Plagues and Peoples in Mesopotamia

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In his stimulating book *Plagues and Peoples* the historian William H. McNeill puts forward the thesis that human history has been widely and deeply affected by disease.[1] He proposes on the basis of evidence from Europe and to a lesser extent from China a general pattern for the effects of disease: highly lethal diseases new to an area initially devastated populations, but within a few years the diseases became childhood maladies to which all surviving adults were immune. Peripheral populations might be savaged by the diseases later, but among such groups too, if the populations were large enough, maladies would soon subside into endemicity. This pattern of accomodation with diseases in limited areas meant that the chain of disease parasites did not die out and at any time could move through human contacts in trade and war to new populations without immunity. The pattern was broken by the cross-immunizations, after initial catastrophic epidemics, during the trans-oceanic movements since 1500 C.E. and more recently and less importantly through the advance of medical knowledge.[2]

McNeill's book, though fascinating, is remarkable for its lack of concrete data from outside Europe and China. That lack is due to early observers' ignorance of the nature of infectious disease and to the spotty record-keeping of bureaucracies facing such cataclysmic disasters. But we have from Mesopotamian sources some data that may bear on the question of the existence of McNeill's proposed patterns.

Several of the king lists from ancient Mesopotamia give the lengths of reigns of the kings.[3] The accuracy of these lists is frequently questionable, but there is not any obvious stylized patterning of the lengths of reigns in them. They thus have a chance of reflecting the life expectancy of the elites at least of the dynasties involved.[4] It may be argued that

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1 *Plagues and Peoples*, (Garden City, NY, 1976). Bibliographic abbreviations here are those used in *The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*.

2 McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 130.

3 The classic study on chronology is M. B. Rowton, "Chronology—Ancient Western Asia," I. E. S. Edwards, C. J. Gadd, and N. G. L. Hammonds, eds., *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1970) I/1: 193–239. The figures are given by J. Brinkman in his appendix to A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, rev. by E. Reiner, (Chicago, 1977), 335–48.

4 For the problems of calculating life expectancy see the introduction by T. H. Hollingsworth, *Historical Demography*, (Ithaca, 1969). Of course kings live longer than they reign since most are not crowned as infants. With a couple of exceptions we have no information on the age of Mesopotamian kings when they became kings. I assume here that reign lengths were roughly proportional to longevity. I do not see how this assumption can be tested, but it does not seem unreasonable.

there are many other ways for kings to die than by disease, and usually in Mesopotamian history we are ill informed about palace conspiracies and military defeats that doubtless snuffed out royal lives. But, as McNeill points out, disease sometimes is a concomitant of civil unrest and of military defeat. If we take a very long view, it may be that the raw figures on royal survival will be significant.

Below are the figures I have abstracted from J. Brinkman's list along with the dates he uses from the Middle Chronology for all the kings who have the length of reign noted.[5]

Average Reigns

Dynasty	*Dates*	*Kings*	*Years*	*Average Reign*
	Southern Mesopotamia			
Akkad	2334–2154	11	181	16.45
Ur III	2112–2004	5	109	21.8
I Isin	2017–1794	15	224	14.93
Larsa	2025–1763	14	263	18.78
I Babylon	1894–1595	11	300	27.27
(Early Dynasty Totals		56	1077	19.23)
I Sealand	1595?–?	12	368	30.67
Kassite	1595?–1155	20	290	14.5
II Isin	1157–1026	11	132	12
II Sealand	1025–1005	3	21.42	7.14
Bazi	1004–985	3	20.25	6.75
Elam	984–979	1	6	6
(Mixed)	978–626	24	173.58	7.23
Neo-Babylonian	625–539	6	87.25	14.54
(Later Dynasty Totals		80	1098.5	13.73)
(Southern Totals		136	2175.5	16.00
	Assyria = Northern Mesopotamia			
Old Assyrian	1813–1431?	20	307.08	15.35
Middle Assyrian	1430–884	32	547	17.09
Neo-Assyrian	883-609	14	260	18.57
(Assyrian Totals		66	1114.08	16.88)
Overall Totals		202	3289.58	16.28

5 See the list by Brinkman, n. 3 above; his dates are according to the Middle Chronology, which could well be off for the dates above 1595 by as much as a hundred years because of the Dark Age, the problems of which are discussed by Rowton in the article on chronology, n. 3 above.

Some of the kings of the Mixed dynasties were in fact Neo-Assyrian kings reigning in the south. I have included them under both dynasties for simplicity though we know from the Neo-Assyrian lists that they lived longer than they seemed to in the data on the Mixed dynasties.

Kings have been included here if the king lists give numbers for their lengths of reign, and the entry under "Years" shows the sum of these kings' years, not the full range of the years the dynasty ruled. Thus, though the Kassite Dynasty may have been influential for over 400 years, we have reigns adding up to only 290 years. The fractions of years counted represent reigns of a month or more.

The lengths of time covered by these dynasties are mostly too long to be immediately applicable to McNeill's thesis. But the general consistency of the averages over time is consistent with his idea that plagues do not indefinitely afflict populations. This listing also allows one to come up with overall averages of reign lengths, which others have found to vary by culture and region.[6] The overall average of somewhat more than sixteen years is similar to that of pre-modern European kings.[7]

It appears from these averages that there is frequently a correlation between great power and long average reigns. The first dynasty of Babylon is known for its consistent longevity,[8] and the Ur III, Larsa, Middle Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian kings, known for their wide power, usually reigned longer than average. The dynasty that at times ruled probably the greatest area, that of Akkad, is, however, only average in length of reigns, and the tenacious if unexciting Kassites fall below the average. Another apparent exception to the correlation of power with long reigns is the first dynasty of the Sealand, about whose history we know next to nothing but whose kings are said to have lasted an extremely long time. What the rough correlation between power and long reigns probably means is what otherwise would be guessed, that powerful kings can easily leave sick cities and protect themselves against unpleasant palace rebellions.[9] These kings, and probably to a lesser extent all kings, are thus unlikely to be representative of the population at large, but these are the only long-term data we have on longevity in Mesopotamia.[10]

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6 On this see Jan Vansina, "Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa," in F. Gilbert and S. Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today* (N.Y., 1972), esp. 433.

7 See the study by David Henige, "Oral Traditions and Chronology," *Journal of African History* 12/3 (1971), 371–89. He notes, p. 377, that 'historical' Japanese emperors reigned an average of 14.7 years.

8 Observed, for example, by W. W. Hallo in W. W. Hallo and W. Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East, A History* (N.Y., 1971), 101.

9 Mesopotamian kings do not in general die in battle, and we find that the few exceptions to this rule are therefore especially missed. See S. N. Kramer, "The Death of Ur-Nammu and his Descent to the Netherworld," *JCS* 21 (1967), 104–22, and C. Wilcke, "Eine Schicksalentscheidung für den toten Urnammu," in A. Finet, ed., *Actes de la XVII^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Ham-sur-Heure, Belgium, 1970), 81–92.

10 We do have some evidence from prosopography that some individuals did live long lives in the Ur III period and in the Late Babylonian period. See W. W. Hallo, "The House of Ur-meme," *JNES* 31 (1972), 87–95, and M. A. Dandamaev, "About Life Expectancy in Babylonia in the First Millennium B.C.," in B. Alster, ed. *Death in Mesopotamia = Mesopotamia* 8 (Copenhagen, 1980), 180–86, with evidence for lives from 60 to 80 years long. If individuals made it through infancy, they might hope to live rather long lives.

There are no Elamite kinglists, and the estimated lengths and dates of reign are not trustworthy enough to be included here; see M. B. Rowton, *CAH* I/1:217f. But it may be noted that the average and mean reigns based on these estimates are similar to the central Mesopotamian figures. I abstracted from G. Cameron, *History of Early Iran* (N.Y., 1968; first printed 1936), and W. Hinz, *The Lost World of Elam* (N.Y., 1973; first German edition 1964):

sukkalmaḫ's from about 2020 to 1761: 13 rulers for 191 years,
average = 14.7, mean = 14 (Cameron, Table II, p. 229);
Igeḫalkids from about 1350 to 1210?: 7 rulers for 140 years,
average = 20 = mean (Hinz, p. 184);
Anshan and Susa, from about 1295 to 1140: 10 rulers for 155 years,
average = 15.5, mean = 13.5 (Cameron, Table III, p. 230);
Anzan and Susa from about 717 to 699 and 693 to 636?, 10 rulers for 76 years,
average = 6.9, mean = 6 (Cameron, Table IV, p. 231).

For 41 rulers over 562 years the overall average reign is 13.7 years.

Population studies based on surface surveys are too imprecise in their isolation of periods to be useful in tracing

Another point these figures bring out is that Assyria, though in some ways a cultural colony of Southern Mesopotamia, had too great a population to be regarded as one of McNeill's "fringe areas" which are likely to be repeatedly devastated by disease. These northern kings live a bit longer than average; in no period are they dying like Amerindians faced with Cortez' germs.[11]

More precision is possible about McNeill's pattern when we look at the individual lengths of reigns in the dynasties. The following charts show the reigns of all datable kings.[12] Reigns of fewer than the overall national average of sixteen years are marked with asterisks. The dagger indicates the case where four kings reigned only three years altogether.

McNeill's proposed pattern should be perceptible in longevity data as a sudden high mortality rate followed by a gradual tapering off of the death rate as the new disease reached an endemic level. In king lists one might expect a pattern of several very short reigns followed by gradually lengthening reigns. There is one period in Mesopotamian history where we see rapid transfer of kingship followed by gradual lengthening reigns in more than one contemporary dynasty, the period around 1830 in the first dynasty of Isin and in the dynasty of Larsa. Also there may be a similar pattern around 1200 B.C.E. in the Kassite and Middle Assyrian dynasties. Other periods of rapid royal turnover may be caused by disease, but these times of instability do not seem to be correlated in more than one dynasty and do not conform to McNeill's proposed pattern.

We will briefly look at the periods around 1830 and 1200 to see if the Mesopotamian sources give us any reason to believe that the crises the kings suffered were caused by or contemporaneous with epidemics.

About the short-reigned kings of Isin from 1836 to 1817 we know almost nothing.[13] But the kings of Larsa from 1849 to 1823 have left more of a record, and it does not coincide with what one would expect from a state wracked with disease. Of the first short-reigned king, Sin-iddinam, Dietz-Otto Edzard writes, "All signs indicate a period of flowering of Larsa under this king."[14] A later omen text says that he died after he was hit by a block of stone while entering a temple.[15] If his successor was identical to the like-named king who ruled Uruk, another southern city, it may be that that king did not die in office but was instead driven from Larsa and retained control of Uruk.[16] We have little information about the next king, but the king who reigned less than a year, Silli-Adad, is mentioned in a contemporary document which dates from the year in which "Silli-Adad

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disasters that occurred over only a few years. Compare the long-term summaries in R. McC. Adams, *Land Behind Baghdad*, (Chicago, 1965), 115, Table 25 for the Diyala region, and his *Heartland of Cities*, (Chicago, 1981), 139, Figure 25, and note Adams' reference to written records, in this case the Babylonian Talmud, to help explain population change partly due to disease, 214a.

11 McNeill, *Plagues*, 199–217.

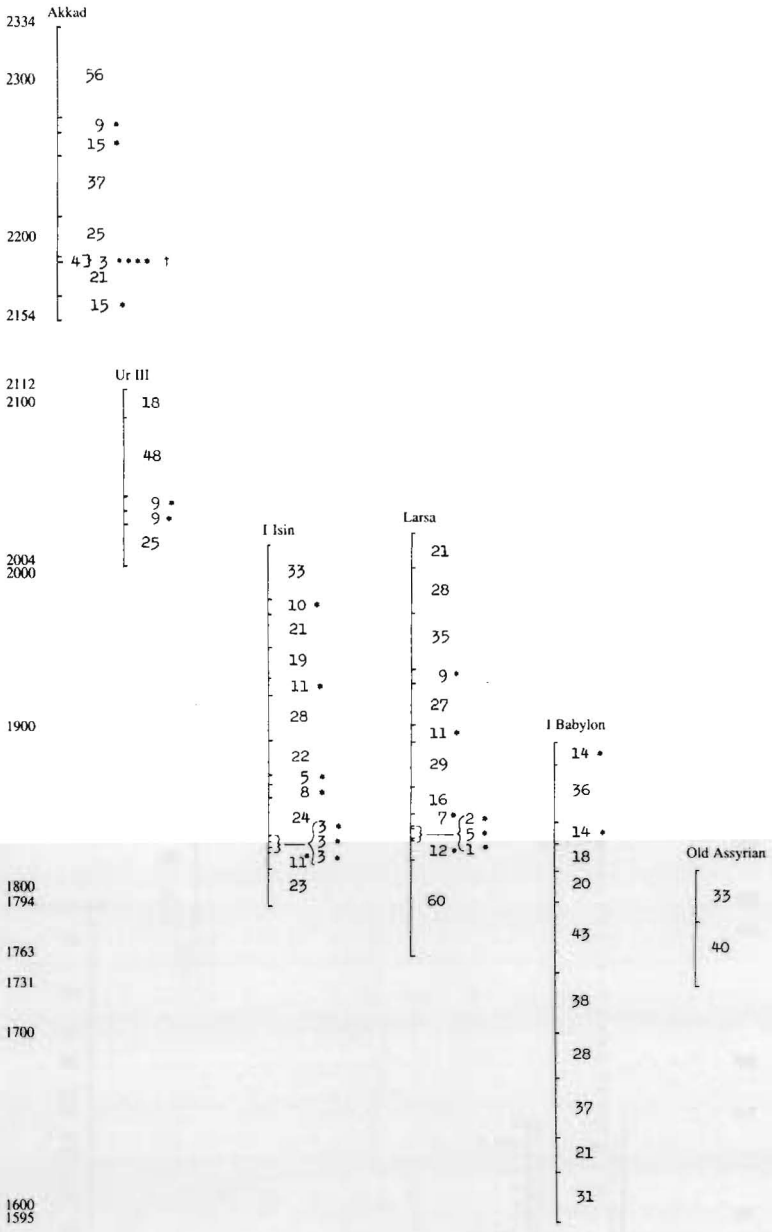
12 Again I include the Neo-Assyrian kings who appear in the Mixed dynasties of the south. I leave out the I Sealand, early Kassite, and Old Assyrian kings for whom we have lengths of reigns but not dates.

13 D. O. Edzard, *Die Zweite Zwischenzeit Babyloniens* (Wiesbaden, 1957), 157.

14 *Ibid.*, 15, translation mine.

15 *Ibid.*, 149.

16 *Ibid.*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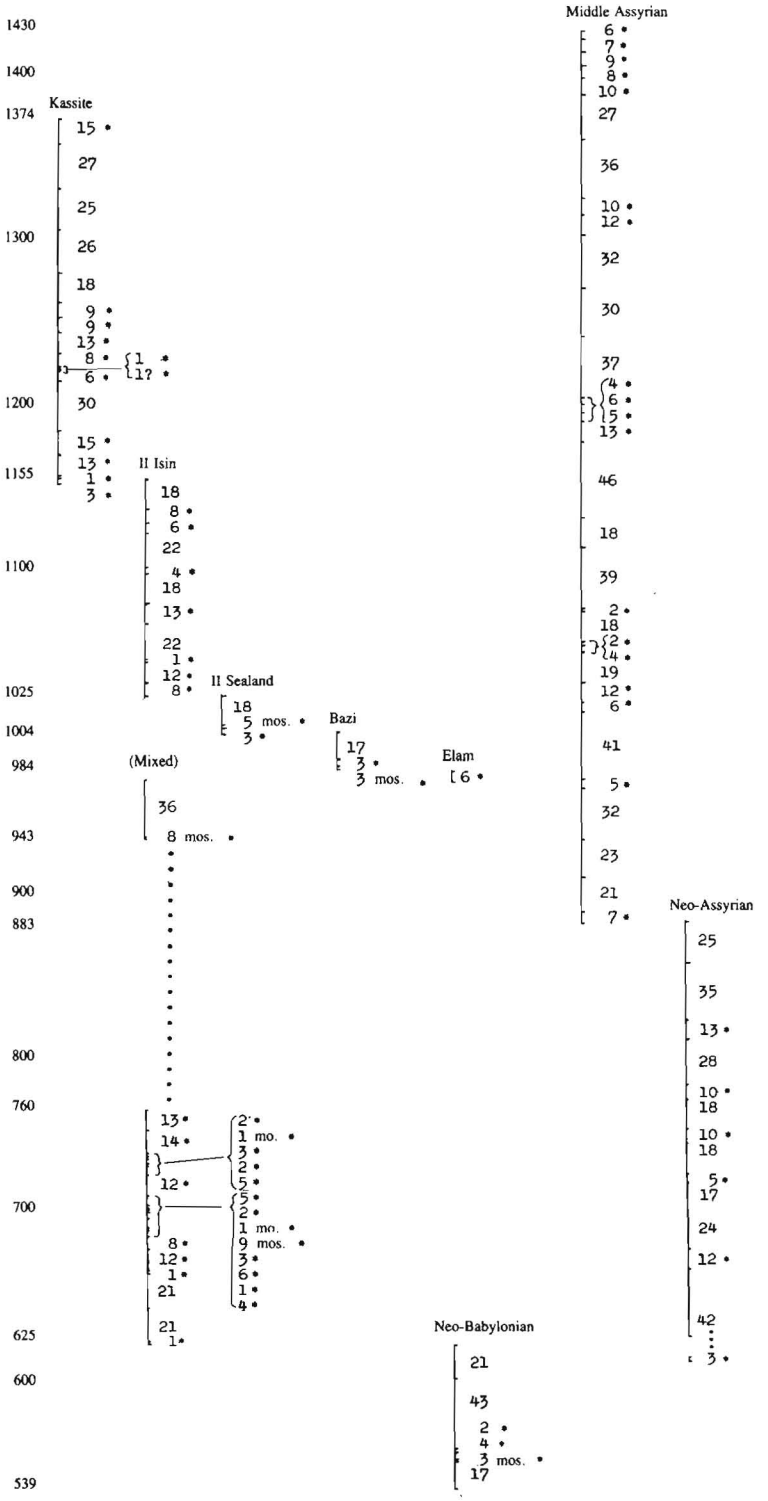
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was driven from the kingship."[17] Again he may not have died then, but he seems to have disappeared from the historical record for political rather than biological reasons. There also seems to be no evidence of biological calamity in the reign of the contemporary king of the first dynasty of Babylon who reigned slightly fewer than an average number of years.[18]

We know that the last two kings to rule Larsa were from a different family from the other Larsa kings, and the advent of that family led eventually to the fall of Isin.[19] Clearly these were tumultuous times, but there is no evidence that an element in the tumult was disease.

The second set of short-reigned kings, around 1200 B.C.E., also seems to show that politics was the main cause of downfall. We know a bit about the Kassite king Kadashman-Enlil II (1263–1255) partly because he corresponded with the contemporary king of Hittite Anatolia, Hattushili III; Kadashman-Enlil was a minor when he became king, and a regent made the important decisions for him. There is no indication that his fall was due to disease.[20]

Kashtiliash IV is another king about whom we have some information, but it indicates that he was captured in battle by Tukulti-Ninurta, king of Assyria (1243–1207), and was taken in chains to Assur. The rest of the short-reigned kings who succeeded him were in one way or another dependents of the Assyrian king, variously being installed by him, rebelling against him, and being replaced.[21] The last of these kings, Adad-shuma-iddina, may perhaps have been removed by an untimely raid by the Elamites from what is now Iran.[22]

The slightly later short-reigned Assyrian kings are also foiled by politics more than parasites. Assur-nadin-apli (1206–1203) may have murdered his father, Tukulti-Ninurta, and his own son is said to have succeeded him.[23] Another son of Tukulti-Ninurta, Enlil-kudurri-usur, who lasted five years, was defeated by a Babylonian king and killed in his stronghold.[24] The last of those Assyrian kings probably owed his throne to Babylonian support.[25] If disease played a role in these imbroglios, there is no record of it. McNeill could plausibly argue that disease may have influenced events in these periods, but scribes did not happen to notice its influence or to correlate it with dynastic problems. Mesopotamian scribes sometimes did discuss mass death, and it may be significant that they did not mention it in connection with these kings.[26]

In light of these negative findings one should note that, in one interpretation of the

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17 *Ibid.*, 150.

18 *Ibid.*, 151f.

19 *Ibid.*, 167–76.

20 J. N. Munn-Rankin, "Assyrian Military Power 1300–1200 B.C.," in I. E. S. Edwards, C. J. Gadd, N. G. L. Hammond, eds., *Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge, 1971), II/2:274–306, esp. 282f.

21 *Ibid.*, 286–90.

22 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia* (Rome, 1968), 86.

23 D. J. Wiseman, "Assyria and Babylonia, c. 1200–1000 B.C.," *Cambridge Ancient History*, II/2: 443–81, esp. 449f., and in general on the king, A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1975), 231b and 292a.

24 Wiseman, *Assyria and Babylonia*, 450.

25 *Ibid.*, 450f.

26 See n. 28 below.

texts, the first raid on Elam by Nebuchadnezzer I (1125–1104) may have failed because his troops caught the plague there.[27] That encounter with disease did not stop him from succeeding in bringing off another foray later. And of course disease did not keep him from reigning a healthy 22 years.

Thus it appears that McNeill's idea, though attractive in its explanatory potential, does not receive any particular support from Mesopotamian history.[28] As so frequently in ancient studies, it seems we can invoke the observation made by J. H. Elliot, who writes, "Historical voyeurism is a frustrating occupation when the keyhole is too small."[29] But that statement does not mean that we should stop peering; we may yet see something good.

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27 Wiseman, *Assyria and Babylonia*, 455.

28 None of this argues that there were no instances of mass death in Mesopotamia. The use of the word *mūtānu*, a plural meaning "instances of death," as F. R. Kraus has shown, demonstrates that something like epidemic disease had been observed. See Kraus, *RA* 65 (1971),97–99, and *CAD* M², 296f. The word *bibbu* in a few omens also may mean plague, according to *CAD B*, 218f.

The god Erra may have been a god of plague, but the "epic" about him presents the destruction he brings about in only very general terms, and its dating is problematic. See L. Cagni, *L'Epopea di Erra*, (Rome, 1969), especially the introduction, 32, on the kind of destruction depicted. J. J. M. Roberts, "Erra—Scorched Earth," *JCS* 24 (1971), 11–16, wishes to see famine as the primary counterpart of the god. As Cagni points out, 45, we have no data on any cult of Erra, though the so-called plague amulets may show that it was a private matter in which individuals might indulge. The amulets, discussed by E. Reiner, "Plague Amulets and House Blessings," *JNES* 19 (1960), 148–55, certainly invoke divine protection against evil, but they do not discuss disease specifically. Compare *lipit Irra* 'the touch of Erra' as plague, *CAD* L, 201f.

One could also mention here the controversial suggestion of H. L. J. Vanstiphout that the fall of the Ur III dynasty may have been due to plague; his evidence is a reinterpretation of later literary reflections on the event which is not, as may be seen from the chart above, supported by a decline in length of reigns. See his articles "Was een Pestepidemie de Oorzaak van de ondergang van het Nieuwsumerische Rijk?" *Phoenix* 20 (1974), 351–70, and "The Death of an Era: The Great Mortality in the Sumerian City Laments," *Death in Mesopotamia* (see n. 10 above), 83–89.

29 The sentence is from his review of C. J. Cipolla, *Faith, Reason, and the Plague in Seventeeth-Century Tuscany*, *New York Review of Books* 27/11 (June 26, 1980), 38f. p. 39.