already discussed. First, he consults with the conservative council of the elders who appear to have been made up of the heads of the powerful families within the state, who advise Gilgamesh against fighting the armies of Kish. However, Gilgamesh has the authority to veto their decision and appeal to a second assembly of all arms-bearing men. This assembly decides to fight and Gilgamesh – despite the advice of the elders – goes into battle for the freedom and liberty of Uruk. In the epic of Gilgamesh, there is, 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’ (Jacobsen 1970 [1943]: 163).

Although there can be no doubt that the assemblies held at Uruk during the time of Gilgamesh were less advanced than those held in later Greece or Rome, 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. 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 twenty-eight men, all over sixty years of age) had the power to overrule any ‘crooked decree’ that was passed by the popular assembly. Further parallels can be drawn between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the deliberative practices of the Roman Republic in the prelude to their war against Carthage (around 265 BCE). In Rome, 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 (Easton 1970: 83 n1).

To describe the democratic practices found in myths such as *Enuma Elish* and epics like *Gilgamesh*, the renowned Danish Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen coined the term ‘Primitive

Democracy' (Jacobsen 1970 [1943]). This political mechanism functioned more like a classical (participatory) than a modern (representative) form of democracy in the sense that it was

a form of government in which internal sovereignty resides in a large proportion of the governed, namely in all free adult male citizens without distinction of fortune or class. That sovereignty resides in these citizens implies that major decisions – such as the decision to undertake a war – are made with their consent, that these citizens constitute the supreme judicial authority in the state, and also that rulers and magistrates obtain their positions with, and ultimately derive their power from, that same consent. (Jacobsen 1970 [1943]: 157)

Jacobsen also goes on to justify his use of the word 'Primitive' to describe this early form of democracy, by stating that 'the various functions of government are as yet little specialized, the power structure is loose, and the machinery for social coordination by means of power is as yet imperfectly developed' (Jacobsen 1970 [1943]: 157).

These democracies seem to have functioned much like the aforementioned divine assembly. Although they were called together to make decisions regarding matters as diverse as irrigation projects, trade missions, land surveying, administrative issues and to judge the serious offences of citizens, it was primarily assembled when the security of the city-state was under threat. This formed the nucleus of the city-state's municipal administration and allowed the collective resources of the community to be pooled in order to reach consensus for concerted action. These councils further mirrored that of the gods by functioning as a bicameral assembly in that it was divided between 'an upper house of "elders" and a lower house of "men"' (Kramer 1963: 74). Although the elder men or 'fathers' seem to have held most of the power, some research suggests that these assemblies also resembled those of the gods in the fact that, 'women as well as men took part in decision-making – sometimes with a dominating role' (Saggs 2004: 30). During an assembly each of the citizens had the right to express their opinion and discussion would continue until a virtual unanimity was reached and the final decisions were then announced by the elders. Just as the gods elected Marduk their king when under

threat from Tiamet, so too did the early city-states of Mesopotamia convene for the specific purpose of electing a king when the security of the city-state was under jeopardy, usually from threat of attack by a neighbour. Although this meant that the new king became the supreme leader of the people and was able to implement new law, the appointment was to be held for a limited term by each incumbent and expired when the pending emergency had been resolved.

However, what makes Jacobsen's use of the term 'primitive' here particularly problematic is that considerable evidence has emerged which suggests that over time these relatively simplistic models of direct and participatory democracy became increasingly sophisticated. More recent work has questioned the notion that the region's experiments with democratic governance were in any way more 'primitive' or inferior to later examples like Athens. They must instead be acknowledged as an important chapter in the complex and multifaceted story of democracy and its history, one that began across the Mediterranean and Eurasian landmass of the ancient world, rather than in specific and isolated corners (Isakhan 2007a, 2011c, 2012a).

One such example is the extended kingdom of Ebla, which ruled a modest empire that dominated parts of modern day Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Excavations at the capital (modern Tell Mardikh in north-western Syria) in 1976 revealed astonishing details about this kingdom of some 250,000 people, which had been at the height of its power from around 2600–2240 BCE (Bermant and Weitzman 1979, Matthiae 1980). The 15,000 cuneiform tablets that were unearthed by archaeologists, exposed a sophisticated political culture involving some 11,000 public servants, providing arguably the 'best evidence we have for a government by an impersonal bureaucracy' in the ancient world (Springborg 1992: 8). The bureaucrats developed a system of governance whereby the king of Ebla was elected for a seven-year term and shared power with a council of elders. After serving his first term, the incumbent was entitled to run for a second and, in the event that he was not re-elected to office, the former king was able to retire on a state pension.

Geographically closer to the early developments of Mesopotamia already discussed the city-state of Shuruppak (modern Fara, Iraq) had its political and economic zenith from 2600–2350 BCE. Political power was firmly rooted in an oligarchy led by the temple priests, but serving underneath this powerful elite was a second chamber of magistrates or governors who formed a plural executive, had limited powers and a revolving tenure (Bailkey 1967: 1218). Perhaps more democratic, the people of Kish (modern Tell Al-Uhaymir, Iraq) held a general election to nominate their king around 2300 BCE. This particular king even took the ‘throne-name *Iphur-kish* (Kish assembled) to emphasize the popular basis of his rule’ (Saggs 2004: 132).

At around the same time, the people of Lagash (modern Tell Al-Hiba, Iraq) were embroiled in an early struggle against the upsurge of despotic regimes. 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 they had come to expect from a free state. Here, corrupt judges had sided with the rulings of the elite and turned much private and temple land into state property. This created 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’ (Kramer 1963: 79). In states such as Lagash, the temple community wielded enormous political power and ‘showed a strongly democratic character’ (Frankfort 1978 [1948]: 221). Not only were all citizens of the state – irrespective of their status or wealth – expected to contribute some labour to the maintenance and harvest of temple land, but the authorities of the temple also fulfilled a vital watchdog function over the government, monitoring instances of corruption and other abuses of power. The extent of the temples’ role in balancing the authority of the state is evident by the fact that it both generated and advocated resistance amongst the people of Lagash towards state-imposed terror and despotism. This constituted some of the earliest evidence of collective political action against oppressive systems of power and the first recorded use of the word ‘freedom’ (Kramer

1963: 79). In the wake of such a struggle, Urukagina (king of Lagash around 2300 BCE) established liberty as one of the main tenets of the society, ‘meaning the removal of abuses of the oppressed and the restoration and safeguarding of their rights’ (Bailkey 1967: 1231). He sought to establish the basic equality of all citizens by freeing the poor of their debts, re-installing the collective and egalitarian policies of the temple, renegotiating the rights of the citizen, working to eradicate hunger and oppression, and by returning the commandeered land to the people, making him ‘the first known social reformer in history’ (Bailkey 1967: 1221).

In the central Babylonian plain, approximately half-way between Lagash in the south and Kish in the north, the people of Nippur (modern Nuffar in Afak, Iraq) had long been familiar with democratic forms of governance. From as far back as the Early Dynastic Period (3000–2750 BCE) the elected elite of the various city-states of Mesopotamia had met in assemblies at Nippur for the purpose of debating and resolving broader regional issues and conflicts as well as the election of a temporary king to rule over the collective states under the confederacy known as the ‘Kengir League’² (Jacobsen 1970 [1957]: 139–40). Similar in practise to the archaic Greek amphictyony, such as the Delphic League, or to the modern day United Nations, the ‘Kengir League’ demonstrates an extraordinarily advanced political culture where the differences and disputes between the various city-states were addressed and hopefully resolved via the extensive debate and deliberation of the kings, emissaries and league officials. While it would seem that the political climate of Nippur might tempt the more ambitious members of the society to overthrow such isonomous models of governance, the city managed to preserve its democratic tendencies well into the Ur III period (2150–2000 BCE). While many of Nippur’s neighbours had since witnessed the rise of a centralized authority under the blood-line of a particular king, Nippur remained ‘governed by a heterogenous collective, the assembly of Nippur citizens, the governor (*Ensi*) of the city, and the highest priests of the Enlil and Ninurta temples’ (Leick 2001: 159).

² ‘Kengir’ is the Sumerian word for the Mesopotamian region.

Underpinning the democratic practices found across ancient Mesopotamia was an extensive set of legal codes developed across the region to ensure that justice was served in cases as diverse as crime, slavery, agriculture, debts and loans, marriage, property rights, sexual offences and theft. As one example, the city-state of Isin (modern Ishan Al-Bahriyat, Iraq), which flourished from 1953–1730 BCE, was governed by the Law Code developed by Lipit-Ishtar (1934–1924 BCE).³ Through the 50 laws, the king demonstrated his concern for the democratic virtues of social justice, equality and peace. In the Epilogue to the Law Code, he claims that the code was developed ‘in order to establish justice in the land, to eliminate cries for justice, to eradicate enmity and armed violence, to bring well-being to the lands of Sumer and Akkad’ (Roth 1997 [1995]: Epilogue I). Although concerns about justice are not inherently democratic, they do reflect, at the very least, the presence of an elite concerned with the wellbeing of the citizen.

Similar concerns about justice existed in the northern Mesopotamian city-state of Sippar (modern Tell Abu Habbah, Iraq) which managed to retain models of collective governance until surprisingly late. From approximately 1890–1590 BCE, the city appears to have been governed by a bicameral assembly comprising an upper house made up of nobility and a lower house made up of free adult males. Here, the upper house consisted of the more senior, qualified and wealthy members of the society who rotated leadership of the various magisterial and administrative positions on an annual basis. Unfortunately, as the city of Sippar gradually came under the jurisdiction of the central Babylonian government, the elite citizens who made up the upper house were infiltrated by royally appointed officials. Thus the emphasis shifted away from the original impetus of serving the citizens towards the role of a mediating body between the authority of the king and the subjugation of Sippar. Even in this situation, however, the upper house retained its judicial role and presided over particular cases that required a higher

³ In all instances throughout this book, the dates that follow the name of a ruler indicate the years of rule, not life.

body to exact justice. These judges were always local citizens and, if dissatisfied with their verdict, a citizen could appeal for a royal verdict (Leick 2001: 176, Oppenheim 1969: 9–10).

More generally, the grand empires of the time – namely, the Babylonian, the Assyrian and the Egyptian – also appear to have had democratic tendencies despite the common misconception that they were the very epitome of Oriental despotism. During the early Old Babylonian period (2006–1595 BCE), the Mesopotamian region fell into an epoch not at all dissimilar to that faced by Greece after the fall of Attica: a period of political instability and factionalism, extreme divergences in wealth and poverty, and incessant bellicosity. To counteract the chaos of such a dangerous political landscape, Hammurabi the ‘King of Justice’ (1792–1750 BCE) who ruled Babylon (modern Al-Hillah, Iraq), devised a set of legal prescriptions commonly referred to as the Code of Hammurabi. These laws are the best organized, longest and most detailed of ancient Mesopotamia and consist of a lengthy prologue, 275–300 laws and an epilogue. What is particularly interesting about these laws is that they frequently make reference to an assembly of judges who preside over complicated legal issues, interpreting the law and applying them to difficult real-world situations. Indicating the importance of the judges and the judicial assembly, the first four laws concern the penalties for giving false testimony before the assembly, which in many cases was death.⁴ The fifth law states that:

If a judge renders a judgement, gives a verdict, or deposits a sealed opinion, after which he reverses his judgement, they shall charge and convict the judge of having reversed the judgement which he rendered and he shall give twelve-fold the claim of that judgement; moreover, they shall unseat him from his judgeship in the assembly, and he shall never again sit in judgement with the judges. (cited in Roth 1997 [1995]: Law 5.6–30)

⁴ There are many laws within the Code of Hammurabi that concern the role of the judges in trying cases of civil law (cited in Roth 1997 [1995]: Law 9, 13, 168, 172, 177).

Beyond this, the Code of Hammurabi also asserts several prescriptions concerning the rights and limitations of citizenship. For example, it distinguishes between people, not on the basis of age, gender, ancestry or military service, as was the case in ancient Athens, but on the basis of class. This ancient Babylonian concern for the rule of law and the rights of the citizen was extended into the reign of later Babylonian kings. The people of Babylon also highly valued personal liberty and the kings frequently prescribed freedom for various groups, by securing the rights of citizens, cancelling obligations to the state and granting freedom to slaves who had fulfilled their duty or had been held as guarantors for loans (Martin and Snell 2005: 404, Snell 2001: 64). In addition, later Babylonian rulers also advocated a judicial system in which the more important and complex cases were brought before the whole town in the form of an assembly. This assembly 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. As Jacobsen points out, this judicial system was democratic in nature, with the major decisions over right and wrong or life and death vested in the assembly, a forum open to the entire community of citizens (Jacobsen 1970 [1943]: 159–63). Overall, the kings of ancient Babylon did not rule despite public endorsement; they operated according to it, always remembering that their incumbency depended upon the consent of their constituents.

The population of the Assyrian capital, Ashur (modern Qalat Sherqat, Iraq), were able to congregate in an assembly which reached agreement under the guidance of the more senior, wealthy and influential members of the community. Knowing all too well the popularity and power of the elders to influence the wider community of citizens, the kings of Assyria were ‘always careful not to offend their high administrative officials, whose loyalty to the dynasty they at times had to secure by oaths and agreements’ (Oppenheim 1964: 103). When differences of opinion between the king and the elders did occur, the elders ‘were quite ready to revolt against the king if they did not approve of his policies’ (Oppenheim 1964: 103). 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. In this way, the citizens of Ashur were able to fight for

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

In addition, 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. More broadly, the power of the state was also mitigated by a thriving private sector as the merchants of the Assyrian empire grew in wealth and, subsequently, in influence. The great merchant families appear to have convened in a building commonly known as the 'city house' where they 'made decisions on commercial policy, fixed the rates of export tax ... acted as a diplomatic body ... and controlled relations with Anatolian rulers on whose cooperation and protection the caravans and resident merchants relied' (Leick 2001: 203). From among this body of wealthy merchants, one member was chosen annually by lot to serve as the chairman of the board. This individual was conferred with the highest honours underneath the authority of the king and 'was responsible for public works, for overseeing the judiciary, and took a leading part in the city's religious and ceremonial rites' (Leick 2001: 203).

Speaking generally about the 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' (Schemel 2000: 104). It appears that due to the size of the community it was often hard to garner consensus and 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 opponents' arguments. Freedom of speech was paramount and, when each of the participants had been given a chance to state their case at least once, the proceedings ended before debate became cyclical, emotional or counter-productive. 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 (Moran 1992: 401–2, n24). Although 'majority votes were often sought

and reached ... it was always possible that minority views would raise the problem again if its legal solution was a failure' (Schemeil 2000: 104). Similar to the Ordained Assembly of the Great Gods, the proceedings of these later assemblies were concluded by the chair sternly pronouncing, 'Let it be'.

As with Babylon and Assyria, the ancient Egyptian Empire⁵ is often assumed to have been governed by Oriental despotism. However, ancient Egypt practised forms of democratic governance including an array of councils who 'convened on the palace stairs, a place where all opinions expressed by courtiers, civil servants, and members of the king's inner circle, all of whom met separately at the building's four corners, could be easily conveyed and explained to the Pharaoh' (Schemeil 2000: 104). The individual charged with the prestigious but onerous task of liaising between the various councils and the Pharaoh was known as the 'Vizier'. Originally, this position was occupied by a prince of royal blood, but was later bestowed upon a nobleman of considerable ability who became the head of every governmental department and therefore the most powerful officer of the state. Essentially the role of the Vizier included 'not only a daily report to his sovereign on the state of the nation but also the delivering of judgements in his audience hall, [and] the receiving and issuing of instructions to the various branches of central government' (Aldred 1998: 196). The central government included several different departments, such as the Treasury and the Ministry for Agriculture, while the Vizier himself was supported by 'a legion of scribes, stewards, runners and guards' (Aldred 1998:

⁵ The Egyptian Empire, as with other examples discussed below including the Hittites, the Israelites and the Phoenicians, never directly ruled over the region now called Iraq. However, each of these empires did rule significant parts of the Middle East, North Africa and/or the Levant and shared borders with Mesopotamian empires, states and kingdoms. Egyptian, Hittite, Israelite and Phoenician histories are deeply enmeshed in the neighbouring Babylonian and Assyrian empires as well as the other kingdoms and city-states of the region. These empires are considered here, not because they are 'Iraqi' in any respect, but for their democratic practices and for their certain cultural influence and diplomatic relations with their Mesopotamian neighbours. It is more than conceivable that the methods and models of participatory governance that were practised in Memphis, Hattusas, Jerusalem and Tyre were well known and even imitated in Babylon, and vice versa.

196). Having strict guidelines to follow, a Vizier would call into session a ‘hearing’ or ‘council of the mat’ 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 and beyond them were the forty senior officials, each of whom was to be heard in due course (the higher ranking officials spoke first, followed by those of lesser importance). Although usually occupied by well educated men, government positions were not limited to those of a particular bloodline, class or colour but were filled by promising young men who had been specifically groomed for the role (Frankfort 1968: 85, 90, Gardiner, 2004: 101). The expectations on these men were enormous, with sentences of capital punishment dealt out to any member of the district council found to be practising injustices.

In such assemblies, the Vizier ‘presided over important civil cases referred to him from lower courts; he dealt with questions of land tenure and the witnessing of wills; and he considered criminal cases requiring heavy sentences’ (Aldred 1998: 196). However, even this council of the elite could not bring new laws into effect without them being duly debated and deliberated across a variety of separate councils and assemblies before garnering either the approval or denial of the Vizier. Such systems were moreover employed for the discussion of military campaigns where lengthy debates on strategy sometimes led to the amendment of royal policy, as in Tuthmosis III’s and Ramses II’s expedition to Syria (Schemeil 2000: 104). Beyond this, the various separate councils appear to have wielded considerable power over the day-to-day agricultural affairs of their individual regions. Interestingly, an individual citizen could appeal directly to the Vizier regarding decisions made by a council on rural affairs. The Vizier would then consult with the relevant officials and usually suspend the verdict so that it could be reconsidered for a designated period of time before the final decision was put into action. 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 (Van den Boorn 1988: 13, 47, 168–71). In addition, this kind of sophisticated appeal

process undermines notions of Oriental despotism to reveal instead 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 governing structures of the major empires of the ancient Near East, one also finds examples from across their colonies. Kanesh, one of the outlying merchant colonies of the Assyrian empire, serves as a case study. With archaeologists uncovering some 16,000 cuneiform tablets, a picture of Kanesh's thriving economic and trade systems emerged. Located in Turkey's Cappadocia region, Kanesh flourished from 2000–1800 BCE with evidence suggesting that a number of Assyrians moved there, purchased land and settled for long periods. Here, Geoffrey Evans 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. Although he rightly points out that there were a number of significant changes, he goes on to state that 'the assemblies of Kanesh remain of the first importance historically. They possess features similar to the earlier ones, and we possess a little more information about the manner in which they operated' (Evans 1958a: 4).

It appears that because these remote and generally wealthy citizens of the Assyrian empire preferred their governance to be closer to home, they were able to retain significant autonomy until surprisingly late periods. The more successful and influential among them formed the council of the elders and there can be no doubt that oligarchic tendencies and nepotism 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. In these assemblies, there appear to have been rather advanced forms of voting whereby the congregation would divide into three groups and each group would deliberate and vote independently before reconvening in a plenary where the final votes were counted (Larsen 1976: 319–23). However, when the elders failed to agree, matters were brought before the full assembly of all adult males, which was 'called into session by a clerk at the bidding of a majority of [the elders]' (Jacobsen 1970 [1943]: 159). 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. What is certain is that beyond the deliberations of the assembly was a civic culture and a complex bureaucracy that extended out into the social world of the ancient Middle East where citizens were accorded freedom of speech, where they discussed and debated social issues, and where they often formed loose political alliances (Gibson and Biggs 1987, Larsen 1976: 161–70). Although Evans is initially reluctant to cite these practices as democratic he later concedes that the various political procedures practised in Kanesh ‘strongly suggest a liberal and democratic spirit among this small group of local dignitaries. In such an atmosphere, democratic procedures within the group might easily arise’ (Evans 1958b: 114–5).

En route between Ashur and Kanesh, caravans of traders, individual travellers and the messengers of the Assyrian empire passed through Mari. A much smaller empire that came to prosperity after the turn of the second millennium BCE, Mari dominated that part of the north-western Euphrates that now falls across the borders of Syria and Iraq. The ancient city of Mari (modern Tell Hariri, Syria) was excavated by French archaeologists from 1933 onwards uncovering, amongst other things, ‘an archive of over twenty thousand cuneiform tablets, mainly administrative and economic documents and letters’ (Saggs 2004: 64). It is these clay tablets that Daniel Fleming has claimed provide the ‘ideal resource for the study of many aspects of ancient political life’ (Fleming 2004: 19). In Mari, as in Kanesh, there seem to have been few who would openly and directly challenge the authority of the king. However, Mari kingship was not despotic, but instead ‘actual power seems to be a matter of constant negotiation, as he [the king] engages a panoply of traditional leaderships, each with its own constituencies and assumed prerogatives’ (Fleming 2004: xv). Through the immense resource uncovered at Mari, it is possible to trace the communicative patterns between and across a broad spectrum of sites of power. Collective forms of governance appear to have held some influence over the state and, reminiscent of earlier examples, ‘they appear most prominently in decisions of war and peace’ (Fleming 2004: 223).

The reason for Mari's dispersed power structure was due to the fact that it was a loose collective of various nomadic, tribal and village peoples. This resulted in a number of chiefs, officials, elders, assemblies and governors who vied for power and influence under the authority of the king. 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 is likely to have been this way since the third millennium BCE. Although collective decision making appears to have occurred mostly in smaller groups of the elite, there were occasions where 'both the pastoralists of the steppe and the residents of towns ... gather[ed], not only to receive word from an outside king but even to speak for the group' (Fleming 2004: 234). Ultimately, these antediluvian governmental systems evolved from simple tribal gatherings to incorporate decision-making aspects and wield influence over the higher authority of the king. It is therefore conceivable that a king genuinely wanting to unite this heterogeneous region would encourage such collective decision making and accept the inherent challenges of a kingdom consisting of various systems and sites of power.

However, Fleming is reluctant to use the nomenclature of democracy to describe the political machinations of the Mari, preferring the anthropological terminology of 'corporate polity' (Fleming 2004: 174–80, 222–8). 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 2004: 16). Beyond his concern over the loose application of the term 'democracy', Fleming also reveals that the Athenian *polis* is not without precedent. While it is commonly assumed that Western democracy arose triumphantly out of a dark history of despotic 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 rival, pre-date and probably influenced the much later developments of ancient Greece.

Another example of early Middle Eastern democracy can be found among the Hittites. These Anatolian peoples formed their state and later their empire out of Hattusas (modern Bogazkale, Turkey) and ruled from approximately 1600–1200 BCE. This burgeoning city was just north of the former merchant colony of the Assyrian empire, Kanesh. The Hittite empire, much like the examples discussed above, developed a number of sophisticated diplomatic and bureaucratic bodies as is evidenced by the uncovering of an abundance of treaties, diplomatic texts, indictments, edicts and letters. Here, power rested across a complex web of parochial townships and villages, each with their own loose systems of collective governance, usually under the guidance of a council of elders who would ‘normally deal with local administration and in particular with the settlement of disputes’ (Gurney 2004 [1952]: 70).

As the Hittites gradually moved from these loose satellites of governance towards a central authority under the king, the earlier systems of power would have had little choice but to streamline and offer their submission to the new ruler. This does not mean that the elders forfeited their power in any way, but rather that the position of king did not equate to absolute control. 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 (Gurney 2004 [1952]: 61). The struggle between the elders and the king seems to have resurfaced many times, particularly when a king passed away and his heir had been appointed without the legal approval of the elders, therefore rendering the appointment invalid.

Beyond the power of the elders, a more general assembly seems to have convened irregularly throughout Hittite history. Perhaps because this council was made up of the higher echelons of the state’s bureaucracy, 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. However, the kings gradually set about establishing hereditary succession as the principal way of garnering authority against this

backdrop of consensus and collective action. Although the nobility remained and the general assemblies of the bureaucracy still convened to preside over important cases, the authority of the king was not subject to the election or approval of the elders, eventually leading to a succession of despotic dynasties in Hattusas (Beckman 1982: 441–2, Gurney 2004 [1952]: 61–2, 66–7).

Examples of early forms of democracy can also be found amongst the ancient Israelites. Here, as E. Theodore Mullen Jnr. has illustrated, there is a clear lineage between the ancient Mesopotamian postulations regarding the Assembly of the Gods and those found in early Canaanite and Hebrew literature. Thus, in methods paralleling earlier Sumerian developments, the book of ‘Exodus’ reveals that Israelite leaders such as Moses were nominated via a mandate direct from God which was confirmed by the assembly of elders (Schultz 1981: 146–8). Later, various councils and bodies of elders are evident throughout several of the key books of the Old Testament,⁶ an era which witnessed the emergence of the Judges’ authority (around 1400–1020 BCE), the eventual ascendancy of the Hebrew monarchy under the leadership of Saul, David and Solomon (1020–931 BCE) and, later, the division of the kingdom into two separate enclaves: Israel in the north and Judah in the south (931–722 BCE). In introducing his study into the democratic practices of ancient Israel, C. Umhau Wolf notes that ‘In the Old Testament certain terms and relationships appear which suggest that democracy, in the broadest definition of the term ... was prevalent in the earliest times and that vestiges of democratic procedures may be discerned in both political and religious concepts throughout the later periods of Israelite history’ (Wolf 1947: 98).

As with many of the earlier examples, the entire free male population of the community constituted the people’s assembly where each individual had the right to speak openly about the issues at hand. These councils appear to have been convened for both religious and political purposes and assembled at the city gate or at the door of the tabernacle. Within the assemblies

⁶ Including ‘Joshua’, ‘Judges’, ‘Samuel I’ and ‘II’, and ‘Kings I’ and ‘II’.

the more elderly, experienced or gifted rhetoricians amongst them tended to be widely respected and thereby dominated much of the proceedings (Schultz 1981: 146). When the deliberations came to a close, a proclamation was made that reiterated the key decisions and announced the people's consent. Later, during the times of the monarchy, such assemblies continued to wield 'at least strong advisory powers, if not full veto power, over the king' (Wolf 1947: 104). The potential for despotism was kept in check by the people's assembly, and the actions of the king required the approval of a complex bureaucratic hierarchy of temple officials, prophets, priests, courtiers and, in some cases, the entire body of citizens. The ascension to the throne itself required neither blood lineage nor divine right, but the consent of the majority who 'had the power to reject any candidate for the kingship, even the heir apparent' (Wolf 1947: 105). Here, the story of Rehoboam (933–916 BCE), the son of Solomon, is particularly instructive. In his aspirations for kingship, Rehoboam was 'forced to confront the full assembly of Israel, an open democratic forum' as well as 'the old men who worked for his father and the young men who had grown up with him' (Martin and Snell 2005: 399–400). While Rehoboam's campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, it indicates that Israelite leadership which 'was not only averse to violence and autocracy, but also encouraged broad degrees of consultation and consensus' (Martin and Snell 2005: 400).

On the north-western border of ancient Israel resided the citizens of Phoenicia. They had lived in the Levant since as far back as the third millennium BCE. However, it wasn't until 1100 BCE that they emerged as a significant cultural and political force and, from the ninth to the sixth centuries BCE, the Phoenicians became 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' (Gore 2004: 36–7).

One such idea – that has since become regarded as quintessentially Western – is that of democratic governance. Throughout the few early Phoenician documents extant are references to an assembly of elders with which the king consults regarding the important matters of state (Goedicke 1975, Moran, 1992). Later, in a treaty between the kings of Assyria and Phoenicia dated to the seventh-century BCE, this council appears to govern alongside the monarch. It is precisely because these councils were made up of the wealthy merchants who had gained their fortune and subsequent status from their extensive trade networks that stretched from Mesopotamia to Western Europe, that they garnered such municipal power and authority. 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.

In the outlying colonies established by the Phoenicians across North Africa and the Mediterranean, are found 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. Here, the senate was made up of thirty-plus key members who readied and collated details of foreign policy matters, such as declarations of war or proposals to resolve external conflict, before presenting them to the elected body of one hundred officials. 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 (Markoe 2005: 101–5). 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* (Bernal 2001: 345–70). As Stephen Stockwell has concluded:

The Phoenicians brought more than just trade into the Greek sphere; they also brought the experience of people governing themselves and, clearly in the case of Sparta and on the balance of probabilities in other cities, the

Phoenicians had a formative influence on the rise of democratic political institutions ... the Athenian contribution was based on powerful ideas that were already circulating among Greeks who had contact with the Phoenicians.
(Stockwell 2011a: 47–8)

In this way, the narrative of Western democracy and its supposed origins in ancient Greece can, at the very least, be problematized by the fact that the Phoenicians – an Oriental people – were responsible for perhaps the earliest forms of collective and egalitarian governance in the Occident.

A later example that is particularly demonstrative of ancient Middle Eastern concerns about democratic principles such as the freedom and equality of the citizen can be found in the Persian Empire of Achaemenid (550–330 BCE). At its greatest extent, this empire, founded by Cyrus the Great, spanned across three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe) and had a lasting influence on the region, including in Iraq. At the time of Cyrus' expansion into Mesopotamia, the Neo-Babylonian Empire was run by an allegedly incompetent, cruel and unholy king known as Nabonidus. 'He continually did evil against his city', by taking many of the free citizens of Babylon into slavery and forcing them to work against their will, 'Daily, [without interruption], he [imposed] the corvée upon its inhabitants unrelentingly, ruining them all'. When Cyrus conquered the city, however, perhaps without fighting a single battle, he was determined to re-establish the basic rights of the individual and to encourage both religious tolerance and personal freedom. Because of their former oppression, 'All the people of Babylon, all the land of Sumer and Akkad ... rejoiced at his kingship and their faces shone ... amidst rejoicing and happiness'. Cyrus was careful not to 'permit anyone to frighten (the people of) [Sumer] and Akkad' but instead set about restoring social justice and the 'welfare of the city of Babylon and all its sacred centres'. As for the citizens of Babylon 'upon whom he [Nabonidus] imposed a corvée which was not the god's will and not befitting them' Cyrus 'relieved their weariness and freed them from their service' (Cogan 2003: II.124). The Persians even permitted the ancient Babylonian assemblies to continue under their auspices which 'still adjudicated in property

litigations and crimes of a local nature' (Dandamayev 1995: 25). More broadly, the Achamenids sought to decentralize power by separating the state from religion and by setting up autonomous satrapies governed by regional ethnic minorities.

The various wars between the Assyrian and Babylonian empires as well as the Persian and Macedonian conquests did not bring to an end the antediluvian assemblies of ancient Iraq which maintained jurisdiction over local disputes and crimes and continued throughout much of the first millennium BCE. Muhammad Dandamayev lists various examples of civil, legal, administrative, private and temple-related cases presided over by the popular assemblies. These cases included murder, theft, rent and tenancy issues, paternity cases, prison escape attempts, disputes between civil officials and temple administrators, debts, complex contractual arrangements, business arrangements, slave ownership and inheritance issues. As with the earlier examples, these assemblies were made up of the free male population of the city who were both permanent residents and property owners, with the more esteemed citizens such as high-ranking officials, temple representatives and wealthy merchants playing a more dominant role. Specifically, one particular assembly consisted of 24 elders who presided over a congregation of 291 ordinary men, including archers, gold and silver smiths, beer brewers, shepherds, farmers, cooks, temple staff and bureaucrats (Dandamayev 1995: 23–8). Dandamayev also documents the last known reference to the ancient Mesopotamian tradition of democracy, bringing to an end almost 3,000 years of collective governance across ancient Iraq. Occurring long after the democratic impetus of Athens had been subjugated by the militarily superior Macedonians in 322 BCE, the city of Cutha (modern Tell Ibrahim, Iraq) convened in a temple assembly as late as 187 BCE. In concluding his paper on this particular era of Mesopotamian politics, Dandamayev states,

On the whole, the Babylonian popular assemblies were stable bodies which outlived the empires of the Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Persian, and Macedonian kings. The final disappearance of the popular assemblies, perhaps at the beginning of the Christian era, marked both the loss of civil rights by

the inhabitants of Babylonian cities and the end of ancient Mesopotamian tradition. (Dandamayev 1995: 29)

Conclusion

The democratic history of Iraq can be seen to have a lineage tracing back as far as civilization itself. Its ancestry lies in the ancient myths recounted by the early Mesopotamians as the region developed its first sophisticated human settlements and systems of governance. These systems evolved as the region witnessed the birth of early city-states that eventually gave way to grand empires. They not only pre-empted Greek developments and the birth of the discourse of Western democracy, but outlasted the much lauded Athenian *polis*, with Mesopotamian councils continuing to convene until at least as late as 187 BCE.

However, the notion that democracy existed in ancient Mesopotamia is not only useful in terms of understanding it as a precursor to the development of the Greek *polis*, but it is also particularly apposite when viewed in relation to the broader project being conducted here. In scrutinizing the presuppositions that have for so long informed Western understandings of the Orient's incompatibility with democracy, these ancient Mesopotamian examples serve to foreground an alternative history of the region. It reveals that collective models of governance and a lively political culture existed across the broader region at various junctures. While it would be unwise here to over-state the extent of these political developments or their influence, they nonetheless indicate just how long the will towards democracy has been alive in Iraq.

Beyond this, the ancient Mesopotamian democracies have particular significance for contemporary Iraq and its ongoing struggle from despotism to democracy. It should be remembered here that ancient Mesopotamia is not a distant, unknown past to the Iraqi populace; it is instead a rich cultural motif which has been frequently appropriated and worked into political, educational, sociological and literary discourses which have long underpinned notions of national unity and cultural pride amongst the Iraqis (Al-Musawi 2006, Baram 1983, 1991, 1994). It is precisely because of this familiarity with Iraq's ancient Mesopotamian heritage that

this epoch's democracies could serve as a powerful historical memory in the process of building and legitimating democratic governance in Iraq today. Where modern Western democracies recall with admiration the Athenian *polis* and Roman Republic, Iraqi citizens may engage ancient Mesopotamian democracy as their own indigenous example of democracy.