

The Concept of War in Ancient Mesopotamia

Reshaping Carl von Clausewitz's Trinity

Michael Cserkits, PhD

<https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2022.01>

Abstract: In this article, the author investigates the concept of “war” during the Akkadian period (ca. 2234–2154 BCE) through fragments and clay tablets that have remained from that period in history more than 4,000 years ago. Given the special place that the divine realm took in the Akkadian worldview, manifesting even in everyday interaction, the author reworks the well-renowned trinity from the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. The author argues that Clausewitz’s analysis of war, which relies on the main trinity of the people, the government, and the armed forces, is not applicable to the beginning of human history in Mesopotamia due to the specific circumstances that societies then faced. The main method of inquiry herein will be a textual analysis of Akkadian scriptures that relate to the campaigns of Sargon, the first ruler of the Akkadian Empire, and his reign in

Dr. Michael Cserkits is a major in the Austrian armed forces and an independent researcher. He graduated from the Theresian Military Academy, holds master’s degrees in sociology and social and cultural anthropology, and has a PhD in African studies. He is currently working in the research fields of military sociology and anthropology and security issues relating to the Sahel zone in Africa. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Marine Corps University, the U.S. Marine Corps, the Department of the Navy, the U.S. government, or the government of the United Kingdom.

constituting the first empire of humankind, as well as sources that explain the role of religion in this historical epoch. Although many of Sargon's groundbreaking military innovations—such as establishing a standing professional army, securing lines of communication and supplies, and fortifying strategic positions—can be analyzed in a purely descriptive way, the focus of this article will be on his constructed relation to the Akkadian pantheon, which had a direct influence on the way warmongering was perceived.

Keywords: Carl von Clausewitz, Mesopotamia, Sargon of Akkade, theory of war

The Current Perception of War: Clausewitz's Trinity

No other author has influenced the theory and perception of war like Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his main work *Vom Kriege* (*On War*).² One of the most cited philosophers of war, Clausewitz distinguished between the *nature of war* and the *character of war*. The former is something immanent in war that differentiates war from other social phenomena and does not change over time. The latter consists of features that can change over time, as they are predominantly the tools that are applied during armed conflict and therefore vary from period to period. These tools range from the legionnaires of the Roman Empire, to the armed chivalry of the Medieval period, to contemporary mass armies that consist of infantry, aircraft, warships, and even nuclear weapons. Although Clausewitz did not think about such modern weapons, they can all be

² Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege: Vollständige Ausgabe* (Hamburg, Germany: Nikol Verlag, 2019).

included in the changing *character of war* since current mainstream research still emphasizes his definition of the *nature of war*.³

According to Clausewitzian dogma, the battle between one and one's enemy will encompass the main features of the nature of war. There is broad agreement among professional military philosophers and researchers that the nature of war can be applied without a specific reference in time. Christopher Mewett writes, "War's nature is violent, interactive, and fundamentally political. Absent any of these elements, and what you're talking about is not war, but something else."⁴ Stemming from that approach, a logically consistent narrative has evolved that ranges from ancient times to today and argues that war, government, and the people together are inseparably intertwined to form Clausewitz's famous trinity.

To maintain a clear distinction between the current perception of Clausewitz's trinity and the one that will be presented in this article, the author will briefly depict the view that Clausewitz had when thinking about war. The initial pillar of Clausewitz's first trinity is a dialectic interplay between hate, primordial violence, and enmity. The second pillar is the interplay between chance and probability. The third pillar is considered to be policy, which subordinates the first two pillars and makes them subject to reason. This first trinity is, even in this case, timeless, though Clausewitz's assessment basis for "policy" was distinct from what could be observed in modern-day scenarios or even in younger ancient empires such as that of the Romans. Derived from this first trinity is a second trinity, which is

³ Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., *On Victory and Defeat: Carl von Clausewitz* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁴ Christopher Mewett, "Understanding War's Enduring Nature alongside Its Changing Character," *War on the Rocks*, 21 January 2014.

represented by physical carriers of the emotional and intrinsic feelings of the first. According to Clausewitz, the interplay between the people (incorporating hate and violence), the armed forces (incorporating chance and probability), and the government (incorporating reason) is what makes the pure essence of war. It is the interplay of this second trinity that this article will aim to reframe in order to show the inapplicability of it to Mesopotamian society during the Akkadian period (ca. 2234–2154 BCE).

Based on Clausewitz's assumptions, Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Key-young Son write, "the concept of the state must be understood as any kind of warring community" that inherits in every conflict ever fought the three main drivers of the human will to fight: passion, deriving from the people who actually have to fight; chance, from the military which seeks to establish better conditions for the government it fights for; and reason (or policy), from the government that has assessed the risks in getting into an armed conflict.⁵ This first trinity, consisting of these human characteristics of passion, chance, and reason, was then transformed to the state of art in human interaction that was observable to Clausewitz during his own lifetime: the Westphalian nation-state. In adopting his first trinity to the state, he then argued what we know as his second trinity, consisting of the people, the military, and the government.

Several authors have already argued that this assumption may need revision. Frank G. Hoffman writes that Clausewitz's "timeless trinity" would be better off as a square due to the changes that artificial intelligence will bring to future conflicts, while John Mark Mattox prefers a "just war"

⁵ Andreas Herberg-Rothe and Key-young Son, *Order Wars and Floating Balance: How the Rising Powers Are Reshaping Our Worldview in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2018), 22.

approach.⁶ Antulio J. Echevarria II has critically reflected on the trinity while conducting research about the primacy of policy during the Cold War period, and Mary Kaldor has questioned the relevancy of the trinity in times of globalization.⁷ Nevertheless, these discussions often aim to reframe the character of war and the changes that new weaponry may bring to the trinity, or to adjust the trinity by making it more effective, such as John Stone has suggested.⁸ Leaving aside those articles that deal with the implications of newly added characters of warfare, only some historians questioned the nature of the trinity itself, not only because of its overpowering dogmatic recitation in almost all military domains and sciences but also due to the apparently seamless logic that makes it applicable to all armed conflicts. Richard M. Milburn, for example, references an entire Persian army that was lost in a sandstorm in 524 BCE as well as the destruction of the Spanish Armada by storms in 1588 as prime examples for the embedment of war's uncertainty, which represents another characteristic feature of its unchanging nature, the so-called "friction."⁹

It is exactly this objective nature that will be the target of this article. Here, the author will argue that Clausewitz's timeless trinity cannot be

⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, "Squaring Clausewitz's Trinity in the Age of Autonomous Weapons," *Orbis* 63, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 44–63; and John Mark Mattox, "The Clausewitzian Trinity in the Information Age: A Just War Approach," *Journal of Military Ethics* 7, no. 3 (2008): 202–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15027570802277755>.

⁷ Antulio J. Echevarria II, "On the Clausewitz of the Cold War: Reconsidering the Primacy of Policy in *On War*," *Armed Forces & Society* 34, no. 1 (October 2007): 90–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764206294175>; and Mary Kaldor, "Inconclusive Wars: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant in These Global Times?," *Global Policy* 1, no. 3 (October 2010): 271–81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-5899.2010.00041.x>.

⁸ John Stone, "Beyond Clausewitz: Better Ways of Thinking Strategically," *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 5 (2017): 468–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1379840>.

⁹ Richard M. Milburn, "Reclaiming Clausewitz's Theory of Victory," *Parameters* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 55–63.

applied to ancient Mesopotamia. This is not because there were then other assets for fighting wars (which, regardless, would fall into the domain of the character of war), but rather because this period in human history possessed views of society, war, and the role of the government that greatly differed from those of later periods. The nature of war during this era was completely different than those of which followed and therefore cannot be explained by using concepts of the Westphalian nation-state. As a result, Clausewitz's trinity must be reframed when analyzing wars in ancient Mesopotamia before the rise of monotheistic religions, which had a direct impact on the view of society and changed its norms and values forever. The research question of this article is hence stated as follows: "What were the main drivers of Akkadian society that come nearest to the second trinity, and how do they impact it?"

Akkadian Perceptions of War: The Role of the Pantheon

Why were early Akkadian worldviews so different than others? To answer this question and draw conclusions for further discussion on how to apply the Clausewitzian model to this human epoch, it is necessary to emphasize the basic notions of everyday life that are still accessible today through the transcription of clay tablets. First, the role of competition in Akkadian life was far more important than other social activities, as the newly emerging order of the first empire in history had a strong favor for connections, synergies, and wits among those who claimed nobility.¹⁰ Further, according to Benjamin R. Foster, "death obliterated everything that was attractive or enjoyable about a human being, leaving only a cold, unresponsive spirit

¹⁰ Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2016), 231.

dwelling in a cheerless afterlife of hunger, thirst, and envy of the living.”¹¹ There was no sense in death among everyday people for a greater good, like the survival of the polis in ancient Greece, the glory of the Roman Empire, or the wealth of the German nation.

As death was so unattractive, some may argue that warfare and conflict were less likely to arise during the Akkadian period than any other time in history. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Despite the belief that after life the envy spirit had to go to the underworld and face the goddess Ereškigal (lady of the great earth), sister of Ištar (goddess of love and war), war had a distinctly potent and important role in the early Sumerian and Akkadian worldview.¹² This is grounded in the deep embodiment of war between gods and demons, beginning with a battle between the god Marduk (patron god of Babylon) and the demon Asag (disease and plague), which explained to ordinary people the struggle in the heavens and the fight for order. This would later culminate in the written text of *Enūma Eliš*, the creation myth.¹³ After the basic order was set, Marduk fought the goddess Tī’amat (chaos) and established out of her remaining body the sea and land. Humankind had its own special place in this mythology, as the human individual was the only creature enabled with *ṭēmu*, which can be translated to “intellect” or “wit.” As Pietro Mander writes:

This theme stems from another tradition in which Enki.k [god of water] plays a pivotal role, creating man to run the universe,

¹¹ Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 236.

¹² Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, an imprint of Penn State University Press, 1997), 203.

¹³ Pietro Mander, “War in Mesopotamian Culture,” in *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome*, ed. Krzysztof Ulanowski (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 5–22, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004324763_003.

thus replacing the minor gods in this role. The new creature has a divine element inherent in his constitution since Enki.k/Ea moulded him not only with clay but also with the blood of a murdered god.¹⁴

In establishing the human race to run the universe, this power struggle was transformed from the divine and heavenly realm to everyday life, where humans had to face demons and evil spirits and counter them with rituals and enchantments. It is thereby possible to conclude that although the divine realm never manifested materially, it was real through the constructed interaction of everyday Akkadians. As the symbolical meaning of *ṭēmu* was compared to the brightness of the stars, this spiral of conflict ended with the Akkadian king, who ultimately became a star after their death and was the sole human being to have a permanent place in the universe.¹⁵ In becoming this, the king did not have to fear death like ordinary citizens, since their legacy would continue for eternity, making war and the possibility of dying less unattractive to them compared to other humans.

Further, the Mesopotamian city did not represent its people, but rather the single divinity of the pantheon for which it was the dominion, sheltering it and receiving protection and blessing in return. According to Mander, "As every Mesopotamian city was the seat and dominion of a single divinity in the pantheon, all the cities together were a reflected image of the

¹⁴ Mander, "War in Mesopotamian Culture," 6.

¹⁵ Elena Cassin, *La Splendeur Divine: Introduction a L'Etude de la Mentalite Mesopotamienne*, vol. 8 in the series *Civilisations et Sociétés* (Paris: De Gruyter Mouton, 1968), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111331010>.

starry sky on the earth's surface."¹⁶ People inhabiting Akkadian cities in early Mesopotamia therefore did not refer to themselves as belonging to a single race or linguistic group (concepts that became popular during the rise of the Westphalian nation-state) but rather as followers of a single deity. Hence in the Mesopotamian worldview, the image of single cities reflected the whole mythology of creation, struggle, and the possibility of driving into chaos on an everyday basis, which influenced behavior and perception. This went so far that the patron deity was perceived as the "life force" of the city, and protecting it had utmost priority. Stealing or taking the statue of a city's god or goddess was a common and harsh punishment in these times, often imposed on rebellious or conquered cities.¹⁷

This behavior toward cities' gods and goddesses offered several possibilities for waging war. First, priests and kings could manifest legends and holy scripts that reported struggles between the different gods, leading to conflict between cities. Second, everyone outside the protected realm was seen as a possible source of destruction. In countering possible sources of destruction, a Mesopotamian city did not only secure its own survival but also further fulfill the will of its deity patron and contribute to the restoration of celestial order.¹⁸ "On a historical level," writes Mander, "the creation of wide-ranging territorial states that included more than one city-state in their domains is a defining characteristic of ancient Mesopotamia; not surprisingly, the reason for this may be found in the mythology."¹⁹

¹⁶ Mander, "War in Mesopotamian Culture," 8.

¹⁷ Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eight and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974).

¹⁸ Brian Rainey, *Religion, Ethnicity and Xenophobia in the Bible: A Theoretical, Exegetical and Theological Survey* (London: Routledge, 2019), 60.

¹⁹ Mander, "War in Mesopotamian Culture," 9.

Logically, however, the Mesopotamian city—represented by its king, who was the only intermediary between ordinary humans and the gods—had a (constructed) divine task: to unite all other cities under one rule and copy the heavenly pantheon on Earth. The first king to accomplish such a tremendous task was Sargon of Akkad.

Sargon of Akkad and His Empire

After the first Sumerian city-states had established themselves in early Mesopotamia, Sumerian language and religion spread throughout the region around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. In this early dynastic time, many mythological kings came to power, such as Etana, Gilgamesh, and Dumuzi.²⁰ As their reign was glorified through widespread stories, a change occurred in Sumerian society that remains traceable today. The formerly known division between a ruler and an elected warlord during times of crisis became more blurred during the passage of several hundred years. Today, researchers can only find evidence that the right to wage wars was exclusively possessed by a “priest-king.”²¹

When the Akkadians, who spoke the first Semitic language in history, arrived in the north of Mesopotamia, they found themselves in a social environment that favored strong and religiously justified leadership.²² According to the chronicles, Sargon of Akkad, who legend says began as a gardener in the palace of Ur-Zababa, ruled the Akkadian Empire from either

²⁰ Joan Aruz, ed., *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

²¹ Josef Bauer, Robert K. Englund, and Manfred Krebernik, *Mesopotamien: Späturuk-Zeit und Frühdynastische Zeit* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 1998).

²² The term *Semitic* refers to a language that belongs to a subfamily of the Afro-Asiatic language family, including Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Ethiopic.

2356 to 2300 BCE (when applying the middle chronology of kings) or 2292 to 2236 BCE (when applying the short chronology of kings). Sargon had several advantages that allowed him to create an empire that humankind had never seen before. Shortly before he became king of Akkade, a new theology of war had developed around 2400 BCE, when King Eannatum of Lagash tried to justify his military campaigns and raids according to reasons deriving from the view of the world as a mirror of the pantheon.²³ Although this “holy war” was first mentioned before Sargon’s reign, the development of rhetorical justification for war as a theological task continued during and after the establishment of his centralized empire. This eventually found its climax under Sargon’s grandson, Naram-Sîn, who left behind several stelae and inscriptions praising his accomplishments in reference to the gods:²⁴

i 1–10: Whereas, for all time since the creation of mankind, no king whosoever had destroyed Armānum and Ebla,

i 11–20: the god Nergal, by means of (his) weapons opened the way for Narām-Sin, the mighty, and gave him Armānum and Ebla.

i 21–29: Further, he gave to him Amanus, the Cedar Mountain, and the Upper Sea.

i 30–ii 7: By means of the weapons of god Dagān, who magnifies his kingship, Narām-Sin, the mighty, conquered Armānum an Ebla.

²³ Irene J. Winter, “Eannatum and the ‘King of Kiš’?: Another Look at the Stele of the Vultures and ‘Cartouches’ in Early Sumerian Art,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 76 (1986): 205–12.

²⁴ Naram-Sîn was the first Akkadian king who deified himself while alive, breaking with the established tradition and making it possible for his successors to argue in new ways about their legacies and tasks in waging war.

ii 8–19: Further, from the side of Euphrates River as far as (the city of) Ulišum, he smote the people whom god Dagān had given to him for the first time.²⁵

According to the Sumerian texts known as the “Sargon Epos,” Sargon claimed power after overthrowing Ur-Zababa, the king of Kiš, and was bestowed the right to rule from the gods Enlil and Ea, as well as the goddess Inanna (the Sumerian term for Ištar). Veronika K. Afanas’eva argues that it is almost certain that the historic Sargon Epos were written one or two lifespans after Sargon’s death, combining folklore and truth into a literal legacy to conserve Sargon’s unyielding gift to humankind—his empire—and preserve the collective memory of the fall of the ancient city of Uruk under King Lugalzagesi.²⁶

Aside from his ability to use the Akkadian system of competition to his advantage, the immediate creation of a divine task bestowed on him, and the seizure of control over a city such as Kiš, several texts suggest that Sargon must have also been an extraordinary military commander. Whereas other leaders led their armies like they ruled—through absolute authority—Sargon might have been someone who did not hesitate to collaborate with his subordinates to develop strategies for battles. Joan Goodnick Westenholz writes, “In all these texts, Sargon appears as *primus inter pares*, a military commander seeking the advice and assistance of his subordinates

²⁵ Vladimir Sazonov, “Some Remarks Concerning the Development of the Theology of War in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in Ulanowski, *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome*, 28, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004324763_004.

²⁶ Veronika K. Afanas’eva, “Das sumerische Sargon-Epos: Versuch einer Interpretation,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 14, no. 2 (1987): 237–46.

before he hazards them and himself upon unknown paths of glory.”²⁷ Even if such texts could be proven to be mere propaganda—which, to a certain extent, they clearly are—Sargon established the first standing army of around 5,400 soldiers, who had their daily meal in the presence of the king to further bond with him. In addition, descriptions of battles, even if hampered to some extent after several millennia, became more precise. They are currently understood to not be exaggerated or unrealistic, for in almost all Sargonic and post-Sargonic sources, reference to the gods is taken to swear on the exact numbers of captives or dead soldiers.²⁸ In that context, a false assumption might have even toppled a well-established ruler if they were willing to misuse the gods. As for Sargon, the major problem for scholars today is that the capital of his empire, Akkade, has never been found. Consequently, researchers have no access to royal archives or even know where to search for them.

In sum, all reports on Sargon’s military campaigns have verified 34 victorious battles. However, this highlights the problem that the loss was never reported by the defeated side, and even if Sargon was defeated, he surely would have erased the scriptures to ensure that only his victories were remembered and written down.²⁹

Besides his standing army and personal talents, Sargon also used to his advantage the uprising cast of *bāru* (astrological priests), who were first

²⁷ Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade*, 57.

²⁸ Sebastian Fink, “Battle-Descriptions in Mesopotamian Sources I: Presargonic and Sargonic Period,” in Ulanowski, *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome*, 51–64, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004324763_005.

²⁹ Fink, “Battle Descriptions in Mesopotamian Sources I,” 59.

mentioned in the third millennium BCE.³⁰ As special priests, they possessed a divine connection, were specialized in reading omens, and participated in military campaigns. Besides assisting with tasks that took place at the king's court, they also advised the king in military strategies and stratagems. It is possible that due to heavy competition among the *bāru*, Sargon had the opportunity to foster only those whose advice had proven to be best in battle, thereby indirectly creating an advisory staff with whom he would discuss battle strategies.³¹ Individual competition among average soldiers was also favored by Sargon. It is handed down in his legend that before a battle began, he would promise to erect a statue for the bravest soldier in his army—an opportunity to have an almost everlasting legacy and therefore the once-in-a-lifetime chance to subjugate even the possibility of vanquishing after death.³² The morale boost for troops must have been extraordinary, especially when compared to the low cost of erecting a single statue.

Another important point is the special identity that Sargon narrated by himself to the gods. In one of the remaining steles of his later reign, Sargon assumes the roles of bailiff of Ištar, priest of An, and governor of Enlil, thereby sealing his absolute authority and neutralizing any attempt to attack him on a theological level.³³

To conclude, Sargon possessed significant personal abilities, had a coherent “theology of war” that gave him a constructed divine task and a

³⁰ Manfred Hutter, *Religionen in der Umwelt des Alten Testaments I: Babylonier, Syrer, Perser* (Stuttgart, Germany: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1996), 89.

³¹ Erica Reiner, *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (Independence Square, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1995).

³² Ulanowski, *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*.

³³ Melissa Eppihimer, “The Visual Legacy of Akkadian Kingship” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009), 35.

right to wage war, fostered morality among his standing army, and may have held war councils with his *bāru*. He cleverly used the everyday perceptions of competition and death, as well as the all-present divine realm that was mirrored on Earth through the city-states, to seize power and control over a vast area and attempt to create a centralized state. So why did his empire last no longer than a century, even when his successors applied the same logic and could achieve significant victories in battle, such as the crushing of Elam, the long-lasting rival of Akkade, during the reign of Naram-Sîn?

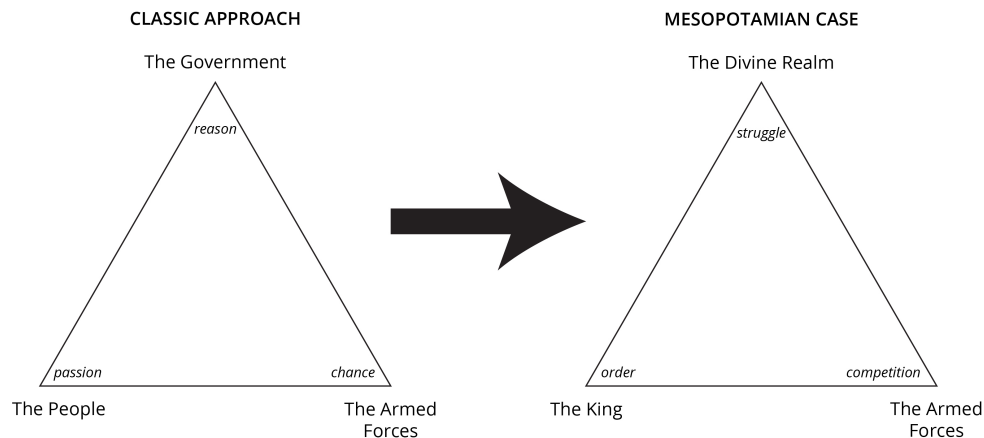
As Norman Yoffee argues, the main problem that early Mesopotamian cities faced when trying to seize control over their neighbors was the poor infrastructure that connected each of the rival entities.³⁴ Apart from their self-conception as the dominion of a single god or goddess, these cities maintained what was essentially a self-sustaining economic circle, where trade did not play an outstanding role. Like Yoffee, this author can only speculate that despite the tremendous military efforts of Sargon, he was restricted by this reality. While the overarching goal of that period was to achieve single sovereignty to achieve eternal order, because eternal order was narrated in the rule of the gods by the most competent god and not by destroying or annihilating the others, there was simply no need to establish a dense road network to maneuver large amounts of troops across a territory. Recent research has shown that although Sargon developed a

³⁴ Norman Yoffee, "The Power of Infrastructures: A Counternarrative and a Speculation," *Journal of Archeological Method and Theory* 23, no. 4 (January 2016): 1053–65.

dense network through his administration, its integration in the classic Sargonic empire reached its limits very quickly.³⁵

Introducing the Divine Realm: A New Model for the Trinity

Figure 1. Picturing the new framework



Courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

The main research question of this article—“What were the main drivers of Akkadian society that come nearest to the second trinity, and how do they impact it?”—can now be answered using the context of the Akkadian worldview and the social environment that Sargon faced during his lifetime. First, the main driver was competition, which can be seen as the predecessor of chance. In the Akkadian social order, competition did not rely on chance (understood as a possibility that could be influenced by using personal or worldly measures) but on the favor of the gods, who, by

³⁵ Sara Brumfield, “Imperial Methods: Using Text Mining and Social Network Analysis to Detect Regional Strategies in the Akkadian Empire” (PhD diss., University of California, 2013), 231.

Akkadian definition, either fulfilled the requests of their followers or did not. No source analyzed during this research suggested that ordinary people could change the course of the gods; this option was only available for kings, and even they sometimes had to face the inaccessible and fluid nature of divine instability (such as Gilgamesh in his epic quest or Etana in his search for life). Second, out of the “theology of war,” a clear task to maintain order in the world could be deducted. This order was represented by the king and later substituted by passion and government. But in the Akkadian view, no passion was needed, for it was natural to maintain order in a world full of demons, gods, and spirits. Because every slight imbalance would have catastrophic consequences, the king was under constant pressure to avoid such a scenario at all costs. Third, and perhaps the most complicated part of the Akkadian trinity, this order cannot be understood without a higher reference. The divine task bestowed on a king was a logical outcome of the struggle that the gods had to endure since the beginning of time. Struggle was thereby the predecessor of reason, as it provided the theological and societal clay that formed early Mesopotamian villages and later cities. As mentioned above, these villages and cities were designed and built as a mirror of the sky, facing the challenges on earth rather than in heaven.

By combining the information that has been gathered thus far, it can be seen that Clausewitz’s second trinity in the classic approach is valid for a broad number of conflicts occurring during a large span of time. But given the special emphases and notions in the ancient Mesopotamian world, this author argues that the Clausewitzian model cannot be applied to this historic epoch. Rather than relying on Clausewitz’s original trinity and trying to interpret his ideas in the complex and quite distinct sociocultural

environment of the Akkadian realm, a trinity of other factors might better explain the case example. The dense framework that existed in everyday interaction during the Akkadian period, which includes seeing gods and demons in every form of human social order, makes it impossible to argue that war in this era was the product of pure reason—or at least the form of reason which we today claim to understand.

First, it is necessary to pass over any notion of “the people” in this triangle to explain the nature of war. Death was not favorable in the Akkadian world, and even though Sargon helped his soldiers forget about the fate they might encounter in battle, people were helplessly dependent solely on their close kin to worship for their dead souls to prevent their vanishing in the afterlife. Only the king of the city-state had an outstanding role and was able to anticipate their afterlife as an everlasting star in the nightly sky. Tasked by the god of the city to establish divine order in the world, the king’s special role among all other human beings has to be of great importance when analyzing warfare in this period.

Second, the role of the government, if there even was one, must be discarded here. Neither Clausewitz nor contemporary scholars would associate with the term “government” what the Akkadians did. As the king was by divine law the owner of the state, the government was simply a vehicle to provide him with the necessary means to achieve his tasks. As those tasks could vary in an extreme span of possibilities, ranging from those of the warmongering Sargon to the so-called “king of peace,” Gudea of Lagaš, it was the king and their interpretation of the divine task that altered

the course of a city or an empire.³⁶ Of course, arguments may arise which state that the king could be equated with the government, as they were the embodiment of it, but this would reduce their role to a mere worldly one—a hypothesis that cannot stand given the divine role they had. The king had to worship the gods and carry out their tasks, a reality that remained until the Babylonian era and even then was still so strong that the neglect of a yearly moon festival by the Babylonian king Nabonidus led to the welcoming of the capture of Babylon by Cyrus II of Persia from the local Marduk priest, thereby legitimizing Cyrus II in front of all Babylonians as their new king.³⁷

Albeit the roles of the Akkadian king as worldly ruler, lawgiver, and caretaker, these tasks are seen as secondary to their divine responsibility. In the theology of war of the Akkadian period, a certain extent of government was necessary to keep city-states in order, just like the firmament held the stars together. But government was not perceived as essential to wage war, as only the king had the ability to claim this divine task. This is the main reason that this author would like to introduce a new military domain: the divine realm. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Akkadian world was viewed as the blueprint of the gods, who had their own struggles and ongoing fights. Even after major tasks such as the defeat of Asag and the disembodiment of Tiamat for the creation of all physical things, including humans, had already been accomplished, the gods in the Akkadian worldview were not simply watching over the world peacefully. The only god that people could rely on was the patron of their own city, and even they

³⁶ Gebhard J. Selz, *Sumerer und Akkader: Geschichte – Gesellschaft – Kultur* (Munich, Germany: Verlag C. H. Beck, 2005).

³⁷ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556–539 B.C.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

could abandon the city if the citizens and king did not worship them accordingly. In such a world where enchantments and everyday struggles with demons built the basis for a vast cast of priests, society incorporated a comparative subsidiary place in the hierarchy of all things. The king was the one chosen to establish divine order in their domain; the gods would do the same in theirs.

Third, the military is the only thing that did not change in the new trinity, but its role is only an auxiliary one. Compared to the classic Clausewitzian approach, in which war is seen as “a continuation of politics by other means” and therefore relies on chance, value, and odds, soldiers in the Akkadian army were merely vehicle to carry out the tasks of the king for the ultimate end state of mirroring the heavens on Earth.³⁸ Compared to Clausewitz’s analysis of historical battles, there was no other way for Akkadian kings to achieve their task than by using the military.

These three components—the king as the bearer of a divine task, the divine realm which must acknowledge them, and the king’s army as their instrument of power projection—are the main parts that could together form the social phenomenon of war in the ancient Mesopotamian case. In presenting this new model, this author hopes to have given some input for a vivid discussion about a true change in the nature of war, which obviously cannot be applied to every epoch of human history and therefore has its limits. But if such limitations are given in the past, they may also occur in the future.

³⁸ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*.