Ancient Cultures and Civilizations

Rulers and kings of ancient Mediterranean cultures were not democratically elected like many leaders are in today's world, and had for the most part ultimate authority. Because these rulers had so much authority, most of these kings justified their power as either being hereditary, given to them by the gods, or both in order to justify their great power and authority.

Not all kings and leaders ruled the same. Some civilizations were ruled with an iron fist and brutality, while others were ruled with justice and fairness (relative to the this time period). The latter happens to be the case with the Babylonians. Some of the first code of laws in recorded history came from Urukagina who stated, (bailkey 1992) “I have established freedom” (pg 31). Later, the Babylonians would focus on a new type of law called misharum meaning equity, justice, or righteousness.

One of the most fondly remember Babylonian kings was Hammurabi. He justified his reign by claiming the gods had chosen him to rule. According to Hammurabi (Bailkey 1992), “...when they made it famous among the quarters of the world and in its midst established an everlasting kingdom...at that time, Anu and Enlil named me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, the worshiper of the gods, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil......to enlighten the land and to further the welfare of the people...” Here Hammurabi is saying that the two gods Anu and Enili had chosen him to rule the land and bring justice to the
people. This was a common way that kings justified their position thought this time period but when comparing Hammurabi to the Assyrians there is a stark difference in how these two cultures ruled. Hammurabi seems to be remembered much more fondly than the Assyrian regime. First, he was an economic reformer, issuing misharum (remission of debts) several times throughout his rule. He also was an established and enforcer of laws with an emphasis on establishing justice. This is exalted by Hammurabi’s statement, (1992) “…under my protection they prospered; I governed them in peace; in my wisdom I shelter them. In order that the strong might not oppress the weak… and to give justice to the oppressed…. and in the presence of my image as king of justice I established it”. (pg 38)

The first few decades of Hammurabi’s rule were quite peaceful. He tended to focus on public works like expanding temples and building defensive walls. Hammurabi also instituted the Code of Hammurabi. Although punishments were very harsh, (to serve as a preventive measure due to the lack of a police force) this was the first code of laws that included the ideas of the presumption of innocence. It also includes the ideas that both the accused and the accuser can present evidence, a much more fair system than what the Assyrians had to offer. He is also quoted saying, (Bailkey 1992) “…let any oppressed man… come before my image as king of justice… may he set his heart at ease” (pg 38). This shows how he wanted to be remembered as “a leader who is like a real father to his people”. Because of these reforms and his pursuit of justice, Hammurabi seems to be remembered as a model ruler even after his death. Many kings would claim ancestry to him because of this.

Much like Hammurabi’s claim that the gods chose him to rule, Sargon (an Assyrian king) claims to be a lover of a goddess. He uses this as a way to cement his position as king stating:
(Mathisen 1997) “When I was a gardener the goddess Ishtar loved me, and for four years I ruled the kingdom” (pg 48). However, this is where the similarities between these two cultures and their leaders diverge. During the rise of the Assyrians, they were not particularly concerned with the commoners from other conquered lands besides trying to suppress them. The regime was based on a warrior aristocracy, who owned a majority of the land. They would take over other cities, extorting resources from the people that lived there. Since most commoners were either artisans or peasants, much of their production was funneled back to the main Assyrian cities. These two classes of citizens had a poor quality of life with very little rights or freedoms. If a state were to rebell. To demoralize the cities the Assyrians would take the captors of a cities they conquered, many times deporting them as they did to the Israelites under Sargon II. Deportation was used to destroy the local identity of the captured people. Through these conquests the Assyrian regime had made many enemies and created a large resentment towards them. Even their religion was militaristic. It seems that the empire was setup to function in a constant war state.

The Assyrian empire was much more concerned with war rather than with justice as Hammurabi was. Even the Assyrian government was not set up with a concern for winning the hearts and minds of the commoners and peasants. Instead it served Assyrian political and economic needs, namely that of the nobel. These policies however contributed to the downfall of the empire. Because the profits of the empire went mainly to the king and his court, the commoners and the army often went unrewarded causing commoners to revault as they did during the reign of Shamshi-Adad V, who was later assassinated due to the unjust powers he granted to the nobel court. This is in stark contrast to the way in which Hammurabi ruled, who
was focused on justice and reform. The Assyrians would lead conquests for both land gain and to plunder loot looking at the conquests as a “mission from god”. The people in these captured towns were treated horribly and were ruthlessly oppressed by use of harsh punishments, expulsion, enslavement, and execution. When comparing Hammurabi’s rule to that of the Assyrians, Hammurabi was much more concerned with justice and righteousness while Assyrians were warmongers who set in place a system benefiting the nobel rather than seeking reform and justice for all citizens.
Citations

Bailkey, Nels M. *Readings in Ancient History: Thought and Experience from Gilgamesh to St. Augustine*. D.C. Heath, 1996.
