



E-ISSN: 2706-9117

P-ISSN: 2706-9109

www.historyjournal.net

IJH 2023; 5(1): 36-39

Received: 11-11-2022

Accepted: 21-12-2022

Tony Yuan

Beijing SMIC Private High
School, No. 13 Wu Dian Road
Jiu Gong, Da Xing, Beijing,
China

Uncovering the propagandistic purpose: A qualitative analysis of the legend of Sargon in ancient Mesopotamia

Tony Yuan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2023.v5.i1a.189>

Abstract

The Legend of Sargon of Akkad recounts Sargon's origins, the adversities he faced, and his final rise to power as the king of Akkadian empire. It is widely acknowledged among scholars as one of the primary sources that help us understand the political and social circumstances of that period and the development of literature and storytelling. Using a qualitative analytical framework based on primary and secondary sources, this paper aims to parse the potential propagandistic purpose of the legend of Sargon. The results of my analysis indicates that some potential purposes of the story are to emphasize his exceptionalism, when compared to the ruling nobles of Sumerian city-states and to legitimize the rule of Sargon of Akkad. Because of Sargon's humble beginnings, people who have been disaffected or oppressed under the rigid social structure of Sumerian city-states may recognize Sargon as a symbol of hope and protection from abuses of the nobilities. While the true purpose of ancient documents may be arduous to determine with confirmation, it is probable that the purpose of The Legend of Sargon is propagandistic, as there are similar propagandistic ancient texts, such as Stele of Vultures.

Keywords: Propaganda, Sargon of Akkad, theological influence, legend of Sargon

1. Introduction

The Sargon Legend is a substantial piece of Mesopotamian literature since it has provided valuable insights into Mesopotamian society and culture. It "is generally considered to be a composite work, compiled from earlier traditions, and may have existed in oral form before it was committed to writing" (Black *et al.*, 2005) ^[5]; it is also likely, since there is no certainty to the actual case, to be composed by scribes and poets in the city of Akkad in the third millennium BCE. However, despite the variations between different versions, the general content remains to be consistent with each other.

According to the Sargon Legend, Sargon was born to an impoverished mother who placed him in a reed basket before sending him down the Euphrates River. Sargon, the newborn, was discovered by a Kish gardener and nurtured as his own. Sargon matures and becomes an ambitious and astute young man, acting as the cupbearer to the king of Kish, a highly regarded post serving the Sumerian monarch wines and liquids, and a trusted counselor to the king.

His natural leadership skills immediately caught the king's attention, which later elevated him to the position of General of his army; he led his troops to victories in numerous campaigns against neighboring city-states, like Ur, Uruk, and Lagash, and eventually made him a prominent figure in the city. Through extraordinary military prowess, leadership insights, and his compelling story, Sargon consequently overthrew the king of Kish, Ur-Zababa, and seized control of the city. However, his ultimate ambition was to unify the disparate civilians of Mesopotamia, including both Sumerians and Akkadian-speaking people. Therefore, the Akkadian empire was born; this is a mark or a sign of the first time in history that a single ruler successfully united various people of the region under a single banner and had a profound impact on both the military and political affairs of later empires throughout the whole world.

The Legend of Sargon, though portraying him as a great and successful leader, lacks any mention of his flaws or disadvantages. The absence of such details has led some historians to question the veracity of the story, given similar biases in other Mesopotamian recordings, such as the Stele of Vulture. The story could have served as propaganda to promote the ruler and secure the allegiance of his subjects.

Corresponding Author:

Tony Yuan

Beijing SMIC Private High
School, No. 13 Wu Dian Road
Jiu Gong, Da Xing, Beijing,
China

By emphasizing his military might and leadership abilities, the populace may have been more inclined to comply with his rule. Nevertheless, we must also consider the possibility that the story reflects the cultural values and beliefs of the time, placing a premium on strong leaders and military prowess. Overall, the story raises interesting questions about the motives behind ancient literary works, and the ways in which rulers sought to maintain their power.

2. Definition of Propaganda

To recognize whether the Legend of Sargon has an aspect considered propaganda, it is critical to define clearly what the propaganda we are talking about is. According to the Cambridge dictionary, propaganda can be defined as information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions. While there are many different definitions of propaganda, they have no significant differences in defining this word but some mere nuance. By defining the word propaganda, it grants us the possibility to identify elements of bias or manipulation that may be present in the story, which, in turn, can help to shed light on the broader social and political context in which the account was created and disseminated and provide insights into the motivations of those who produced it.

3. Humble Beginning

"My mother was a changeling, my father I knew not. The brothers of my father loved the hills. My city is Azupiranu, which is situated on the banks of the Euphrates." (Sargon Birth Legend, lines 1-4)

Sargon, unlike other rulers of ancient Sumerian city-states rulers, had a humble beginning; as the direct quote above indicates, he was abandoned and seen as the illegitimate child of a "changeling," "which could refer to a temple priestess of Ishtar (whose clergy were androgynous)" (Mark, 2023)^[7] and an unknown father. Therefore, this part of the story may serve as a contrast between his humble beginnings as an illegitimate child and the noble family and rulers currently in those city-states. Therefore, this is an excellent way for Sargon to appeal to commoners by showing that he is different from other rulers and knows what those people want in their circumstances because he rose to power from the lower-classes.

One function of this section serves as propaganda since it is gaining support and resonating with all people that have felt disaffected by the traditional order of the city-states, which they would plausibly recognize Sargon as a gleam of hope and light that defends them of the devil of noble abuse and representing their own interests. Therefore, Sargon gains support from the commoners and unites, in this condition, the people who are oppressed by the nobilities. As to supplement the information to prove the doubts about how nobles abused the commoners, it is essential to talk about the background of society at that time. The structures of city-states at that time were highly rigid, with a social hierarchy. Only a small percentage of the ruling class of elites was given most of the power and wealth; on the other hand, the commoners, which were a majority of the population, were marginalized and oppressed with no chance of political representation. Therefore, this can further demonstrate how Sargon was a unique person that has represented the commoners who had been oppressed and later serve as one reason why Sargon defeated other powerful city-states like Lagash, Ur, and Uruk.

In this logic and condition, the Sargon legend bolsters the influence and impact on commoners, which not only generates political influence for Sargon but also means Sargon's rise within the military made it possible for Sargon to influence people in various ways and set up revolutions against other city-states. By portraying himself as a leader of commoners that granted rights to general people and a leader appointed by god and destiny to rule cities, he gains a lot of support and is able, later, to defeat Lugalzagesi and UrZababa, who are already influential and skilled leaders.

4. Divine interventions

"Ur-Zababa, the king who knew the hearts of the gods, who cared for their sanctuaries, had a dream, and he summoned his seer to explain it. 'I had a dream,' he said, 'and the heavens roared, and the earth rumbled. Anu and Enlil have abandoned me, and they have chosen another to reign in my place. Tell me, what does this mean?' (Foster, 2001, p. 46) The seer replied, 'Your majesty, this dream means that the gods have chosen Sargon, the gardener, as their king instead of you. He will rule over the four corners of the earth, and his glory will shine like the stars in the heavens.' (Foster, 2001, p. 46)

Upon hearing this, Ur-Zababa was filled with fear and ordered his armies to stop Sargon. But Sargon was not afraid, and he led his troops to victory, conquering Kish and establishing his own dynasty as the king of Akkad." (Foster, 2001)

It is challenging to determine the specific or clear propagandistic purpose of the text since the reasons for writing those ancient pieces of literature can be difficult and complex to both understand and determine, mainly because they are too distant from us. However, the paragraphs above, which are from the Sargon legend in the inscriptions of Sargon himself, one of the most well-preserved and detailed, can possibly contain propagandistic purposes related to theology and the worship of gods.

From one aspect, it indirectly warns other rulers of Mesopotamia to respect the decisions of god or face the wrath of divinities. From another aspect, it can be proposed that it is an excellent way to convince civilians of different city-states that he is the chosen leader from god who will bring glory, peace, and prosperity to all city-states of Mesopotamia.

In many city-states, as Joshua J. Mark wrote in his essay "The Rise of Sargon and the Akkadian Empire," "Sargon's conquests were not universally popular, ... there were likely those who resisted his rule and resented him for taking over their cities and territories." This applies to the other Sumerian city-state rulers, the noble families that are occupied, and some civilians who are unsatisfied with this result; therefore, it is possible that the Sargon Legend is a way of positively influencing the reputation of Sargon as a ruler that god has appointed. And this would be a way to justify his rule.

4.1 Religious background

Religion is critical in Mesopotamian societies. People in Mesopotamia at that time, same as most people in other areas of the same period, all intensely relied on religion. "From calling on Kulla, the god of bricks, to help in the laying of the foundation of a house, to petitioning the goddess Lama for protection, there developed many tales concerning these deities." Therefore, for Mesopotamians, the gods are not distant beings that they cannot touch but entities that can actively meddle in businesses in the daily

lives of human beings. The literature of Mesopotamia also wrote about how gods and human beings interact with each other, i.e., in The Epic of Gilgamesh. "This belief in divine intervention influenced nearly every aspect of Mesopotamian life, from the construction of temples and the performance of rituals to political decision-making and military strategy." (Bayliss, n.d.)

4.2 Theological influences

As in the introduction of the religious background of the people of Mesopotamia, they were devoutly religious, and gods usually intervened in things and events in real life. Civilians of Mesopotamia respected and obeyed the decisions and commands that the god made in many different aspects. Sargon, in his autobiographical version, depicted his mother as a "changeling," mentioned in the section discussing his humble beginning, and in the dream of Ur-Zababa, he was the new favor of god and chosen as the leader.

Hence, in the legend, when Ur-Zababa and Lugalzagesi attempted to eliminate Sargon, they were ultimately defeated in their efforts to challenge him. This is a way of demonstrating the belief of Mesopotamians that their resistance to the fate appointed by god often resulted in defeat and that divine destinies governed their lives. Indeed, the gods could be seen as arbiters of war, which are able to control the consequences and outcome of battles and punish those who defied their will. Additionally, the legend can also be seen as a warning against the dangers of challenging leaders chosen by the god and to indirectly warn other city-states' rulers not to take aggression against them. The victories of Sargon over his powerful enemies indicated the divine favor he enjoyed and suggested that those who opposed him were at odds with the will of the gods. This can be a powerful reminder of the significance of obedience to the divine mandate in Mesopotamian society, where the consequences of defying the gods could be dire. The legend also serves as a vivid illustration of the central role played by religion in Mesopotamian life, highlighting the deeply held beliefs that governed social and political interactions, emphasizing and reinforcing the power of gods to shape human destiny and fate and the danger of defying wills of divinity.

Furthermore, for those ordinary civilians, with the humble beginning that plausibly united people through his effective speeches, they will be further convinced because Sargon is the one that has been chosen by god, which was dreamed by the wise Ur-Zababa. As in previous sections, ancient Mesopotamians were deeply religious; they respected and obeyed the decisions of god and believed that obeying those things would lead them to a glorious, prosperous path. Therefore, though many may dissatisfy with the rule of Sargon and may cause an ultimate rebellion at first, it is possible that they will turn loyal after the idea that he is chosen by god.

From another aspect, a different version of the legend's start may serve as a way of legitimizing the rule of Sargon. Though the beginning of Sargon has been aforementioned, we have not talked about the theological factors and influence in the Sargon Birth Legend. "My mother bore me in secret. 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. While I was a gardener, Ishtar granted me

her love, and for four and... years I exercised kingship." (Sargon Birth Legend, lines 5-10)

By writing so, the story can serve the purpose of legitimizing the rule of Sargon, which Van De Mieroop also claimed in 2007 having a similar idea that "The Sargon myth was carefully crafted to establish the legitimacy of the first dynasty of Akkad," making him appear not as a power-hungry individual that tries to seize power for himself, but who is destined to rule that is the god's decision. In this way, it can have both a positive influence on posthumous and reputation during life. The story reinforced that he is appointed by god for several times in order to show and demonstrate the idea that he was different from other rulers because of support from divinities.

In addition, the gods have also intervened in the adversities that Sargon overcame that depicted as a hero who triumphed. One example of this can be when Sargon was abandoned as a baby; he is saved by gods who ensure that the river does not drown him. There are similar cases throughout the story, where when he faced military opposition from other city-states, the gods also intervened and helped him to succeed.

In this instance, it is of import to take note of the reason for the repetition of Sargon's divine support. The frequency of such mention serves to distinguish him from other leaders of city-states and commoners who aspire to power. It deliberately portrays Sargon as a heroic figure endowed with divine favor and one who has achieved feats beyond the capacity of others. The repeated affirmation of his divine appointment instills a belief among the populace that Sargon is the chosen one to bring prosperity and glory to Mesopotamia. Moreover, it reflects the cultural values of the time that hold high regard for strong leaders who enjoy divine support. This emphasis on divine sanction serves a propagandistic purpose, as it lends credence to his rule and inspires obedience.

5. Sargon's military conquest

Sargon's military conquest and skilled leadership skills are major factors of his ultimate success. His military strategies and innovations were highly complemented by many historians; Joshua J. Mark claimed, "Having replaced the local militias with a professional army, Sargon then improved upon their formation and reach. He had the troops trained to fight in a tightly formed, six-man-deep phalanx with the front line protected from enemy fire (from slings and bows) by long, rectangular shields. As the phalanx marched toward the opposing army to break their front line, slingers and archers behind it would open fire on the enemy with the archers using the most significant improvement in warfare: the composite bow."

The legend of Sargon depicts him as a brilliant military strategist that has shown his military prowess through numerous victories against other major city-states, like Ur, Lagash, and Uruk. Sargon's ability to lead glorious victories and descriptions of how he has defeated those nations are further highlighted. In the myth, Sargon was able to unite everyone together and inspire loyalty and obedience from all of his soldiers with his own charisma.

Consequently, the portrayal of Sargon as a genius in military and tactics that have used his own strategies, bravery, and charisma may serve as a form of propaganda that is aimed to present Sargon as a great leader with the capability of conquering other city-states and creating a new empire. This is also a way to further illustrate that the decision of god to appoint him as the leader of the Akkadian

empire is the correct decision because of his ability to conquer other city-states and his excellent leadership of him. So, this part of the propaganda further convinced civilians by describing the warfare that he had led to believe that he was the correct leader.

Furthermore, this is a perfect way of instilling awe and respect in his subjects, as well as the fear of enemies, since the legend illustrated the defeat of those major city-state powers, like Lugalzagesi, who had expanded his influence better than previous Uruk rulers. This would make it a great convenience for Sargon to rule over the territories that he conquered.

The military campaigns of Sargon also have an economic purpose or aim. As they allowed Sargon to seize the resources and wealth of the areas that they had newly conquered, and also the tax system allowed him to expand his military power by strengthening his army and consolidating his rule. The legend of Sargon also emphasizes repeatedly of the economic benefits that Sargon gained from his military conquests, as they describe how he brought back "silver, gold, precious stones, and precious goods" (Sargon Birth Legend, lines 20-21) to his capital city of Akkad. This allowed the nation to build a new irrigational system, better walls, and all things with economic benefits, which was stated in the biography of Sargon of Akkad in Britannica, "Sargon's reign was marked by extensive building activity, including the construction of a new capital city, Akkad, which was endowed with superb irrigation works. He probably instituted the provincial administration that was to endure for more than a millennium and brought about economic expansion through efficient resource management."

The economic aspect of the Akkadian empire that is described in the legend of Sargon also helps serve as a propagandistic purpose, where it helps to portray a successful conqueror that has brought both the cities he originally had and the conquered cities prosperity and wealth to its people. This is an excellent form of propaganda since it connects with his humble beginnings, so by accomplishing all of those feats, it demonstrates that he knows what all the civilians need and better portrays himself as a leader who always considers the needs and wants of his people.

In this condition, his military conquests not only help provide a better opportunity to demonstrate his extraordinary leadership skills but also brought economic prosperity and wealth to its people with the military campaigns and conquests of other city-states. The awe and respect of their leader have been deeply rooted in its people with the experiences of Sargon and the support of divinities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have analyzed the possible propagandistic purpose of the Sargon legend from his humble beginning, God's interventions, or theological influences, and from military and economic aspects. The legend of Sargon overall portrayed a flawless man that has started by being a commoner, rose to power because of his brilliant strategies, leadership skills, and other abilities, and was also appointed as the ruler of the Akkadian empire by divinities. Therefore, the story definitely serves as means of praising Sargon as the king of Akkad. And the propagandistic purposes can therefore be seen as legitimizing Sargon's rule, instilling awe and respect in his subjects, and portraying himself as a person knowing the need of all commoners.

Since it is common to have stories in different places where

it deliberately beautifies the figure of a monarch in order to ingratiate the king and the king's family. For example, the legend of king Arthur, establishing him and the knights of the round table as a symbol of justice and chivalry, the legend of Alexander the Great, his experiences are romanticized and embellished and portrayed as a heroic and visionary figure. There are many examples of this, and the Sargon Legend, where impractical theological elements are implemented is possibly a beautified version of his life and actually serves as propaganda and ingratiate the later generation of Sargon. Therefore, it can be contended that some purpose of the Sargon Legend can be propagandistic.

7. References

1. Encyclopedia Britannica. Sargon of Akkad. Accessed March 10, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sargon-of-Akkad>.
2. Ancient History Encyclopedia. Sargon of Akkad. Accessed March 10, 2023. https://www.worldhistory.org/Sargon_of_Akkad/.
3. Mark JJ. Sargon of Akkad. Ancient History Encyclopedia; c2016 December 22. https://www.ancient.eu/Sargon_of_Akkad/
4. Bayliss A. (n.d.). Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia. Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia.
5. Black J, Robson E, Cunningham G, Zólyomi G. The Literature of ancient Sumer. Choice Reviews Online. 2005;43(01):43-0138. <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.43-0138>
6. Carver M. Editorial. Antiquity. 2008;82(316):259-264. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003598x00096770>
7. Mark JJ. The Legend of Sargon of Akkad. World History Encyclopedia; c2023 February 17. <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/746/the-legend-of-sargon-of-akkad/>
8. The Sumerian Sargon Legend on JSTOR. (n.d.). https://www.jstor.org/stable/601860?readnow=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
9. Van De Mieroop M. A history of the ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC. Blackwell Publishing; c2007.
10. The Sumerian Sargon Legend on JSTOR. (n.d.-b). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/601860>
11. Lambert WG. Sargon of Akkad and his dynasty. In J Baines & E. H. Cline (Eds.), Atlas of Ancient Empires. New York, NY: Facts on File; c1990. p. 28-29.
12. Crawford H. Sumer and the Sumerians (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
13. Glassner JJ. Mesopotamian Chronicles. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature; c2004.
14. Smith J. The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero Who Was Exposed at Birth. Journal of Near Eastern Studies. 2015;74(1):45-60. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/679862>
15. Jones R. Sargon of Akkad and His Empire. Ancient History Encyclopedia, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1224/sargon-of-akkad-and-his-empire/>
16. Propaganda; c2023. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda>