

HI126- Lecture 3

Ancient State Warfare

MESOPOTAMIA (“the land between the rivers”): the Emergence of City States in Sumer, *circa* 3200 BC

-These were urban centres of perhaps 35,000 people & the surrounding countryside under the authority of one government (first priests, then kings).

- The diverse population were priests, officials, craftsmen, peasants (farmers), slaves – & soldier
- UR was one of those city-states: “The Royal Standard of Ur” is a decorated box in the British Museum, *circa* 2500 BC.

- The **Stele of Vultures** shows the army of King Eannatum of **Lagash** (another city-state in Sumer) who has won a victory over the city of Umma, *circa* 2450 BC. (Stele = commemorative stone slab or tablet.)

- The infantry formation here is even tighter – it resembles the phalanx that will dominate in Greek warfare 2000 years later.



-“Eannatum, the ruler of Lagash, is leading his army out to battle [against the King of Umma], and behind him are the soldiers of the city – but they are neither a jumbled mass nor the single ragged line of ‘tribal’ war. They are shoulder to shoulder with their shields overlapping, several rows deep, and with the spears of all the rows bristling ahead of the formation in the classic phalanx style. Almost certainly, they were marching in step. [...] The Stele of Vultures claims that three thousand men of the army of Umma died on the battlefield – and then those who were taken captive were marched to the foot of their own city’s walls and slaughtered.”

-In Sumer the original 30 or so city states came to be dominated by a few .

-Then **Sargon of Akkad** (reigned 2270-2215 BC) united all of Mesopotamia to form the Akkadian Empire (which would be followed by a series of other empires over the centuries).

- His army was no longer a phalanx of farmers loyal to one city, but a professional force of soldiers from across an empire.
- **EGYPT** emerged in the same way as the Akkadian Empire from about 40 small city states. The “Towns” Palette (*circa* 3100 BC) shows several fortified towns with a symbolic animal (tribal totems?) attacking each.
- Egyptian tradition attributes Egyptian unification to Menes (or Narmer), most likely *circa* 3100-3050 BC.
- Egypt – i.e. the Nile Delta & River Valley, protected by the desert & the sea – was highly defensible.
- The pharaoh was a living god: the incarnation of Horus.
- A long series of dynasties ruled over Egypt for 3,000 years.

From about 1600 BC, Egypt maintained a standing (permanent) army:

- 20,000 foot soldiers outfitted with the best equipment (body armor, swords, shields, etc.) – 3,000 chariots

-Art henceforth depicted the pharaoh as a warrior-king.

-Egypt went on the offensive to establish a “buffer zone” for protection.

The “Chariot Revolution” (1600s BC)

The heavy Sumerian battle wagons (*left*, on the Standard of Ur, *circa* 2500 BC) evolved into a light **CHARIOT**, which Egyptians adopted from Hyksos invaders (*circa* 1600 BC).

- The wagon (with solid wheels) was pulled by four onagers (wild asses) & carried driver & spearman.

-The chariot (with spoked wheels) was pulled by horses & carried a driver & archer.

Chariots could be used for rapid outflanking manoeuvres, for harassing enemies & for pursuing defeated enemies in flight.

The Bronze Age

circa 3000–1200 BC

- Bronze – 9 parts copper to 1 part tin – is stronger than copper alone & makes better tools & weapons.

The Iron Age (from *circa* 1200 BC)

The use of iron dates from *circa* 1200 BC & gradually spread throughout Europe,

-the Middle East & Asia.

-By 900 BC iron was becoming more common than bronze in agricultural tools & weapons.

-Iron was more plentiful, more widespread (& cheaper) than copper & tin (much tin had to be brought from Britain).

-States could equip large armies with iron weapons = a **MILITARY REVOLUTION**.

ASSYRIA existed as a state from *circa* 2500 BC to 605 BC.

-Its first capital as **Assur** or Ashur, then **Nineveh**.

- At times dominated by other powers, at times independent, at times the centre of a vast empire, its power rose and fell over two millennia.

The Neo-Assyrian Empire (934-605 BC)

-The Assyrians were the first to take advantage of this “military revolution” (iron weapons) to conquer the largest empire known up to that time, encompassing the entire Fertile Crescent, including Egypt.

-For 3 centuries, the Near East was “dominated by the dynamic military power of Assyria.” – Mark Healy, *The Ancient Assyrians*

-The King of Assyria was not himself a god, but he ruled as the anointed regent on earth of the chief god Ashur or Assur (*left*), who required that his worship be extended through conquest.

-The “King of Kings” enjoyed absolute power (but had to respect traditional rights of his people) & exercised it through his officials & puppet kings who owed him allegiance.

Religion justified conquest, but also:

military power meant security against neighbouring states ...

... & brought material benefits (metals, wood, horses, livestock, slaves, control of trade routes etc.).

A Biblical description of the soldiers of the Assyrian army:

“None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps, not a waistband is loose, not a sandal strap broken; their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent, their horses’ hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind. Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions they roar; they growl and seize their prey; they carry it off, and none can rescue [it].” – *The Holy Bible*,
Isaiah 5:27-29

-The Assyrian army was originally composed mainly of peasants called up for the summer after the May harvest.

- By the time of Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) it was a large & effective professional fighting force of more than 100,000 men.

-Men were now available year-round for fighting or garrison duty anywhere in the Empire. The core was the King’s personal bodyguard (*gurubti sha shepe*) .

-There was a larger standing army (*kisir sharruti*) of native Assyrians supplemented by troops supplied by conquered lands (e.g. 50 chariot teams from Israel).

-Landowners often held property under an obligation (*ilku*) to provide civil or military service to the state for a certain number of days a year.

-When needed, additional provincial levies were called up (*sab sharri*).

The Assyrians had a total force of 100,000+ men.

- They armed it with iron weapons.
- They adopted & adapted weapons & ideas from other peoples (& used conquered peoples as auxiliary forces).

They organized an integrated army combining infantry with spears, bows & arrows, slings (for shock); archers (for artillery); cavalry & charioteers (for mobility); siege engineers (to take cities). They used terror to inspire fear in rebels & enemies.

- Bows & arrows were the main offensive weapon of the infantry; archers provided the army with formidable fire power.

- Archers could be effective over 250-650 metres. Their quivers held about fifty arrows.

- The **Akkadians** had developed long-range archers using powerful composite bows.

- The composite bow was made of wood, animal horns, animal tendons & sinews glued & bound together. The arms bent away from each other, creating more tension when they were pulled back.

- King Sennacherib created a corps of slingers – he probably borrowed the idea from the Egyptians – in about 700 BC.

- Horses were first domesticated in the **Eurasian Steppes** (*left*), perhaps by 4,000 BC.

- In the Middle East, horses were used in war to pull battle wagons (Sumer, 2500 BC) & then chariots (Egypt, 1600 BC), & were finally ridden into battle as cavalry (Assyria, early 9th Century BC).

Selective breeding was needed to breed a horse strong enough to be ridden.

The Assyrians originally used heavy chariots for shock action, but: “**Because of the limitations on the chariot [in rough terrain], the Assyrians were forced to consider a cost-effective substitute. They gradually adopted the idea of a chariotless chariot system – that is, the chariot itself was eliminated, but the crew and the horses were retained.**” – Louis A. DiMarco, *War Horse*

This was the invention of **CAVALRY** circa 850 BC:

The men rode bareback without saddles or stirrups, generally in pairs on two horses: (1) an archer (with a composite bow) who fired arrows; (2) another rider to hold his reins & guide his horse.

With great siege engines, the Assyrians no longer had to starve a walled city into submission – they could attack it

-The Assyrian Empire linked by a system of military highways (unpaved in the dry climate); its armies could move as rapidly as 30 miles (50 km) a day.

-The Assyrians did not maintain a permanent, regular fleet of ships, but could acquire them when needed from their vassal states.

-The armies of successor empires (Neo-Babylonian, then Persian) were modelled on the Assyrian, but the Assyrians were particularly brutal: they revelled in killings, mutilations, decapitations, rape, mass deportation & enslavement, which they memorialized in their inscriptions & palace decorations (reliefs on palace walls).

-**TERROR** was consciously used as a tactic to terrify enemies & rebels into submission.

-Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria (*left*)

(reigned 883-859 BC) boasting of how he dealt with one rebel city:

“I cut off their heads, I burned them with fire, I set up a pile of living men and of heads over against the city gate, I impaled men on stakes, I destroyed the city, I turned it into mounds and ruined heaps, I burned the young men and maidens in the fire.”

Defeat populations might also be forcibly deported to new territories.

In 701 BC the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem: “thus saith the king of Assyria, Make an agreement with me [...] and come out to me, and then eat ye every man of his own vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his cistern: Until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, [...] that ye may live, and not die.” (*The Holy Bible*, 2 Kings 18:31-32).

The King of Assyria later claimed to have resettled 200,000 Israelites in all.

-605 BC: The Assyrian Empire collapsed when, after a series of civil wars & rebellions, a coalition of enemies seized & destroyed Nineveh in 612 BC

-Cyrus the Great (reigned 559-530 BC) created a vast Persian Empire

-“Cyrus built his empire as much by political acumen and propaganda as by military means.” – Christon I. Archer et. al., *World History of Warfare*

- He showed clemency to the defeated, respected local gods, & often left native rulers in power if they obeyed & supplied him with troops.

The Empire was divided into *satrapies* (provinces) & the *satraps* governed & supplied levies for major campaigns.

- The core of the Persian army were the “Ten Thousand Immortals” (immortal because number was fixed permanently).
- The rest of the army was an agglomeration of troops from different regions, each - fighting in their traditional way.
- This lack of cohesion would prove fatal against the disciplined Greeks.

Battle Casualties

- Armies were large but casualties could be low.
 - Only the first ranks of units engaged the enemy.
 - Spears protected against cavalry.
 - Shields protected against arrows.
- “The real killer on the ancient battlefield was fear.” – R. Gabriel
- Panicked & fleeing troops often threw away arms & armour & could be run down slaughtered or rounded up for massacre.