

"Have To" History - Who Was Sargon (of Akkad)?

Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To) About Sargon

Three Big Things:

1. Arguably the oldest individual identifiable by name in all of known history. If you read every biography ever written in chronological order, his will be first.
2. Formed the first real empire in all of human history (Mesopotamia) – a civilization made up of different peoples and cultures but still forming a coherent whole.
3. For centuries after his death, his military success, his rule as king, and his general self-proclaimed awesomeness set the standard for all subsequent generals and monarchs. He was Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Patton, all rolled together. (Or was he?)



Background

Mesopotamia is generally considered to be the birthplace of civilization. It's where our ancestors first transitioned from a hunting and gathering lifestyle to settled, agriculturally-based sort of living. The area roughly corresponds with modern Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Israel, forming a "Fertile Crescent." If there was a literal Garden of Eden, it was probably located in Mesopotamia.

The Agricultural Revolution had a far larger impact than just changing where or how people got their food. It meant that more people could live off of much less land, allowing the human population to begin expanding dramatically. Intentional farming produced a surplus – enough food to feed more than the number of people involved in growing it. This allowed all sorts of other crafts and professions to flourish, so that individuals (and eventually groups) began specializing in different skill sets, in turn leading to greater innovation and technological improvements and good times aplenty.

Agriculture meant cities, and actual civilizations – organized armies, trade with one another and neighboring peoples, religious organization and a push for cultural unity even among diverse members of the community. Trade meant records needed to be kept, and that led to the earliest forms of writing. Surplus meant buildings, and monuments, and temples, and so forth, and that meant government, and a limited bureaucracy, which meant writing and record-keeping became more sophisticated and versatile, and before you know it... Switzerland!

There were downsides too, of course – greater organization and protection means less freedom. Strong central authority could be oppressive or become corrupt. Inequalities of all sorts began appearing in ways inconceivable in hunting and gathering societies. Wealth and power were distributed unevenly, and patriarchy asserted itself consistently for the first time. There's always a tradeoff between security (of whatever sort) and personal freedom. Still... walls! Better beer! Diversified skills! Even better beer!

At the top of that festive food chain, both literally and metaphorically, was Sargon of Akkad. Or, as he seemed to prefer, "Sargon the Great."

Sargon, Take It Away

Most historians consider Sargon the first individual clearly identified in all of written history. He definitely existed, he was definitely King of the Akkadians in Mesopotamia, and he definitely played left-handed guitar in that They Might Be Giants video. His legendary status even long after his death is also well-documented.

The trick is figuring out how much of what's documented about him *actually happened*.

See, kings and other rich, powerful types often used to, well... 'embellish' their accomplishments and abilities via monuments, inscriptions, or other royal accounts. It was rude to argue, besides which they might kill your entire family or do horrible things to your Saluki if you chose to nitpick over the details. Consequently, much of what's

recorded about Sargon seems a bit... exaggerated. Some of it's downright *mythical*.

What the modern reader must keep in mind, though, is that the line between "literal" and "mythical" wasn't nearly as tightly defined a few thousand years ago. That's not because our forebears were such primitive ooga-booga types, hunched and hairy and terrified by eclipses or fire. It's that stories – even histories – had very different roles than they do today. Their priorities were different.

It's not unusual even today for historical "urban legends" or exaggerated family histories to overrun pure facts when we're telling ourselves tales of who we are and how we came to be. Such legends persist in stories and art because they hold value, and proclaim truths other than the literal. Historians, on the other hand, would very much like to be better able to unravel the legendary from the actual with figures like Sargon – and go to great lengths trying to do so.

What Seems Fairly Certain

Sargon was the first ruler of the Akkadian empire, which conquered the early Sumerian city-states around 2340 B.C. (The Sumerians were the first dominant flavor of "Mesopotamians," the Akkadians the second, and the Babylonians the third.) His kingdom included most of Mesopotamia and parts of surrounding areas.

He had previously been the "cup-bearer" to a Sumerian king, Ur-Zababa. The role had evolved from simply being the guy whose job it was to test royal beverages for poison or other tampering (usually by drinking some to see if you died) into a position of great trust and some power. The "royal cup-bearer" was often the king's most intimate companion and advisor. Shared risk seems to do that for people.

Sargon became king by overthrowing Lugal-zage-si, also a Sumerian King, but apparently not the one immediately after Ur-Zababa. Lugal-zage-si's rule may have followed a period in which vassals or local governors handled executive matters, or he may have succeeded Kubaba – the only female king in ancient Sumerian record and later promoted to actual goddess. Whether there's a relationship between Ur-Zababa and Kubaba isn't clear, but the names are certainly fun to say in close proximity as often as possible.

There are plenty of fragmented records related to Sargon, including a first-person account in which he explains that he was born as the illegitimate child of a high priestess. Mom placed him in a basket and floated him down the river; he was discovered by a member of the royal entourage and eventually raised to be king.

I know what you're thinking – he totally ripped off Superman's origin story. More likely, though, is that this prologue was a kind of biographical trope – a standard literary device supplementing any rise from humble beginnings to greatness. The alternative explanation is that similar accounts of Moses, Oedipus, and their ilk, might be quite literally true, and the custom of sending your baby off to either die or accidentally become royalty was simply not that unusual back in the day. Less likely, but not inconceivable.

Another Sargon tale derived from fragmented tablets involves Ur-Zababa, the king for whom Sargon served as cup-bearer. The King had become alarmed by a series of dreams Sargon shared and decided he'd better kill him off just to be safe. One of the gods intervened and Sargon rose to power instead. One can't help but note the similarities to stories of Joseph or Daniel in the Old Testament, but once again this doesn't prove such stories are *false*. It does, however, make us stroke our chins and say, "Hmmm...." in a very thoughtful tone.

Many bits'n'pieces praise Sargon's many military accomplishments – pretty standard king stuff, especially from an age before divine right or bloodlines carried the influence they would in later centuries. Still, Sargon *did* conquer all of Mesopotamia, and formed the first actual empire in all of history. The reach of his administration via an extensive and efficient bureaucracy and a fiercely loyal military was unprecedented, and set the standard for future rulers and their kingdoms for centuries after. That sort of impact requires more than a few good war stories and a successful harvest or two; it suggests great competence and capability, prolonged measurable success at kinging.

Pull that off, and you can dress up the details however you like.