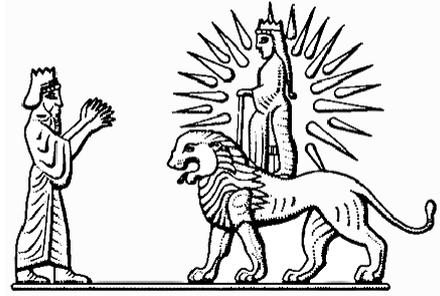


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“Ideology and Nomenclature of Power in Sumer and Ebla”

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GIOVANNI PETTINATO Roma

Ideology and Nomenclature of Power in Sumer and Ebla

The vastness and variety of the very rich epigraphic documentation found in the Royal Palace G of Ebla, from 16,000 to 20,000 documents, might make us assume that we, scholars, are in the most favourable condition to go back to both political and social conceptions of the Eblaites and that we shouldn't find it difficult at all to rebuild both Ebla's life and the relations with its surrounding world.

Unfortunately, the reality is different. The ancient peoples preceding the Greeks, among whom there were Mesopotamians and Egyptians, did not hand down to us political treatises, therefore we are entrusted with a difficult task, that is to carefully read their historical and economic documentation, and draw out of it that information which allows us to trace out a reliable outline of their institutions.

As far as Egyptians, Sumerians and Akkadians are concerned, we have to acknowledge that our undertaking is not so desperate, also because their mythological and epic texts and the historical inscriptions of their sovereigns allow us to get an approximate idea of their religious and political conceptions. As an example, this way, now we know for a certainty that Egyptians and Sumerians had created a state structure based on a monarchy reflecting the divine system: as the reign of the gods was ruled by the main god of the crowded Pantheon in an absolutistic way, at the same way the hu-

man world was ruled by a sovereign who, in addition, was invested by the divine world, so that his sovereignty was, so to say, sacred. Furthermore, in Egypt, the Pharaoh was the incarnation of the god himself, while in Mesopotamia the sovereign was the earthly vicar of the god and could exercise his sovereignty with the gods' consent, of which he could be deprived in any moment. Both peoples considered sovereignty as a gift of the gods to the human beings, who otherwise wouldn't be able to get organized and ruled.

As we will see further on, the Sumerians had a large range of terms to express the State's highest authority and the sovereigns themselves use them in their commemorative inscriptions in an interesting way, so that we can not only reconstruct the power map, but also understand the difficult political balance between the various cities-states of that epoch. It's true that, especially for the most ancient periods, there are many unanswered questions due to the very little epigraphic information, but we cannot doubt at all on the fact that, already in the 3rd millennium, the political structure in force was based on the sacral monarchy with the differentiations above mentioned.

Now, as far as Ebla of the 3rd millennium is concerned, the surprises started right away in 1974: reading the recovered economic texts, I noticed, among the words comprehensible at that time,

the fateful *en-eb-la*^{ki} “lord of Ebla” which, if on one side it confirmed our proposal of identification of Tell Mardikh with Ebla, just because of the ancient Syrian city mentioned in economic texts, on the other side it rather perplexed me: having a profound knowledge of the Mesopotamian civilization, I expected, in fact, that the head of the city, or better of the reign of Ebla, was designated by the term *lugal*, just as it was used in the coeval Mesopotamia.

But the repeated mention of *en-eb-la*^{ki} made me also understand that the expression had not to be referred to a priest-en, but to the Eblaite state’s highest position who dealt as an equal with the sovereign of Assur, as we will shortly see, discussing this wonderful document. At the same time, it became evident that, if it was possible to compare Ebla’s royal title with a corresponding one in Mesopotamia, then we even had to go back to the civilization of Uruk, the sovereigns of which are called, at least in the epic compositions, *en-kul-ab*^{ki} “lord of Kulab.”

I spoke about these matters twice, exactly in 1979 and 1986, that is in *Ebla 1* and *Ebla 2*, and both times, although I met with a very remarkable success of audience, my arguments and conclusions were not favourably accepted, at least according to the two reviews of my books by A. Archi and W. Heimpel, who were perhaps too much worried to outline the defects.

In the Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian Mesopotamia, there are various terms meaning the State’s highest authority, such as *lugal*, *ensi* or *en*, where *lugal* has to be surely considered a designation of *princeps*. The various titles I just mentioned are unlikely to appear contemporarily and, even when this occurs, it isn’t always easy to perceive the

differences of meaning, as it is also difficult to establish the apparition chronological order of each term. Now, it’s a general opinion that, in any case, the title designating the highest political authority is *lugal* which originally means “great man” or, more exactly, “leader of men,” while *ensi*, which found favour especially at Lagash during the first and second dynasties, assumed in a short time the connotation of “governor of province” of the reign. Then, in the Sumerian literature, the term *en* has a double meaning, the first one of a political nature and the second one of a religious nature: in fact, it designates the political leader of Uruk, but also a particular type of priest or priestess in the various Cities-States.

We already mentioned the presence of the expression *en-eb-la*^{ki} in Ebla’s texts, and we outlined that it had to indicate, unless there were mistakes, the State’s highest position. But here we have another surprise of our documentation: together with the term *en*, we often find evidence of the term *lugal*, and, what’s more, in the same document. But the latter cannot mean the State’s highest position, as it is contemporarily attributed to more than one person, on a average of 14. Now, unless we want to consider Ebla a political confederation, that is a sort of United States of America, we have to conclude that *lugal* designates a different authority from the head of the state. And, in fact, as we will see further on, the *lugals* in Ebla are the “governors of the reign,” who are submitted in some way to the supreme authority who surprisingly bear the title of *en-eb-la*^{ki}, “lord of Ebla.” Of course we cannot say that in Ebla we find a reversed situation compared with Mesopotamia, but only a different situation as this occurs only for the title of *lugal* which here doesn’t indi-

cate the supreme authority.

In Ebla, the head of the State is defined “*en*” just like in the Sumerian Mesopotamia, in Uruk, where the sovereigns are called, especially in the epic poems, *en-kul-ab*^{ki}, “lord of Kullab.” In some of my previous works, I have already outlined the extraordinary importance of this connection between Ebla and Uruk, which gives us ground to hypothesize a close relation between the two Sumerian and Syrian cities also at an institutional level. This fact, the use of the same word to designate the highest authority, together with the finding of Uruk’s protohistoric seals in the excavation of Ebla, convinces us more and more that Ebla was founded by the Sumerians or, at least, that it was in very close relations with Uruk since the protohistoric periods, from where it probably imported not only the state model, but also the writing and the academic manuals for the study of the Sumerian language and of the technical and administrative terminology.

The fact that with the title of *en-eb-la*^{ki}, “lord of Ebla,” our documents characterize the supreme authority of the Eblaite State is confirmed by the state official texts such as the “international treaties,” the diplomatic correspondence, the orders to the officers, always signed by the “sovereign of Ebla.” And, here, another peculiarity of this new civilization intervenes: unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, where the sovereigns in their inscriptions compete with each other to accumulate a flood of epithets and where an almost exaggerated personality cult is observed, in Ebla the function of *en* almost eclipses the person who exercises it; the official documents always and only mention the “sovereign of Ebla,” very rarely accompanied by the name of the sovereign. We have the

feeling that in the State of Ebla the figure of the personalized sovereign was not important, the important thing was only the authority expressed by the title: this makes the institution of the rule or sovereignty in Ebla something of absolutely abstract and at the same time full of political meaning; if the document is signed by So-and-so, king of Ebla, this has undoubtedly a great importance, but it has a greater importance if it’s simply signed by the “sovereign of Ebla,” because in such a case Ebla itself undertakes to abide by any agreement through the figure of its highest representative.

I would like to go deeper into the meaning and value of “*en*” in Ebla; we have to inquire if there are such indications in the Eblaite documentation. Now, this purely Sumerian title is never translated in the administrative texts, even if its institutional and political implication is clear. The Bilingual Dictionaries translating the Sumerian lexicon into the Eblaite language, on the other hand, instead of helping us, place us in front of unexpected difficulties. First of all, we have to start by saying that the term “king” sounds like *šarrum* in the Mesopotamian area, which we have denominated Eastern-Semitic, while in the Western-Semitic, corresponding to the Syro-Palestinian zone, it’s expressed with *malik*.

Hereupon it is obvious to conclude that *en*, used in Ebla, corresponds to the Western-Semitic *malik*. A support to such deduction could be found in the administrative texts of Ebla, where, as a consequence, the sovereign’s wife is called with the Western-Semitic name *maliktum*, “queen,” which is the feminine form of *malik(um)*. A further confirmation could be given by the bilingual dictionaries themselves, where *nam-en* “sovereignty, royalty” is appropriately ex-

pressed with *malikum* “royalty, sovereignty” (the term is an infinitive form of the verbal root *mlk* which means “to reign”). Availing myself of this datum, I had assumed that the Semitic equivalent of the Sumerian title *en* was precisely *malik(um)*, which had been accepted by all; and what’s more, once the colleague Archi wrote that the Semitic correspondence of *en* is attested in the administrative texts under the form of *ma-lik*; this should cancel out any doubt.

But this is not how things are: I had stumbled into a simple error and Archi had not understood that the *ma-lik*, he had found, could not correspond to *en*, but to *lugal* “governor,” as fully confirmed by the documents when published. After all, the Bilingual Dictionaries which, besides *nam-en*, also register *en*, offer an Eblaite translation completely different from the one we assumed and precisely *sha shahinum*, which I would propose to translate into “he who is in charge,” an expression which means everything and nothing. According to my opinion, until now nobody had taken into consideration this Semitic meaning of the Sumerian *en*, even if, and I am firmly convinced of it, this can help us to understand the nature itself of the royalty of Ebla in 2500 B.C.

The epigraphist A. Archi seems convinced that Ebla’s royalty is dynastic and, what’s more, hereditary, then Ish’ar-Damu would be son of Irkab-Damu, even if not by his first marriage, and Irkab-Damu would be son of Igrish-Halam. Then the Eblaite do not reveal anything new on the royal institution, as they follow the purest Mesopotamian tradition, even if meanwhile, as we will see hereinafter, the studies went on in this field too.

But the fact that Ebla’s sovereignty has to be intended in a totally different

way from that observed in Mesopotamia and Egypt can be already understood from some peculiarities, noticed in the documentation of Ebla, which are worthwhile to be globally discussed here: among the five kings documented in Ebla, the first four of them are surely not related to each other; they do not have any relation of father and son, but they even seem to belong to different families. Based on this, my first conclusion already drawn in my book *Ebla 1*: that is, Ebla’s sovereignty was not dynastic, at least for most of the period covered by the archives. Only Ebrium and Ibbi-Sipish are respectively father and son, therefore we can speak of dynastic principle only in this case. The events occurring under Ebrium correspond, according to my opinion, to a radical change of the institutions and it is certainly not by chance that under Ibbi-Sipish also the year datation system, I denominated numerical, has changed: it was finally transformed from regressive into progressive.

And let’s go back to the datation system of Ebla which, unlike all other state societies of the antiquity, is regressive instead of progressive. This implies that it is not related to the period of reign of a determined sovereign, or that Ebla’s sovereignty is a function limited to a certain period of time. The hypothesis, I have already advanced in *Ebla 1*, that the sovereignty was elective and limited to a fixed period of seven years, is based on incontrovertible arguments: first, that Ebla’s sovereigns are not related to each other; second, that some of the sovereigns are still alive when their successors enter upon office (this is documented for Arennum and Ebrium); third, that the regressive datation system starts, as a rule, from the 7th year and ends up with the 1st year, respectively from the 8th year

to the 1st year, and this led P. Mander to hypothesize that the septennate's cycle was connected to the astronomic cycle of Venus, of which we would even have traces in the inscription of Ibbit-Lim, in the famous sentence "in the eighth year, since Eshtar appeared in Ebla."

If, on top of this, we add that almost all sovereigns of Ebla, before reaching the high position of *en*, are *lugal* of the state and that they, even after having become sovereigns, are so much submitted to the Treasury that they are the first ones to pay huge amounts to it, then we finally understand that Ebla's sovereign was a *primus inter pares* (=first among equals) and that the authority was in the hands of Ebla's *lugals*, to whom actually all administrative processes were subject and who controlled the sources of the country's wealth.

But how did they choose the one who had to become sovereign in the list of *lugals*? In the conclusion to my work on the *Ritual for the Succession to the Throne of Ebla*, I take sides on this subject too, after having specified that Ebla's royalty was firmly in the queen's hands, with a specific question:

An evidence that the nomination of the new sovereign was elective, which was already assumed in 1979, can be seen in two economic texts recently published in MEE 10. In the first one, we read about a present of fabrics just from Ebrium to Iti-Agu, his commissioner, with the following reason: "for the good news communicated to him (=to Ebrium) concerning (the election) as sovereign"; the second passage speaks about presents to GIBIL.ZA-il, the Treasury's superintendent of the sovereign, "for having communicated the decision (concerning the election) as sovereign of Ebrium."

Now, putting these two statements together with those deduced from MEE 7,

34, i) and from the *Ritual* themselves, from which we learn that Ebrium became sovereign by marrying the queen and after having delivered the ritual wedding presents – in the Middle-East societies, it's a rule that the wedding presents have to be given to the newly-wed bride by the newly-wed bridegroom, and this applies both to the divine world and to the human world –, we can not only reasonably suppose that the nomination as sovereign was elective, but also that it was officialized, or more, realized through the wedding with the queen. But if this applies to Ebrium, we have to admit the same thing for Arennum, as, in the Ritual Formulas C, he plays the same role that Ebrium plays in B.

In a recent contribution, facing the age-old theme of the landed property in Mesopotamia at the time of the Sumerians, I've been able to deny, I think once and for all, the thesis that in each phase of the Sumerian civilization, with the exception of the 3rd dynasty of Ur, the rural lands were owned by the temples, wherefore the expression city-temple coined by A. Falkenstein. Recently, this thesis was still defended by P. Steinkeller, who sets up the temple economy of Lower Mesopotamia against the state or palace economy of the Semitic or Semitophone area.

Now, we do not understand our American colleague at all: it's a matter of fact that the centralized economy is a peculiarity of the Sumerian civilization, in contrast with the Semitic one which prefers the private economy. Should it be possible to speak of a difference, then recent studies make it evident that Sumer's centralized economy was not in the hands of the priestly class, but in those of the sovereign since the beginning, wherefore the expressions *gána-en* and *gána-ni-en-na* to designate the State

property, also in those states with a political system which differed from that of Uruk, where the institution of the *en* was used.

Then, having found in Ebla the same royal institution of Uruk, I wondered at what extent was it possible to propose comparisons between these two cultures, facing the problem as follows:

“By synthesizing, we can say, with no fear of being given the lie, that in Ebla there was a leader above the *lugals*, who was first of all a co-ordinator of the foreign politics, who was qualified as an *en*. Since the Eblaites couldn't have made all up, it's natural for me to think that the same meaning found out in Ebla has to be attributed to the terms *en* and *lugal* in the Sumerian texts.”

I agree with my colleagues that in the royal inscriptions, included those coming from Uruk, the sovereigns describe themselves simply as *lugals* or in some cases they declare they exercise the *nam-en* of Uruk. Therefore it would seem that the problem does not exist, while actually all discussions on this subject start from a precise reality which has not been taken into consideration by any of the scholars: that is, the scattered presence of *en* in the economic texts which are usually considered of a minor importance, just as it wouldn't be worth-while to take them into consideration. On the contrary, I am convinced that an exact evaluation of the term *en* cannot prescind from its use in the economic-administrative texts”: we have to mention the expressions *nì-en-na* in Lagash's economic texts, and then the circumstance that living personages, as S.M. Chiodi could recently demonstrate, traditionally considered dead forefathers of the royal family, are called *en-en*, which is unconceivable in a culture where the term *en* wouldn't be used. On the other hand, I am not inclined to can-

cel the evidence only because it's in contrast with the models we have created. Then, the fact that these models are applied to a whole millennium is something that even an unprepared person cannot avoid to refuse.

This makes it necessary to go back to the problem of the definition of the two terms *en* and *lugal* in Mesopotamia, which, according to my opinion, has to be approached all over again, also because the Sumerian literature is not lacking in indications for an exact evaluation.

In one of his inscriptions, the king Enshakushanna of Uruk defines himself *en-ki-en-gi lugal-kalam-ma*, “lord of Kiengi, king of the country.” Now, I do not believe that Kiengi and Kalam are two synonyms, but rather the expressions of two different geographic realities: Kiengi stands for the whole Lower Mesopotamia and Kalam for the territorial State of Uruk only.

Should this be true, they have a geopolitical value, and the two terms *en* and *lugal* acquire a precise meaning: in other words, the title of *en* is higher than *lugal*. Then, compared to the inscription of Lugaliginedudu, here we make a further step forward in a larger delimitation of the political spheres expressed by the terms *en* and *lugal*: while *nam-en* was the characterizing element of Uruk's authority only, here it acquires a larger meaning as it identifies a larger authority, above the whole Sumer. Furthermore, I am convinced that, in order to correctly interpret the *nì-en-na* of Lagash's texts, we have to relate it right with the meaning of *en* in the inscription of Enshakushanna.

The model of Uruk's royalty, called *nam-en*, hasn't been certainly productive in Mesopotamia, but it has found its heirs in the suburban areas, in Northern Syria,

in Ghezira and in the countries of Oman, exactly those countries that had been reached by the great commercial expansion of the protohistoric Uruk, while in Sumer the prevailing model was that of Kish expressed by the *lugal*, which did not certainly involve the concept of supranational State.

But the model of Uruk, just because of its peculiarity involving a concept of supranational State, and because of its other as exacting characteristic of the close relation of the State concept with the figure of *en*, made it possible that the title of *en* was used by all the reigns, when the person of the sovereign had to be differentiated by the idea of State. Wherefore its almost constant and always coherent use to designate the State property which didn't belong to the king, but to all citizens.

Then, the institution of the "city-temple" disappears, and the other one of the city-State, certainly more interesting, takes over, but with the connotation of supranational-State; and this modification occurs in a period preceding the coming of Sargon of Akkad.

Almost contemporarily with my work *I Sumeri* (The Sumerians), where for the first time I faced the problem of the royal titles in the Sumerian texts, an interesting article of W. Heimpel was published, where for the first time a clear difference between *en* and *lugal* was explicitly established, in which *en* involved an elective royalty while *lugal* involved a dynastic hereditary royalty.

I have previously confirmed that the data at my disposal make more than plausible the hypothesis that the title of *en* in Ebla was not hereditary. Should such hypothesis be valid now, we have a further contact point between the Eblaite royalty and that of Uruk, where the *en*, as demonstrated by W. Heimpel, wasn't

certainly dynastic.

In Uruk, the sovereign obtained the title by marrying the goddess Inanna, represented by her priestess who, as we know, was chosen through divination, more precisely, the extispice, that is the exam of the animal's liver, usually a sheep. In the history of the 3rd dynasty of Ur, all priestesses of the reign, but especially of Ur and Uruk, were chosen through this kind of divination, after all already attested in the previous periods, as during the 1st dynasty of Lagash.

For Ebla, I didn't have any hold. Actually there was an evidence and it had been published by A. Archi in 1988, without understanding it, because quoting the passage, obviously without translation, he added that it was "a passage not easy from the syntactic point of view" (ARES I, p. 247):

(1 + 1 fabrics) *ti-ti-nu* mashkim *eb-ri-um*
ni-dmul ama-gal-en
*mash-sha*₆ *lu dingir-a-mu da-bur-da-mu*
ma-lik-tum eb-la^{ki}

"(1 + 1 fabrics) for Tidinu, the commissioner of Ebrium, as an offer to the divinity of the high sovereign's mother, for the favourable extispice of the god of Tabur-Damu's fathers (in order to become) queen of Ebla."

At this point, it becomes evident that the queen of Ebla, just as it happened in Uruk with the priestess of Inanna, was chosen through a favourable extispice guided by the divinity of the clan which Taburdamu belonged to. The imaginative reconstruction above proposed by A. Archi on the presumed not mature age of the future queen of Ebla, who cannot be other than the bride of the very powerful Ebrium, is a comment to itself.

Meanwhile, we recover a very important part for the knowledge of the destiny of the Eblaite royalty: in Ebla the royalty was not dynastic, just like in Uruk; in

Ebla, the future queen, bearer of royalty, was chosen through extispice, just like in Uruk the sovereign obtained the title by marrying Inanna, or better one of her priestesses chosen through extispice.

The only difference we can notice is

that, while in Uruk it was Inanna who drove the extispice, here, in a familiar society, it's the god of the family's fathers who superintends the act determining the destiny of the family and, at the end, the destiny of the reign of Ebla.

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