

Historical Nimrod

about 1000 years before the Exodus



The Torah mentions Nimrod in Bereishit 10:8-12. He is described as the descendent of Cush, as "a first mighty one in the land" and "a mighty conqueror before Hashem". Based just on this information, it would be almost impossible to identify Nimrod as a historical figure. But then, the Torah gives us some historical context which makes this task possible:

“The beginning of his [Nimrod's] kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Akkad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land [he] went forth [to] Assyria, and built Nineveh, and Rehoboth-Ir, and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.” (Bereishit 10:10-12)

Ramban writes in his commentary that ***Nimrod was the first monarch to rule over other people by force, and he vanquished the people of Babylon until he reigned over them. And after this he went force to Assyria, building fortified cities there through his power and might.*** Therefore, the land of Assyria is sometimes called “the land of Nimrod”, as it is said, “And they will pound the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod at its gateways.” (Micah 5:5). The land of Nimrod refers to Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir and Calah and Resen, the cities that Nimrod built in Assyria.

Interestingly enough, the modern name of the ancient Assyrian city Kalhu/Calah in Iraq, is Nimrud. However, no king named Nimrod or with a similar name appears anywhere on any pre-biblical Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian or Babylonian king list, nor does the name Nimrod appear in any other writings from Mesopotamia itself in any context. So, who was then a historical Nimrod?

While many cities on the Nimrod’s list had histories spanning literally thousands of years, the royal city of Akkad is unique. It had a very short known history of about 200 years. It was first attested around 2350 BCE. Then it became a glorious capital of the Akkadian Empire (2334 - 2154 BCE), only to be utterly destroyed by the barbaric Gutians. Its ruins were never found.

In fact, before the decipherment of cuneiform in the 19th century, Akkad was known only from a single reference in ... the Torah. Currently, there are 160 known mentions of Akkad in the extant cuneiform corpus. Based on these facts we can narrow down our search to the rise and fall of the first known empire in world history, the Akkadian Empire, and its legendary founder, Sargon of Akkad.



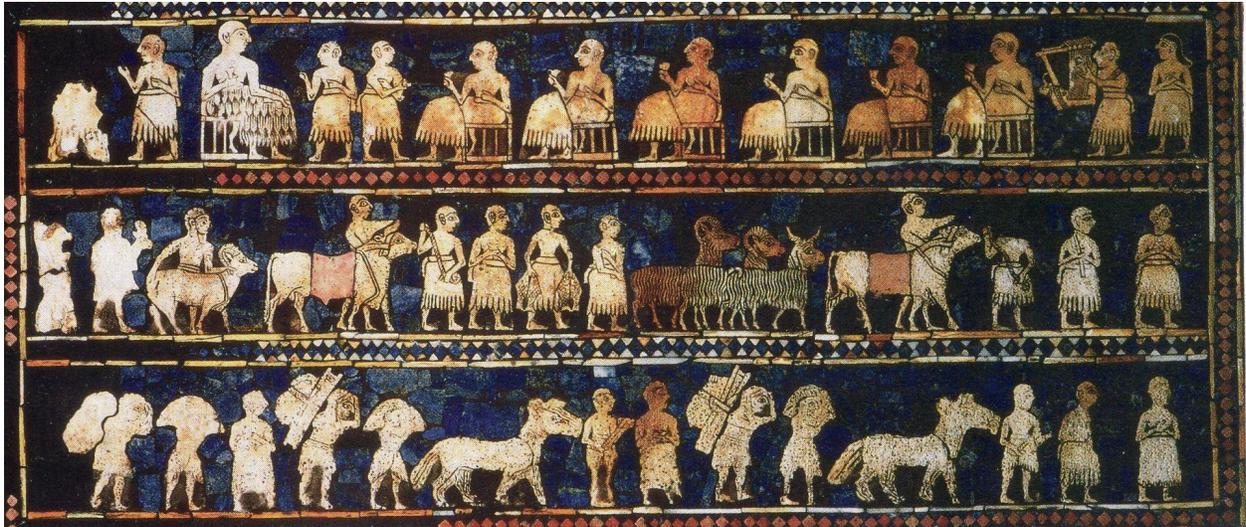
The Fertile Crescent (Levant and Mesopotamia) ca. 2500 BCE

Sumerians and the Land of Shinar

Sumer (*Shumeru* in Akkadian) is the earliest known civilization in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia (now southern Iraq). It is also one of the first civilizations in the world, along with ancient Egypt, the Indus Valley civilization, the Minoan civilization, and ancient China.

Living along the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, Sumerian farmers grew an abundance of grain and other crops, the surplus from which enabled them to form urban settlements. Proto-writing dates back before 3000 BCE. The term "Sumer" is the name given to the language spoken by the "Sumerians", the ancient non-Semitic-speaking inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia, by their successors the East Semitic-speaking Akkadians. The Sumerians themselves referred to their land as Kengir, the 'Country of the noble lords' as seen in their inscriptions.

The origin of the Sumerians is not known, but the people of Sumer referred to themselves as "Black Headed Ones" or "Black-Headed People". For example, the Sumerian king Shulgi described himself as "the king of the four quarters, the pastor of the black-headed people". The Akkadians also called the Sumerians 'black-headed people', or *šalmat-qaqqadi*, in the Semitic Akkadian language.



Standard of Ur. Sumerians at peace. 2600 BCE.

The most important archeological discoveries in Sumer are many clay tablets written in cuneiform script. Sumerian writing is a great milestone in the development of humanity's ability to not only create historical records but also in creating pieces of literature, both in the form of poetic epics and stories as well as prayers and laws. The Sumerian language is generally regarded as a language isolate in linguistics because it belongs to no known language family.



Triangular or wedge-shaped reeds were used to write on moist clay. A large body of hundreds of thousands of texts in the Sumerian language have survived, including personal and business letters, receipts, lexical lists, laws, hymns, prayers, stories, and daily records.

Full libraries of clay tablets have been found. Monumental inscriptions and texts on different objects, like statues or bricks, are also very common. Many texts survive in multiple copies because they were repeatedly transcribed by scribes in training. Sumerian continued to be the language of religion and law in Mesopotamia long after Semitic speakers had become dominant.

In the late 4th millennium BCE, Sumer was divided into many independent city-states, which were divided by canals and boundary stones. Each was centered on a temple dedicated to the specific patron god or goddess of the city and ruled over by a priestly governor (ensi) or by a king (lugal) who was intimately tied to the city's religious rites.

The dynastic period begins c. 2900 BCE and was associated with a shift from the temple establishment headed by council of elders led by a priestly "En" towards a more secular Lugal (Lu = man, Gal = great). This period was associated with increased war. Cities became walled and increased in size as undefended villages in southern Mesopotamia disappeared.

According to the Sumerian king list, the five "first" cities, said to have exercised pre-dynastic kingship "before the Flood", were: Eridu, Bad-tibira, Larak, Sippar and Shuruppak. The first city to exercise the kingship "after the Flood" was Kish. Other cities were: Uruk, Nippur, Ur, Lagash, Umma, Isin and Larsa.

Semitic Akkadians

The Torah tells us that descendants of Arpachshad, the son of Shem, dwelled "after the Flood" from Mesha going toward Sephar, the mountain of the east (Bereishit 10:30). After a while, they migrated from there and found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there (Bereishit 11:2).

Semitic Akkadians migrated to the northern part of Lower Mesopotamia, the land of Shinar (Sumer), in the 25th century BCE. They derived their name from their ancestor, biblical אַרְפַּכְשָׁד, and as such, they were ancestors of our forefather Abraham and his family. Later on in history they will be also known as the Kasdim (also from אַרְפַּכְשָׁד) and the Babylonians. Their close cousins Assyrians, who had spoken practically the same language, settled in Upper Mesopotamia on Tigris, founding the city of Ashur, their ancestor and chief deity.



During the 3rd millennium BCE, a very intimate cultural symbiosis developed between the Sumerians and the Akkadians throughout Mesopotamia, which included widespread bilingualism. The influence of Sumerian (a language isolate) on Akkadian, and vice versa, is evident in all areas, from lexical borrowing on a massive scale, to syntactic, morphological, and phonological convergence.

Akkadian gradually replaced Sumerian as the spoken language of Mesopotamia somewhere after the turn of the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BCE, although Sumerian continued to be used as a sacred, ceremonial, literary and scientific language in Mesopotamia until the 1st century CE, as did use of

the Akkadian cuneiform.

"It is now generally recognized that the two races which inhabited Sumer and Akkad during the early historical periods were sharply divided from one another not only by their speech but also by their physical characteristics." (A History of Sumer and Akkad, by Leonard King).

The "black-headed", light skinned Sumerians invariably shaved their heads and faces, while long hair and beards adorned Semitic Akkadians. Interestingly, the two deities adopted from the Akkadian triad of gods, Ea, known as Enki to the Sumerians, and Enlil, common to both, are shown even in Sumerian depictions in Akkadian hair style and dress. I hope that the reader will appreciate the hat style of our ancestors from more than 4,000 years ago.



Akkadian depiction of Ea, the water god, receiving animal sacrifice with the sacred tree near the altar. An "angel" blesses the offering. Two other gods of equal rank attend the ceremony.

Sargon of Akkad

The middle of the 3rd millennium BCE was tumultuous in war-ravaged Sumer. Fortress city-states fought for supremacy against each other, gaining control, only to lose it again in yet another battle. Umma and Lagash were two city-states locked in the power struggle for Gu-Edin (Gu'edena or perhaps, "Gan Eden"?), literally, "the fertile plain", between these two cities. Around 2450 BCE, king Eannatum of Lagash prevailed over the Ummans. Decades later, Lugal-zage-si of Umma exacted revenge and sacked the city of Lagash. Following up on this success, he then united Sumer briefly as a single kingdom. The victory was not to endure as the forces of Lugal-zage-si were crushed at Nippur by Sargon the Great, bringing to power a new ruler, a Semite, over Sumer and Akkad.

***"In Akkad, Sargon, whose father was a gardener, the cupbearer of Ur-Zababa [king of Kish], became king, the king of Akkad, who built Akkad; he ruled for 56 years."* (Sumerian King List)**

Sargon's origins are surrounded in intrigue. Legend has it that a Semite woman found herself with an illegitimate child. After birth, baby Sargon was placed in a reed basket waterproofed with pitch and set adrift upon the headwaters of the Euphrates. The basket drifted downstream and was found by a Sumerian farmer irrigating his fields who later reared little Sargon in his home.

Starting his career as cupbearer to Ur-Zababa, king of Kish, Sargon launched an effective military campaign. After crushing Lugal-zage-si's army at Nippur (biblical Calneh), Sargon quickly defeated and captured Lugal-zage-si in the Battle of Uruk (biblical Erech). He then conquered the rest of Sumer, founding the Akkadian Empire (2334 - 2154 BCE), the first known empire in world history.



The Akkadian Empire ca. 2300 BCE

The earliest records in the Akkadian language date to the time of Sargon. Sargon was claimed to be the son of La'ibum, a humble gardener, and possibly a hierodule, or priestess to Ishtar or Inanna. One legend related to Sargon in Assyrian cuneiform tablet says the following:



Story of the birth of Sargon, early 2nd millennium BCE.

“My mother was a lowly, my father I knew not. My lowly mother conceived me; in secret she bore me. She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid. She cast me into the river which rose not over me. The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water. Akki, the drawer of water, took me as his son and reared me. Akki, the drawer of water, appointed me as his gardener.”

Later claims made on behalf of Sargon were that his mother was an "entu" priestess (high priestess). The claims might have been made to ensure a pedigree of nobility, since only a highly placed family could achieve such a position.

After becoming the king of Akkad, Kish and Sumer, Sargon entered upon a career of foreign conquest. Four times he invaded Syria and Canaan, and he spent three years thoroughly subduing the countries of "the west" to unite them with Mesopotamia "into a single empire". Then he took this process further, conquering many of the surrounding regions to create an empire that reached westward as far as the Mediterranean Sea and perhaps Cyprus (Kaptara); northward as far as the mountains well into Anatolia; eastward over Elam; and as far south as Magan (Oman). He consolidated his dominion over his territories by replacing the earlier opposing rulers with noble citizens of Akkad, his native city where loyalty would thus be ensured.

As Sargon extended his conquest from the "Lower Sea" (Persian Gulf) to the "Upper Sea" (Mediterranean), it was felt that he ruled "the totality of the lands under heaven", or "from sunrise to sunset", as contemporary texts put it. Trade extended from the silver mines of Anatolia to the lapis lazuli mines in modern Afghanistan, the cedars of Lebanon and the copper of Magan. This consolidation of the city-states of Sumer and Akkad reflected the growing economic and political power of Mesopotamia.

The empire's breadbasket was the rain-fed agricultural system of Assyria and a chain of fortresses was built to control the imperial wheat production.



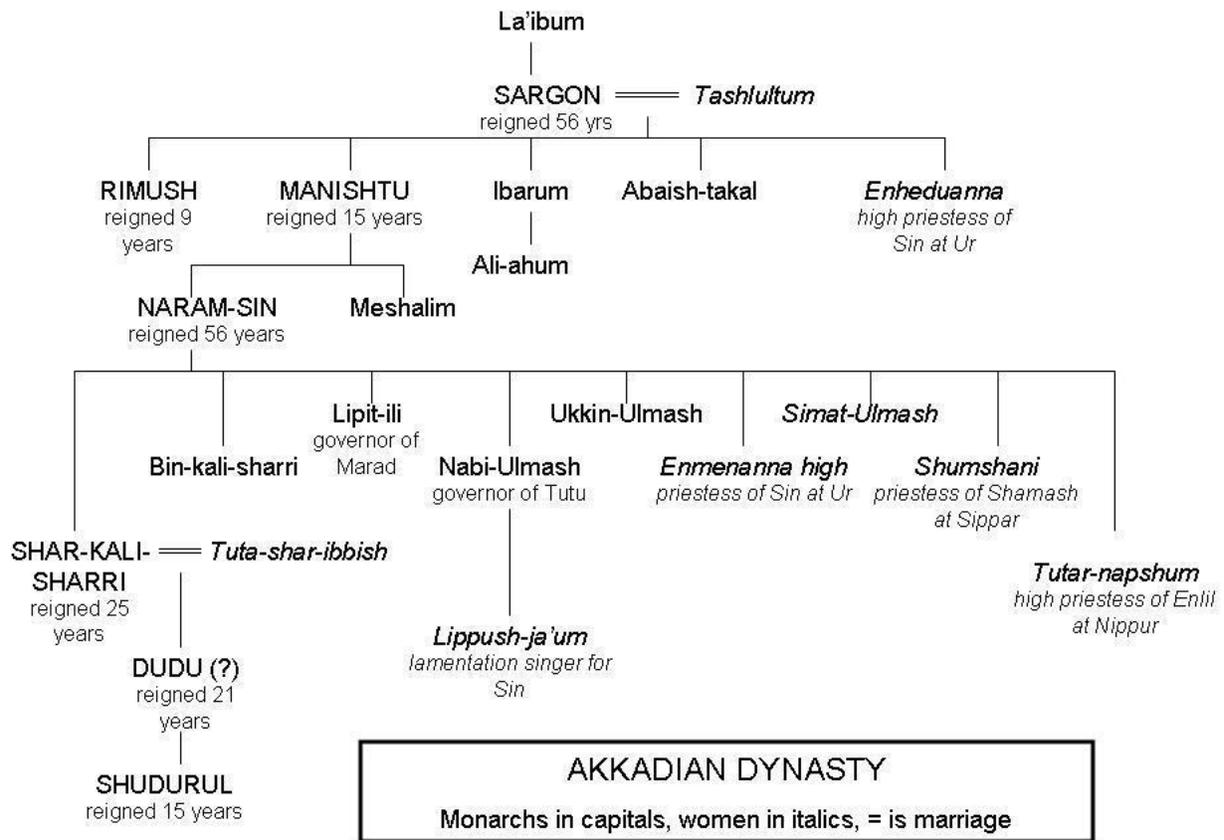
Images of Sargon were erected on the shores of the Mediterranean, in token of his victories, and cities and palaces were built at home with the spoils of the conquered lands. Elam and the northern part of Mesopotamia (Assyria/Subartu) were also subjugated, and rebellions in Sumer were put down. Contract tablets have been found dated in the years of the campaigns against Canaan and against Sarlak, king of Gutium. He also boasted of having subjugated the "four-quarters" — the lands surrounding Akkad to the north (Assyria), the south (Sumer), the east (Elam), and the west (Martu).

Sargon ruled from Akkad between 2334 and 2279 BCE. Some of the earliest historiographic texts (ABC 19, 20) suggest he founded or built the city of Babylon (*Bab-ilu* in Akkadian, meaning "Gate of God") in its new location near Akkad. The so-called Weidner Chronicle (also known as ABC 19) states that Sargon had built Babylon c. 2300 BCE "in front of Akkad" (ABC 19:51). A later chronicle states that Sargon "dug up the dirt of the pit of Babylon and

made a counterpart of Babylon next to Akkad". (ABC 20:18–19).

Sargon of Akkad is identified as the first person in recorded history to rule over an empire (in the sense of the central government of a multi-ethnic territory). His rule also heralds the history of Semitic empires in the Ancient Near East, which, following the Neo-Sumerian interruption, lasted for close to fifteen centuries until the Persian conquest following the 539 BCE Battle of Opis.

Sargon was regarded as a model by Mesopotamian kings for some two millennia after his death. The Assyrian and Babylonian kings who based their empires in Mesopotamia saw themselves as the heirs of Sargon's empire. Sargon may indeed have introduced the notion of "empire" as understood in the later Assyrian period. The Neo-Assyrian Sargon text, written in the first person, has Sargon challenging later rulers to "govern the black-headed people" (i.e., the indigenous population of Mesopotamia) as he did.



Naram-Sin of Akkad



Naram-Sin (meaning "Beloved of [the moon god] Sin"), who reigned c. 2254–2218 BCE, was the third successor and the most important ruler of the Akkadian Empire, after its founder (and his grandfather) Sargon the Great.

Under Naram-Sin the empire reached its maximum strength, expanding up to the Mediterranean Sea and Armenia. He was the first Mesopotamian king known to have claimed divinity for himself, arrogantly taking the title "God of Akkad", and the first to claim the title "King of the Four Corners of the World, King of the Universe". As we are going to see, this did not go unnoticed.

The Curse of Agade is a Sumerian story dated to the Ur III Period of Mesopotamia (c. 2112 – 2004 BCE) though thought to be somewhat older in origin. It tells the story of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin and his confrontation with the assembly of gods, particularly the chief god Enlil, whose ziggurat temple he

stormed, and which led to the eventual disintegration of the Akkadian Empire. This tale is reminiscent of the story of the dispersion recorded in the Torah.

Sargon the Great and Naram-Sin became the subject of many tales and legends down through the centuries and their stories were among the most popular throughout Mesopotamia.

Based on the Torah description, traditional sources, history and archeology, it appears that Sargon of Akkad is the primary candidate for historical Nimrod:

- He was the founder of the Akkadian Empire and the one who built the Akkadian cities of Akkad and Babylon (Babel). Early in his reign, he conquered the Sumerian cities of Nippur (Calneh), Uruk (Erech) and the rest of Sumer (Shinar).
- Sargon of Akkad is identified as the first person in recorded history to rule over an empire. The empire's breadbasket was the rain-fed agricultural system of Assyria and a chain of fortresses was built to control the imperial wheat production.
- The name Sargon (*Sharru-ken* in Akkadian, meaning "True King"), was his throne name. Sargon's grandson and most powerful king of the Akkadian Empire was Naram-Sin and there is an indication that Sargon's other name was also Naram ("Beloved"), as he was called "Beloved of [the goddess] Ishtar". The name Naram [NRM] is linguistically close to Nimrod [NMR].
- Some authors suggest that biblical Nimrod is a combined image of the two historical personalities: Sargon of Akkad and Naram-Sin. The Torah might have chosen the name Nimrod, to convey an arrogant and rebellious character of these kings.
- Sargon the Great and Naram-Sin became the subject of many tales and legends down through the centuries: 'Therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty conqueror before Hashem."'

If the above identification is correct, we have to address the following questions: (1) The Torah tells us that Nimrod descended from Cush [the son of Ham], which would be strange for Sargon, because the Akkadians were descendants of Arpachshad [the son of Shem]; (2) the city of Kish where Sargon started his career and which also was the principal city of his empire, was not mentioned on the Nimrod's list.

While it is easy to find simple answers to these questions, some scholars suggest that Cush in the story of Nimrod was not a person but a geographical location in Mesopotamia. Incredibly, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's "The Living Torah" commentary opines that it could be an ancient city of Kish located eight miles east of Babylon. If this is the case, the Torah meant to say that Nimrod "emerged" from Kish or that Kish "produced" Nimrod: "And Kish produced Nimrod; he began to be a first mighty one in the land".

Historically, the story of Nimrod/Sargon belongs somewhere between the Akkadian settlement in Sumer and the story of the dispersion in Bereishit 11. This raises an interesting question whether the passage of Nimrod had "migrated" to its current place in Bereishit 10, where it noticeably interrupts the flow of the descendants of Ham, after the tradition about Mesopotamian Cush (city of Kish) became forgotten.

References

1. The Legend of Sargon of Akkad, c. 2300 BCE. Available online:
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/2300sargon1.asp>
2. The Curse of Agade, c. 2000 BCE. Available online:
<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/748/the-curse-of-agade-naram-sins-battle-with-the-gods/>

Sources

This article was adopted from the following sources:

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumer>
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sargon_of_Akkad
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akkadian_Empire
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naram-Sin_of_Akkad
5. RAMBAN, Commentary on the Torah, ArtScroll Series
6. Historical Genesis: From Adam to Abraham, by R. J. Fischer
7. The Living Torah, Commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan