

From: 'Sumer' by André Parrot, Thames and Hudson, 1960
Staircase at the Palace of Zimri-Lim; eighteenth century B.C.

A King of Early Assyria: Shamsi- Adad

The letters of Shamsi-Adad reveal his humanity, patriarchal wisdom and an easy sense of humour

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HOW OFTEN HAS IT HAPPENED that a chance discovery leads to the resurrection of an entire civilization? In recent decades, at least three major surprises have emerged from Western Asia to confront archaeologists, ancient historians, Biblical scholars and interested laymen. First in 1925 came the discoveries at Nuzi, the modern Yorghan Tepe, not far from Kirkuk in Iraq. Some twenty thousand clay tablets gave a detailed picture of life among the Hurrians—a people who, until then, had been shadowy figures mentioned in the Bible. Nuzi's contribution to understanding the Patriarchal Age, especially that of Jacob, has been immense. In 1928, a peasant's plough uncovered a great city, Ugarit, on the Mediterranean; the first alphabetic script in the

history of mankind was employed by its Canaanite citizens, before the twelfth century B.C., to immortalize great sagas of Baal, Anat, El and a host of other gods little regarded by the Prophets.

During the summer of 1933, a handful of Arabs gathered to bury a departed friend on the flattened top of Tell-Hariri, the 'silken mound'. The *tell*, which was located some seven miles north of where the present Syrian border cuts the Euphrates, produced a mutilated statue. The find was interesting enough to urge the French authorities, then in control of Syria, to dispatch to the site a young but able archaeologist, André Parrot. Work began in December of that year; a little over a month later, an abundant cache of statuettes signalled the start of discoveries that

are still in progress today. There quickly came to light a palace of some three hundred rooms that contained thousands of cuneiform documents. Also uncovered was a temple to the god Dagan, the deity who much later and farther west was to sponsor Samson's last stand. The inscribed texts conclusively proved that the ancient name of this city was Mari. In addition, they contained a very large corpus of personal and place names which until then were barely known. From previous documentation, however, Assyriologists had been familiar with two personalities. Hammurapi of Babylon (ca. 1792-1750), whose presence in Mari's archives helped to establish a secure date; and Shamsi-Adad, who will be the subject of this essay.

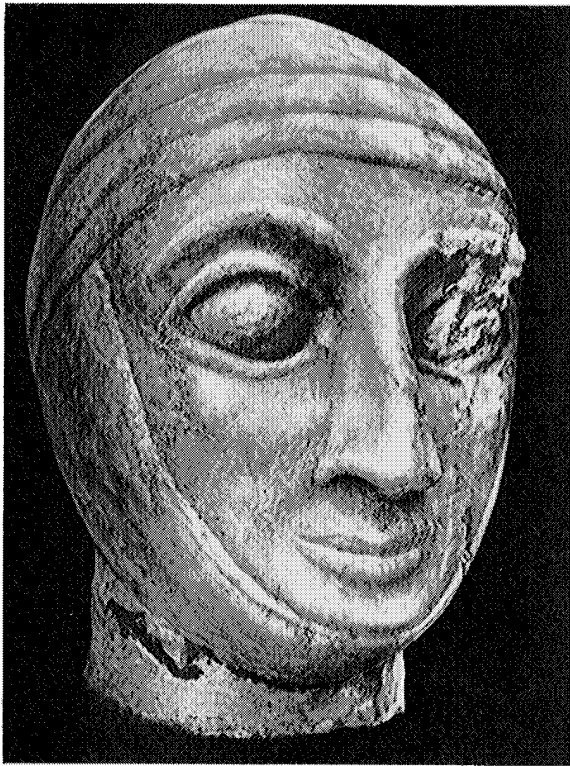
Shamsi-Adad's beginnings were rather humble. His father, Ila-Kabkabu, was the descendant of nomadic tribesmen who had successfully established themselves as kinglets in the area of the middle Euphrates. He was not a very cordial neighbour, for he constantly quarrelled with two kings of Mari, Yagid-Lim and his son Yakhdun-Lim. We possess a document, unfortunately in a poor and fragmented condition, which speaks of alliances repeatedly concluded and broken. Despite all his efforts, Ila-Kabkabu was not very successful, since during his life-time his kingdom did not increase to any appreciable degree. His eldest son Aminum succeeded him; this left the younger one, Shamsi-Adad, frustrated but eager to pursue glory elsewhere. We are not well informed about this prince's earliest attempts, but we find him making forays into the land of Babylon that lay to Mari's south-east. Some time later, Shamsi-Adad conquered the important fortress city of Ekallatum, on the Tigris River not far from the great city of Ashur; but he was not yet in a position to threaten this city, the seat of Assyrian power. Within three years, however, Shamsi-Adad successfully usurped the throne; all indications point to the fact that this coup was accomplished diplomatically, and without much bloodshed.

With the north-west open to him, Shamsi-Adad began to outflank the kingdom of Mari, creating a powerful, crescent-shaped line of attack against Yakhdun-Lim. At this point, we are again faced with the difficulties of unravelling

the thread of events. It is possible that either Yakhdun-Lim or his successor fell victim to a harem conspiracy; Shamsi-Adad in all probability being deeply involved. Be that as it may, when the curtain rises again, we discover Shamsi-Adad's youngest son, Yasmakh-Adad, securely sitting in Mari's palace. With this last bastion occupied, Shamsi-Adad became master of all the land between the two rivers, an area stretching northward from Babylon, where young Hammurapi was dreaming of conquests, to the southern flanks of the Taurus mountains in Anatolia. It may be asked, was Mari a prize worthy of so much exertion? To answer, it will be well to go back some three centuries into history.

About 2100 B.C., the last Sumerian Empire was centred around the city of Ur, some 150 miles from the Persian Gulf as the Euphrates flows north. It was a powerful kingdom with an amazingly complex system of government. The Empire's trade was dominated by the river. From the North, woods, metals, and stones were brought to supply a country singularly lacking in material resources. But the bulk of imported objects came from the tropical lands of India, Somaliland, Yemen, and Ethiopia. Although rich, the kingdom seems to have exhausted a large part of its treasures in organizing defences against Semitic-speaking nomads known as Amorites, 'Westerners', whose incursions were becoming increasingly bold. Successful at first in stemming the tide, the Sumerians gradually weakened. By 2000 B.C. their last king capitulated, falling victim to the qualities that had strengthened his ancestor: bureaucratic rigidities in the extreme.

The old and venerable cities of Sumer were largely neglected by the relatively uncouth Amorites, and decayed beyond salvage. The new masters preferred to rule in newly established capitals. With the ancient cities moribund, trade with the suppliers of spices and other exotic goods languished. The North reaped the benefits fully. Mari, well-centered on the Euphrates, was in a position to effect the exchange of products between the South, hungry for materials, and the relatively undeveloped North. In addition, its main source of income came from the imposition of high tariff rates upon river traffic. From all the archaeological evidence, Mari has proved to be



From: 'Sumer'

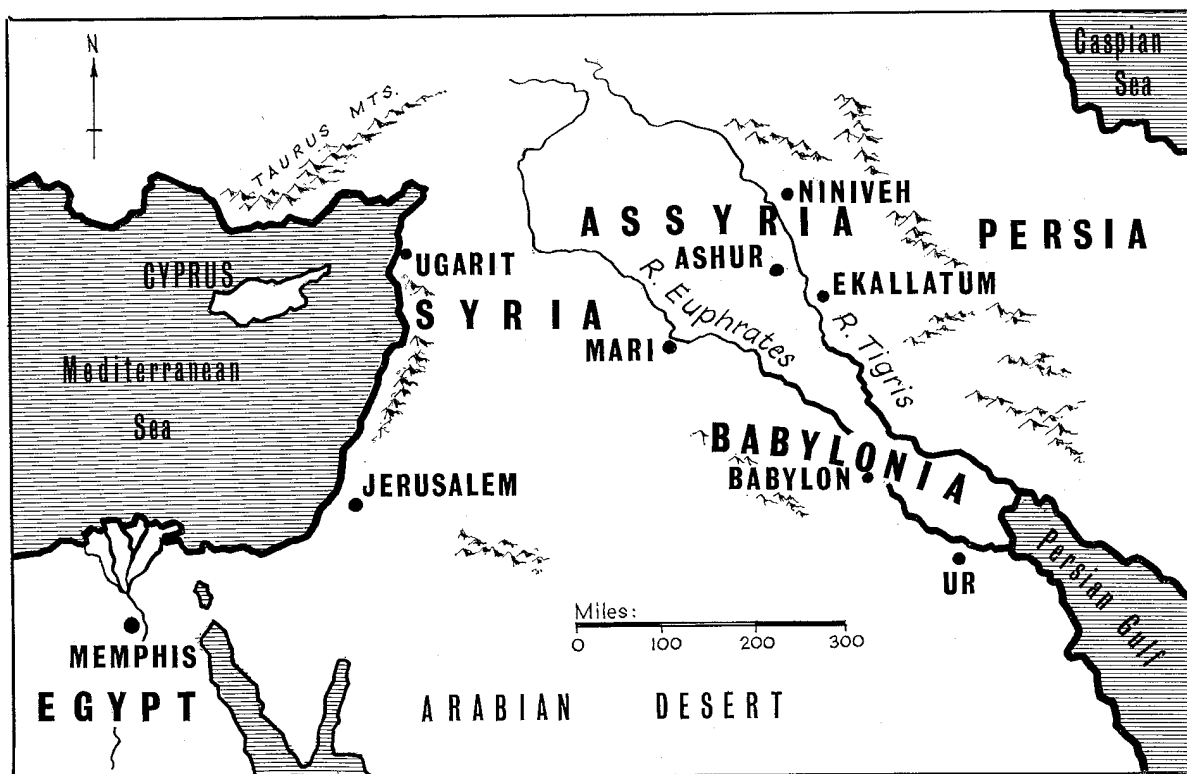
Warrior with chin-piece; from Mari; now in Aleppo Museum

among the richest cities of its age. The covetousness of Shamsi-Adad can now be understood. But it might be said that poetic justice applies to all aspects of life. Just as it had attained heights of wealth and influence because of its strategic location, Mari was to be totally destroyed, around 1757 B.C., by Hammurapi of Babylon for the same reasons.

No statue, bust, or painting of Shamsi-Adad has yet been uncovered; we are therefore ignorant of his personal appearance. But the palace of Mari, famous even to its contemporaries, was richly and gaily decorated with frescoes depicting scenes from the religious and secular life of its occupants. By combining the classical rigidity of the Sumerian artist with the naturalism that belonged to the Semitic invaders, highly satisfying compositions were produced. Let us focus upon the renderings of royal figures; for they, at least, indicate the regalia then in fashion. The face was olive-skinned with large black eyes, effectively high-lighted by application of black kohl. Thick

eyebrows were carved to meet over a rectilinear and generously fleshy nose. A full mouth, with the upper lip jutting slightly over the lower one, was entirely lost in the field of a dense, black beard. The latter often long and squarely cut, stretched from one large ear to another. Beneath a soft bonnet, a Prince-Valiant style of haircut covered most of the forehead, yet not reaching below the scruff of the neck. Of the many ceremonial costumes worn, only two need be described. One is a large shawl, probably made of linen, with fringed edges. When placed over the royal back it partly covered the right shoulder, while the folds of the other side were neatly gathered in the left arm. Beneath was worn a kilt, reaching to the mid-thigh. Another dress was more elaborately conceived; it was an ankle-long tunic, leaving the left shoulder bare. Vertically sewn strips of coloured material, arranged by bands, six inches in height, gave the outfit the appearance of being a 'cloth of many colours'.

Like most of his royal contemporaries, Shamsi-Adad could neither read nor write; but he was certainly able to dictate. This he did abundantly, keeping, as is likely, a number of scribes at disposal around the clock. The letters were written on clay tablets and generally begin with the name of the addressee, followed by the injunction to the scribe at the receiving end to 'speak' (that is, 'read'). Before the actual message is intoned, the name of the addresser, his function and position are revealed. A greeting or a pledge of allegiance can sometimes be added. A typical letter from Shamsi-Adad to his son opens as follows: 'To Yasmakh-Adad, speak!, Thus says your father Shamsi-Adad . . .'. Shamsi-Adad usually ended his statement by indicating the place, the date, and, an unusual practice, the hour of writing. From the many missives sent by Shamsi-Adad to his children, Yasmakh-Adad at Mari, and eldest Ishme-Dagan at Ekallatum, we are given an insight into the mind of a complex, energetic, gifted, ruthless, and hard-driving man. Yet we do not lack instances where can be detected a broad humanity, a patriarchal wisdom, and an easy humour. Many obscurities and difficulties are met in our texts. I have therefore taken the liberty of modifying the content. Efforts have been made, however, to retain as much of the communica-



'History Today' Map by L. P. Thomas

The Ancient Middle East, showing the site of Mari

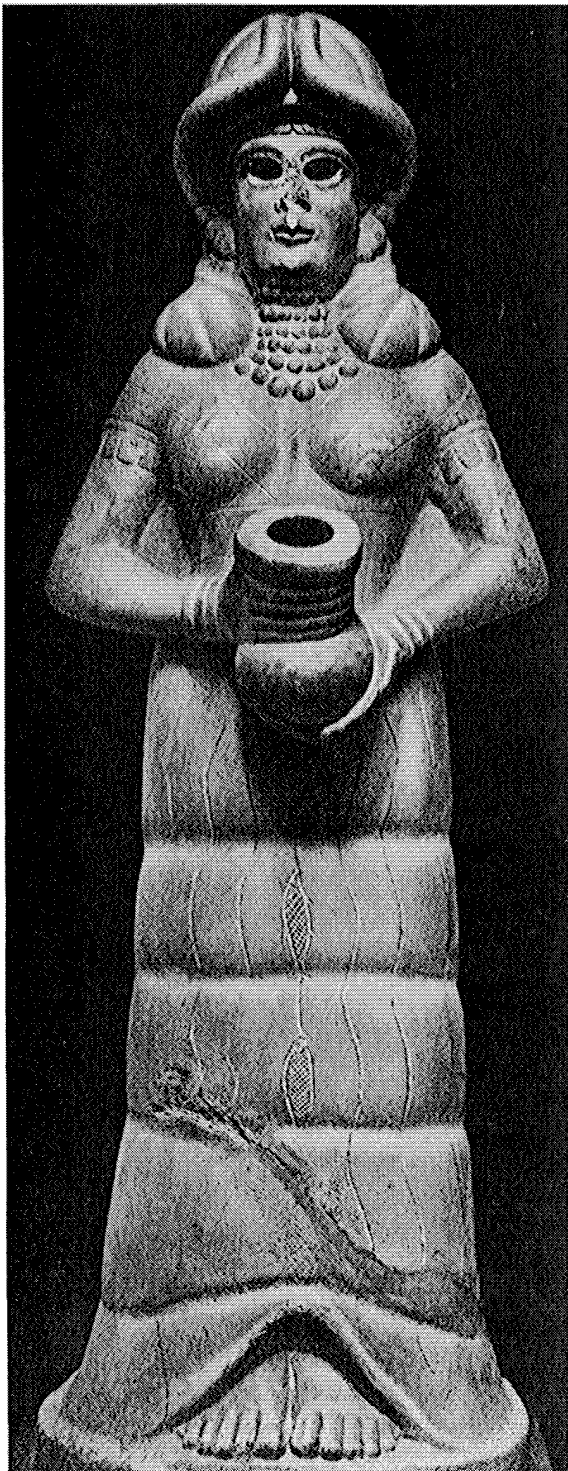
tions' 'flavour' as possible. As so many of the documents exchanged were concerned with the problems of war and peace, we begin with the following. It shows that the forces pitted against each other were quite respectable in size:

General Yarim-Addu wrote to me the following: 'I have inspected the Khaneen-nomads in their camps, and I fixed at 2,000 men those who are to go on a military campaign with Yasmakh-Adad. I have tallied all the members of the group. They are now individually registered.' This is what he wrote to me. I have thus given you 2,000 Khaneens from the camps who will march with you, plus 3,000 men sent previously. Have La'um and those servants who are before you hear this tablet and decide upon this matter. The men of your district have not been tallied for a long time and the day of tallying is long overdue. But since at this moment you cannot tally the people you must tally the people on your return. Until then, replace only the dead and the missing. All the people who go with you should be registered individually on a tablet and be clearly assigned positions. Collect 1,000 men from among one group of nomads and another 1,000 among the Khaneens.

From the Yarikhu, Urapu, and Amnanu tribes pick up here and there 200 to 300 men, according to circumstances, and in this manner, collect 500. With your bodyguards, 1,000 men will suffice. Then you will have assembled 6,000 men. As for me, I will send you 10,000 men, a strong and well equipped contingent. I have also written the city of Eshnunna. 6,000 men will come up from Eshnunna. These added to the others will make 20,000 men, a strong army.

Another letter on a related theme reveals the ire of a demanding father:

Concerning the soldiers I have commanded the following to your brother Ishme-Dagan; 'Mobilize there at Ekallatum the soldiers and write to Mari so that they will mobilize for you the soldiers there. I will mobilize the soldiers of the cities of Shubat-Enlil and Tuttul.' Ishme-Dagan has forgotten to write to you concerning the mobilization of the soldiers who are with you. Well! Your brother forgot. But concerning the soldiers who are with you, why did you not ask yourself the following: 'an expedition is taking place. Why are the soldiers with me sitting idle? I will send them!' Why did you not



From: 'Sumer'

Goddess from Mari, holding a vase of plenty; Aleppo Museum

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think of this? Now send as many soldiers as are with you, and let them bring axes and equipment along with them.

As is apparent from our next example, Shamsi-Adad did not permit any exemptions from military duty:

I have given to you copper to produce arrow-heads. Now send word to Mari as soon as you get the order, so that they will quickly bring to me arrow-heads made of the copper which I gave to you.

Another matter: From among the Khaneen-nomads which you are tallying, levy 400 good men in order to guard the gate of my palace. Of these, 200 men, that is one company, should come from respectable families; and 200 men, that is one company, should be poor men. To the poor men I shall give good positions in the palace. As for the sons of respectable families, they should be kept in their paternal homes. Discuss it with General Yarim-Addu and then assemble them either at the town of Gashshim or at Shunem, wherever drinking water is available. The soldiers from the embankment of the Euphrates should assemble in the town of Sagaratim. The campaign is set for the beginning of the month and you yourself will go with me as I had written previously to you. Be fully equipped and ready for action.

We possess a number of letters in which Shamsi-Adad writes, sometimes good-naturedly, concerning military matters. In the following three excerpts, the king of Assyria speaks, no doubt after considerable experience, of tactics, ambushes, and fifth columnists:

You (Yasmakh-Adad) think up stratagems to beat the enemy and to manoeuvre for position, but the enemy likewise try to think up stratagems and to manoeuvre for position against you, just as wrestlers use tricks against each other. This is just like the old proverb: 'In her promiscuity, a bitch gave birth to blind puppies.' As for you, don't do the same. Watch out lest the enemy tricks you while in his territory.

Concerning the raids that the nomads are making, it is certain that they are causing damage. Until the nomads accomplished their raids, they were not to be taken seriously. Consult with Tarim-Shakim and La'um. Send your decision to an intendant so that he will dispatch to you troops with which to continually raid the nomads' territory. At the harvest season, I will accept the nomads' offer of alliance. They will then go to the Euphrates. While they water their flocks at the creek, they will be subjected to a large-scale attack.

Offer a reward to the citizens of Zalmaqum. Clothe the first man who is brought to you, give him in-

structions concerning the raids and let him go within the land. All the land of Zalmaqum will say the following: 'Our lord is our only chief, he will not plunder us.' This is what they will think. They will listen. When I will march into the land, it will entirely revolt, all at once. Act in this manner.

Shamsi-Adad's peculiar way of treating allies and vassals is reflected in the following, which may have been written with a tongue in the cheek:

I have sent to you the tablet that Supri-Erakh has conveyed. Hear it! He wrote to me about the dispatching of 200 men. We will do, then, like the Turukku-tribesmen who awaken the sleepers but do not feed those who are awake. We will therefore act as follows: We will continually supply troops to the one who has no barley and does not desire troops. To the one who has barley and desires to keep troops, we will not give troops. Give him (Supri-Erakh), then, 100 men. They will stay in his district and he will provide for them. His district is large. Let these 100 men stay in his district, so that he may keep this district safe.

Hostages were kept in order to persuade a group into a friendly disposition. Shamsi-Adad's letter shows him to be merciless when his plans failed:

Concerning the members of the Ya-Ilanum-tribe who are with you (Yasmakh-Adad), I had written to you to keep them in case an alliance should be concluded some time in the future. Now, however, there will be no treaty with the Ya-Ilanum. On the contrary, I am thinking of conquering them. All the members of the Ya-Ilanum, each one of them who is with you should die on the same night. There should be neither vigil, nor lamentation, nor a wake. Let tombs be prepared, let them die and be buried. Let their head ornaments and their cloth be removed from them. Take their silver and gold.

On the other hand, we find Shamsi-Adad planning the conquest of an enemy stronghold in order to barter his victory for the lives of one of his vassal's children:

I have sent to you (Yasmakh-Adad) the tablet which I had dictated for the king of Eshnunna. As Sin-Tiri has advised you, keep this tablet until the city of Malgum is taken. Once Malgum is taken and one is well-pleased with it, dispatch this tablet either with Ili-Ite or Belshunu, and write the following: 'Your brother (i.e. ally) has handed me this tablet and said the following: "Since Malgum is taken and my brother is well-pleased, dispatch this letter to Eshnunna, for, if one treats an officer well, one receives an important gift from whoever is his lord.

And now you, since my brother is well-pleased, grant me a wish. Put forward your request for the princes who were taken in Qabra, and say the following: 'These are truly princes. In what manner are they dogs?' Give up these men and make your brother happy! Send this tablet to Eshnunna.

A short text tells us how a city was taken:

The town of Nilimmar which Ishme-Dagan was besieging, Ishme-Dagan has taken. As long as the siege-ramps did not reach the top of the town's wall, he could not conquer the town. But as soon as the siege-ramps reached the top of the town, he gained mastery over this town. With Ishme-Dagan, all is well; with the troops all is well. They have now been sent home. They have now come to the town of Khamsha. Rejoice!

The fate of an occupied city depended on the whim of the conqueror: In one case, Shamsi-Adad urges his son to 'destroy the village of Attari-Saduq. Do not spare its barley. Ruin even the smallest herb'. On the other hand, Shamsi-Adad is once quoted as saying to Yasmakh-Adad:

You had written to me that you seized the city of Tell-labnim, and that you did not kill the citizens of that city, but that you calmed and freed them. This deed of yours is very nice. It is worth many minas of gold.

Yasmakh-Adad did not always receive compliments from his father. We possess a number of documents in which the most bitter criticism was heaped upon this indolent ruler. The following particularly galled Yasmakh-Adad:

Since an enemy army had gathered at the city of Qabra, I have sent Ishme-Dagan with an army to the land of Akhazim. As for me, I will leave for this city. Ishme-Dagan has annihilated the troops of that land and the Turukku-tribesmen who had gathered there behind them. Not one man escaped. On that day he conquered the whole land of Akhazim. This is a great defeat for the land, and you can rejoice. While your brother has won a great victory here, you remain there, reclining among the women. Now then, when you will march with the army toward the city of Qatna, act as a man! Just as your brother established a great name for himself, you too make a name for yourself in your land.

In another letter the following is added:

As to you, how long will we have to guide you? Are you still young? Are you not a man? Is there no beard on your chin? How much longer will you fail to administer your own house? Do you not see your brother commanding large armies? Administer, then, your palace and house!

We are fortunate to have Yasmakh-Adad's weak reply to this charge. He begins by quoting, verbatim, the above accusation, then continues:

Am I even now young and incapable of administration? In former times, Papa was of a different opinion. For this reason, should I not be able to administer servants and house? How was it formerly when I was a child and grew up in Papa's home? But now some servants have begun to undermine my Papa's affection for me? But when I appear before Papa, I will say as follows: 'I present myself to Papa and will lay the suffering of my heart before Papa.'

A good father in the Middle-East, it is well known, would choose a bride for his son. Shamsi-Adad did not fail in this task. It would not be harmful, of course, if some political advantages were reaped in the match:

Let La'um, Sin-Idinnam, and Mashiya hear in your presence the following tablet. I have decided that you are to take the daughter of Ishkhi-Adad (king of Qatna) as your wife. The house of Mari is well-respected. The house of Qatna is also well-respected. It is unbecoming to give a small dowry. Five talents of silver will be given to Qatna.

Having made a political treaty with the father of the bride, Shamsi-Adad is understandably concerned when he hears rumours of her neglect:

Did not the former kings establish their wife in the palace? Yakhdun-Lim honoured his concubines, neglected his wife, and placed her in the desert. In the same manner, you might be planning to place the daughter of Ishkhi-Adad in the desert. Her father will hear of this and he will be deeply troubled. This is not good. In the Palace-of-Palm-Trees, there are many rooms. Let them choose a room for her and move her there but do not remove her to the desert.

It will be of interest to illustrate Shamsi-Adad's administrative abilities with the following selection:

On hiring an able civil servant: Since the death in Tuttul of Yashub-El, you have written to me concerning his replacement with Abduma-Dagan in Tuttul. It is not clear, according to your tablet, whether he is being sent. Are you definitely hiring him there, or are you looking for someone else? Abduma-Dagan, however, is the man who should be engaged. He is reliable. In addition he has slept among the oracle takers, and I would consider him for the position. He has committed no offence or act of negligence. Place him then in Tuttul and tell him the following: 'Why do you stay in Zibnatum where a homestead cannot be made and where there are rocky regions. At Tuttul, where

you can make a homestead and start a family, there is plenty of arable land. This land is like the land of Shubartum there is plenty of arable land. Settle in that place and construct a nobleman's house; start a family and protect the city and the land for your lord.' Tell him all this, soothe him, and settle him at Tuttul. Place a reliable major-domo in charge along with him. In Zibnatum choose a man from among the natives, either one of your palace servants or a reliable courtier, to replace Abduma-Dagan. Place that man in Zibnatum as replacement.

On manufacturing arrow-heads: Concerning the production of 10,000 arrow-heads, of 6 shekels each (about 50 grammes), I wrote to La'um and Mashiya. They have replied as follows: 'There is no bronze available; we will not be able to produce 10,000 arrow-heads.' Therefore, only 5,000 arrow-heads should be produced. For these 5,000 arrow-heads, 8 talents and 20 minas of bronze are required. According to the market, 2 minas of bronze are worth 1 shekel of silver. For 8 talents and 20 minas, 4 minas and 10 shekels of silver are needed. Pay out this silver, so that the bronze (can be purchased), and the 5,000 arrow-heads manufactured.

On sending singers to a neighbour: Concerning the master-singer whom Aplakhanda (king of Carchemish) has requested of you, give him one of your singers. All of your singers are equally excellent, one of these singers is no less indispensable than another. As to the female master-singer whom he has requested of you, look around and give him one who is dispensable.

On ostentation: Let La'um and Mashum hear this tablet in your presence. You had written to me: 'Grant some money for purchasing servants and throwing a party (literally . . . opening the jars).' For whom will you throw a party? Here (at Mari) you are not well established yet; there are not enough men to protect Mari, yet you would squander money on a party. The administration of Mari (however) is well organized. Allow the men to have meals regularly at your table. Do not offer them anything fancy; they should always eat plain.

On preparation for a festival: The current month is Addar. When the sixteenth day comes, the New Year festival will be performed. The envoys of the king of Eshnunna are already here. As to the ceremony, let your teams of mules and horses come here to the New Year's festival. The chariots and harnesses for the horses should be new. They will pull (the chariot) during the New Year's festival and will then be returned promptly to you. Your animals should be dispatched to this place the day you receive this letter, without even waiting for the next morning.

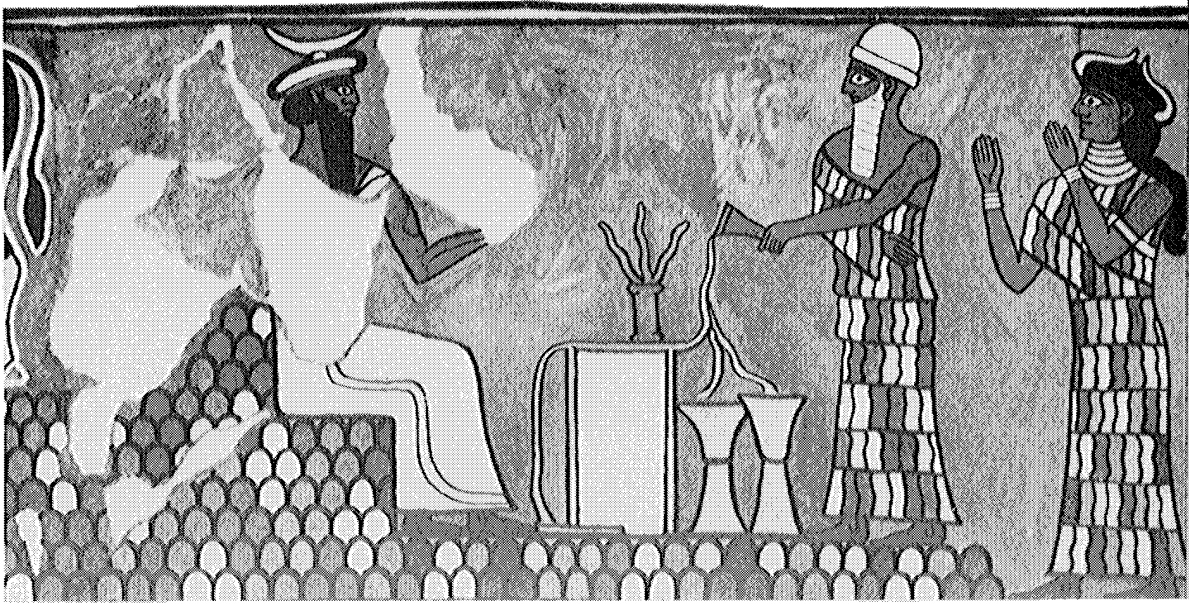


Photo: Draeger

Wall-painting at Mari, which depicts a sacrificial offering of fire and water; now in the Louvre

On artisans: Why is Ili-Dagan the housebuilder there (at Mari)? Why is he idle? The house is not even built there. Send him to Shubat-Enlil (Shamsi-Adad's capital city). He will not be transferred here permanently. His people will remain there. He will, as before, head your own team of housebuilders. Send him to Shubat-Enlil. At Shubat-Enlil, the temple of Enlil is to be built. Let him build that temple.

Sometime in 1780 B.C., Ishme-Dagan informed his brother at Mari:

I have ascended the throne in my father's house. This is why I have been extremely busy, and have not been able to send you news of my well-being. Now you are my brother; I have no other brother but you. . . . You must not be anxious. As long as you and I are alive, you shall sit on the throne. Let us swear a binding oath to each other by the life of the gods, and then, let us meet, you and I. Let us maintain brotherly relationships with each other for all time. Be happy and have no cares.

But this was not meant to be. Despite the praises of his father, Ishme-Dagan was not able to keep what had been gathered by Shamsi-Adad's tenacity, strong will, and superior military capabilities. Within four years, Mari's throne was restored to one of Yakhdun-Lim's sons, Zimri-Lim. Yasmakh-Adad's fate is unknown to us.

At the death of Shamsi-Adad, Hammurapi of Babylon had been reigning for a little over a decade. The fame of the latter had rested upon his

military prowess, his personal rule, and his code of law. New discoveries have considerably whittled down the territory granted to him by a previous generation of Assyriologists. It is now clear, for example, that his victories netted him little west of the Euphrates, an expanse controlled by the kingdom of Aleppo and its allies. At its heights, the kingdom of Shamsi-Adad had spread wider, beyond the two rivers. If he did not succeed in establishing a dynasty as securely as his Babylonian contemporary, his fame was acknowledged by four of his successors who chose Shamsi-Adad as their throne name. As an administrator, Hammurapi pales besides the Assyrian monarch whose breadth of interest, attention to detail, and organization of empire have to some extent been exemplified above. No example of Shamsi-Adad's legal formulations have so far come to light. This does not necessarily imply that a law code, such as the one Hammurapi sponsored, was not promulgated by the Assyrian. Mesopotamian rulers had been involved in the regulation of justice for at least six hundred years before Hammurapi, and it may be that Shamsi-Adad's capitals, still to be discovered, will provide us with further materials to study this fascinating personality of a long by-gone age.