Private and State in the Ancient Near East

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What Is Intellectual Opposition?

The Greek Prototype

Diogenes of Sinope (ca. 412–323 B.C.) can be seen as the prototype of an intellectual opposing the state. Diogenes was a nobody; he had to leave his hometown – Sinope – for unclear reasons and was stranded in Athens, where he got to know Antisthenes, who was himself a pupil of Socrates. Diogenes tried to challenge the established customs and values because he thought they were just habits and that they were not based on reason or given by the gods. To see if the customs and values were useful, Diogenes broke the rules and tried to find other ways of life. Thus he invented experimental philosophy, abandoned all established values and, like the punks and tramps of our days, he lived on the street and bothered other people with his extraordinary behaviour.¹

The state Diogenes allegedly opposed was Macedon, ruled by Alexander the Great. As Alexander conquered Athens he wanted to meet the famous Diogenes, which was maybe not a very good idea. Diogenes did not show any respect for Alexander. He criticized him in a harsh way and showed him that there is nothing that Diogenes could learn from Alexander but that there is a lot for Alexander to learn from Diogenes. A famous anecdote tells us that Alexander offered Diogenes to grant him any wish. Diogenes replied: “Stand out of my sunlight.”² Michel Foucault discussed this meeting between the philosopher and the king as an example of the philosophical use of parrhesia, free speech. For philosophers like Diogenes the truth is more important than a personal advantage. Even in cases when their own life is in danger they prefer using dangerous parrhesia to sweet-talking when addressing a mighty king.³

Even if all these stories around Alexander and Diogenes are invented they express a certain picture of an ideal philosopher. According to this picture the only

² Plutarch, Vit. Alex. 14.
concern of a philosopher should be the truth, and he should not fear anybody because he is a wise and truly free man. In what is known as the axial-age such free intellectuals were seen as motivators of great changes, the intellectual revolutions that occurred in that period.\textsuperscript{4} Mesopotamia is seen as a region where no axial-age breakthrough took place in literature. It seems that there were no free intellectuals to give the impulse to any fundamental change.

Mesopotamian scholars, despite their occasional lamentation about being neglected, were remunerated by the palace or the temple (which was to a large extent controlled by the crown) and enjoyed a fairly high status thanks to their association with these institutions. But they had to pay a price for these privileges. They were obliged to make sure that their intellectual activities met their patrons' requirements. To engage in truly independent forms of investigation was not an option for them. The close association between scholars and kings thus prevented the emergence, in ancient Mesopotamia, of more radical lines of study and of more critical forms of scholarship that could have triggered or accelerated political and cultural change.\textsuperscript{5}

I do not want to go into detail about theories of the axial-age but I will discuss some documents that might reveal a measure of intellectual opposition in ancient Mesopotamia.

Sources for Intellectual Opposition

The discovery of Mesopotamian literature was strongly affected by the discovery of the royal archives in Nineveh, the so-called Assurbanipal Library. It seems quite clear that the kings who owned this library, which contained up to 25,000 cuneiform tablets, were not interested in collecting and handing down to future kings literature that criticized themselves. Another major problem of identifying oppositional literature is the possibility of it having been written on perishable material. Cuneiform texts written on clay tablets or stone inscriptions can endure for thousands of years – quite unlike Aramaic texts that were written on parchment or paper. For my investigation this is quite a loss because it is clear that Aramaic was the mother-tongue of most of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia in the second half of the first millennium. Therefore we can suppose that anybody who wanted to address the common people used Aramaic texts,\textsuperscript{6} nearly all of which are lost.\textsuperscript{7} Another problem with oppositional literature is whether they were transmitted orally or also in writing. To record an anti-royal text on clay or parchment may have been quite dangerous. So it seems that many oppositional texts were only transmitted orally, like the so-called \textit{Flüsterwitze} in the German “Third Reich.”

Despite all the restrictions mentioned here, we still have some texts that seem to be inspired by an intellectual opposition. Due to the nearly complete absence of author's names in the cuneiform sources I can only refer to the find spots of the manuscripts of the texts discussed here to elucidate the origins of these texts.

\textsuperscript{4} The theory of the axial-age was developed by Karl Jaspers (1956). Recent discussions of this theory can be found in Eisenstadt (ed.) 1986 and Árnason et al. (eds.) 2005.
\textsuperscript{5} Frahm 2011: 525–26.
\textsuperscript{6} That political agitation existed in Mesopotamia is proved by the mention of political agitators in Assyrian letters. The letters report that these political agents spoke before the assembly and ridiculed officials, which implies a possibility of speaking freely before the assembly. See Barjamovic 2004: 63.
\textsuperscript{7} The surviving texts are mostly written on pottery. For an edition of all known texts from the 7th and 6th century, see Hug 1993; see also Radner 2011.
Challenging Established Customs and Values

The Instructions of Shupe-ameli

This text is known form sources from Ugarit, Emar, and Hattusa. The find spot of the Ugarit tablet RS 22.439 is the house of a scholar; the Emar text was found in a temple; the Hattusa-fragments were found in a layer of debris. The extant text can be dated to the 14th-13th century, but seems to have been originally composed in Old Babylonian times, even if no sources from Mesopotamia have survived.

At first sight the text resembles a piece of traditional Mesopotamian wisdom literature, like the Instructions of Shuruppag, where a father gives counsels for agriculture, business, and choosing wives and slaves – all quite mundane topics – to his son. But instead of quietly listening to the advice of his father, the son starts to argue with him:

The son opened his mouth and spoke, he said to his father, his lord: “The words of my father, my lord, I have heard, but now let me say something. [...] My father, you have built a house, you made the gate high, you made it 60 cubits wide, but what will you keep of all this? The attics of your house are filled and the granary is full with grain, but on the day of your death nine pieces of bread will be counted for you. A thousand head of small cattle do belong to your property but only one goat and a garment are your share. Sparse are the days we eat food, a great many are those [we are dead and thirsty]. Sparse are the days we see the sun, a great many are those we stay in the shadow (of the underworld).”

Here we can see that the son is not very confident with the simple, mundane wisdom of his father. He tries to convince him that there are more important things in life than accumulating riches. Thereby he questions the established customs and values of his father by a radical way of seeing all the deeds of his father in the light of his inevitable death. But it is not quite clear what kind of counsel the son gives to his father. Hurowitz points to the possibility that this text is a deathbed-debate between father and son and that the son tells his dying father that his life was a failure. One does not have to go that far, but it is quite clear that the son criticizes his father. What is not clear at all is the conclusion that can be drawn from the son’s remarks. At least to our current knowledge there was no religion of salvation in the second millennium B.C., so there was no point in using the vanity-theme to convince someone to abstain from earthly pleasures in order to be rewarded after his death. Instead of this the son seems to be convinced that life after death is miserable. Maybe the son just wants to tell his father that he should relax a little and enjoy life.

The Babylonian Theodicy

The Babylonian Theodicy is one of the highlights of Akkadian literature. The main topics of this dialogue are the question of suffering, which was usually explained by the causal relationship of sin and sanction, and the question of a just world order. But this text shows that the explanation of suffering through sin was

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10. For an edition and discussion of the various versions of this text, see Alster 2005: 31–220.
not accepted anymore and that at least some ancient Mesopotamians dared to question the justice of the gods.

Wilfred Lambert listed manuscripts from Assur, Babylon, and Nineveh. The oldest manuscript was found in the library of Assurbanipal. It is unclear when this text was first written down, but it is mostly dated to between 1000 and 800 B.C. The two characters of the dialogue are the sufferer and his conservative friend, who tries to calm the sufferer and to guide him back to the belief in the justice of the gods. During the dialogue the anger of the sufferer grows and he becomes so desperate that he proposes a transvaluation of all values, as Friedrich Nietzsche did some 3,000 years after him:

I will abandon my home. [. . . ] I will desire no property. [. . . ] I will ignore my god’s regulations and trample on his rites. I will slaughter a calf and . . . food, I will take the road and go to distant parts. I will bore a well and let loose a flood, like a robber I will roam over the vast open country. I will go from house to house and ward off hunger; famished I will walk around and patrol the streets. (lines 133–41).

So the sufferer is thinking about abandoning all the social standards and leading the life of an outlaw. When again his friend tries to calm him it finally leads to another outburst of rage, in which the sufferer explicitly questions the justice of the gods:

Pay attention my friend, understand my ideas. Heed the choice expression of my words. People extol the word of a strong man who is trained in murder, but bring down the powerless who has done no wrong. They confirm the wicked whose crime is [. . . ,] yet suppress the honest man who heeds the will of his god. They fill the [store house] of the oppressor with gold, but empty the larder of the beggar of its provisions. They support the powerful, whose . . . is guilt, but destroy the weak and drive away the powerless. And as for me, the penurious, a nouveau riche is persecuting me. (lines 265–75)

The Dialogue of Pessimism

As Lambert stated “this composition is unique in cuneiform, and it is a very effective piece.” It describes the dialogue between a master and his slave and it is dated to around 700 B.C. The manuscripts were found in Assur, Babylon, and in the royal library at Nineveh. The Sitz im Leben of this text is unclear, the interpretations vary between humoristic and philosophical approaches to the text and Lambert states that “the writer of this piece may well have been of abnormal personality, a genius given to fits of morbid depression.” But despite Lambert’s interpretation, the text presents a rejection of nearly everything most people consider to be valuable in life: founding a family, enjoying life, gaining a reputation, success in business, doing something good for the community, and so on.

In our anti-metaphysical world one of the last resorts of metaphysics is love. Maybe this is quite the same as in that period of Assyrian history which, according

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15. Ibid., 87.
16. Ibid., 143.
to Manfried Dietrich, brought forth several pieces of Krisenliteratur. But for the slave not even love is something desirable:

“Slave, listen to me.” “Here I am, sir, here I am.” “I am going to love a woman.” “So love, sir, love. The man who loves a woman forgets sorrow and fear.” “No, slave, I will by no means love a woman.” “[Do not] love sir, do not love. Woman is a pitfall – a pitfall, a hole, a ditch. Woman is a sharp iron dagger that cuts a man’s throat.” (lines 46–52)

While we can regard these as private matters, the next paragraph belongs to the sphere of the state. The slave’s master is thinking about using his wealth for the community:

“Slave, listen to me.” “Here I am, sir, here I am.” “I will perform a public benefit for my country.” “So perform, sir, perform. The man who performs a public benefit for his country, his deeds are placed in the ring of Marduk.” “No, slave, I will by no means perform a public benefit for my country.” “Do not perform, sir, do not perform. Go up on the ancient ruin heaps and walk about; see the skulls of high and low. Which is the malefactor, and which is the benefactor?” (lines 70–78)

At the end of the dialogue, the master thinks about killing the slave and himself, because it seems to him that there is no good argument against a suicide out of boredom.

**Intermediate Results**

The short discussion of these three texts has shown that there was plenty of arguing against the rules of behaviour and the traditional values established by society. But now let us turn to the question of public and state. At first sight the texts presented above seem to touch the sphere of the state, only occasionally, but on deeper reflection even these texts would have been important for the state. They demonstrate that there were doubts about the justice of the gods and the king. This implies that people were searching for something else or at least seemed not to be confident with the way things were organized by the state. They did not believe in an overall justice anymore. If this conclusion is true why do the texts not argue more explicitly against the state? I have already mentioned the restrictions in the transmission of such texts, but even so some texts from the Ancient Near East that argue against the state, which was symbolized by the king, have survived.

**Making Fun of the King**

It still seems to be an unquestioned belief of many modern scholars that the institution of kingship was so sacred to the Mesopotamians that they did not dare to argue against it. But a closer look at the sources reveals something else.

**The Poor Man of Nippur**

This unique text was found in a “school” in Sultantepe. After its discovery one further fragment from the royal library at Nineveh and one from Nippur could be

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19. Ibid., 149.
identified as belonging to this composition. As I do not want to discuss the whole storyline of this interesting piece here, it should suffice to highlight some points. Trouble starts when a poor man offers a goat to the mayor of Nippur. The mayor takes the goat and throws the poor man out of his house. Enraged by this injustice the poor man decides that he himself will obtain justice by taking vengeance. He has the name Gimil-Ninurta, with the ambiguous meaning “vengeance/benefit of Ninurta.” When he visits the king he does not ask for justice but instead he plays on the apparently well-known weaknesses of the king for his private plans:

Gimil-Ninurta came before the king. He prostrated and did homage before him. “O noble one, prince of the people, king whom a guardian spirit makes glorious, let them give me, at your command one chariot, that for one day, I can do whatever I wish. For my one day my payment shall be a mina of red gold.” The king did not ask him, “What is your desire, that you [will parade about] all day in one chariot?” (lines 72–80)

As stated by Jerold Cooper, the text demonstrates that the king’s major interest is gold, not justice and thereby it can be understood as a harsh critique of kingship or at least of a certain kind of king. The king does not appear as an ideal, untouchable, almost holy figure in this text at all. The poor man seems to be informed about the king’s greed for gold and he uses this weakness of the king to take revenge on the mayor, whom he beats up three times. After having reestablished justice a happy Gimil-Ninurta leaves his hometown in order to escape the mayor’s revenge.

“Historiographical” Literature

In Mesopotamian literature we can find many texts criticizing ancient kings. It is a well-known fact that, especially under censorship, authors formulate their critique of the actual state of affairs by using examples from the past, from remote and exotic people, or by inventing a future world which mirrors and enlarges actual problems. It seems quite reasonable that this genre was used for an implicit critique on the actual king.

One of the oldest examples with a clear political intention – if we assume this text to be written by someone promoting the cult of Enlil in Nippur – is the Curse of Agade. This text, which may be a prototype for the city laments, describes the destruction of Agade as a result of Naram-Sîn’s destruction of the Ekur temple in Nippur after he was angered by not obtaining the oracular permission to rebuild that temple. So it is clear that the text criticizes and warns any king who does not obey to the messages of the gods, conveyed through oracles as interpreted by diviners.

Another example (to those discussed here many more could be added) is the Cuthean Legend. Seven enemy kings attack the land and again it is Naram-Sîn who asks the oracle for advice and fails to obey the divine will:

I summoned the diviners and instructed (them). I designated seven lambs, one lamb for each of the seven. I set up pure reed altars. I queried the great gods: Ištar, Ilaba,
Zababa, Annunītum, Šullat, Haniš, and Šamaš, the hero. The “latch-hook” of the great gods did not give me permission for my going and my demonical onrush. Thus I said to my heart (i.e., to myself), these were my words: “What lion (ever) performed extispicy? What wolf (ever) consulted a dream-interpreter? I will go like a brigand according to my own inclination. And I will cast aside that (oracle) of the god(s); I will be in control of myself.” (lines 72–83)²⁵

As expected such royal arrogance leads directly to disaster. All of the troops Naram-Sîn sends out against the savage enemy hordes are killed; none return. Once again the scribes try to show to a king who are the real masters. The king has to obey the gods and the oracles or he will lead the land and himself into ruin.

Letters, Proverbs and Other Literature

Another example of an ancient scholar trying to influence his king, this time by means of an old, reliable text, is a letter edited by Erica Reiner. The scholar quotes a passage of the Babylonian Fürstenspiegel, and tells the king that this text is reliable, and thereby tries to convince him that the city of Nippur is as privileged as Babylon. Erica Reiner comes to the following conclusion:

It has not so far been observed that scribes – to use Oppenheim’s term, the intellectuals of Mesopotamian society – used these texts not only for pedagogical purposes, and copied them not solely to enlarge their own tablet collections, but would also draw on them to influence contemporary events, just as the scholars who cited the compendia of divinatory texts in their reports to the king attempted to influence the king.²⁶

Gebhard Selz pointed to the Sumerian Proverbs as a source for critique of the ruler, or at least of the ruler’s entourage in the palace. But unfortunately proverbs are quite general and so it is not possible to put them into an historical context.²⁷ The proverbs mentioned by Selz are:

There are numerous ignoramuses in the palace.²⁸
A palace is bound to succumb by itself.²⁹
A palace is an ox, let its tail be caught! Let your eye be directed toward Utu, the lord.³⁰
A palace is a slippery place which catches those who know it.³¹
The swift one escaped, the strong one fled, he who had a “mouth.” went into the palace.³²

Another composition that makes fun of the king is a text so sexually explicit in its formulations that Wolfram von Soden did not publish it until 1991, although he had prepared his edition in manuscript of it as early as 1952.³³ To satisfy the curiosity of the reader I will quote Hurowitz’s translation at length:

²⁵. Ibid., 317.
²⁸. Alster 1997: 178 (9 Sec. A 9). Alster’s translation is very polite. The Sumerian reads: nu.zu é.gal.la ba.šár which could also be translated as “The palace is full of dullness / idiots / know-nothings.”
²⁹. Ibid., 194 (11.54).
³⁰. Ibid., 219 (14.21).
³¹. Ibid., 147 (6.4).
³². Ibid., 241 (18.8). For other references to the palace in the proverbs, see the register, ibid.: 510.
Jo[y . . .] is a foundation of the city! [. . .] One comes [up to her (and says) Jo]y . . . !
Come, obey m[e xxx J]oy . . . ! and then another comes up to her (and says) Joy . . . !
“Come, let me caress your vulva.” Joy . . . ! (She replies) “After I obey (the two of )
you Joy . . . ! gather around me the young men of your city Joy . . . ! and let’s go to
the shadow of the wall.” Joy . . . ! Seven (times) facing her chest and seven (times)
facing her haunches Joy . . . ! sixty and another sixty (young men) satisfy themselves
again and again in her vagina. Joy . . . ! The young men are exhausted but Ištar is
not exhausted Joy . . . ! (so she says) “Put it to the pretty vulva, young men!” Joy . . . !
When the young girls speak Joy . . . ! the young men listened and obeyed her word.
Joy . . . !

One can argue about the nature of this text but as Wilfrid Watson has shown, this
text at least contains a side blow to the custom of a sevenfold prostration before
the king and is to be understood as a satire. Other texts criticizing kingship by
ridiculing well-known text-formats are the Letter of Gilgameš and the text LKA 62
that contains a parody of the reports of Assyrian military campaigns. Frahm even
quotes a letter (4R 32, 2) from the royal library that states that an Assyrian king
made a fool of himself.

Final Results

Despite the problems with the transmission of texts regarding opposition and
critique against established views and values and especially against the king him-
self, a significant number of texts exemplifying this kind of critique can be found in
the Ancient Near East. Interestingly, many of these texts were found in the Royal
Libraries in Nineveh. What does this mean for our investigation of intellectual op-
position between private and state? It seems to me that documentation for private
opposition can be mainly found in the proverb collections and in the Instructions of
Shupe-ameli. So is it possible that the other texts discussed here, which were found
in the royal libraries, represent a state-organized intellectual opposition against
fundamental aspects of the state itself?

This may seem rather strange, but if we think of the institution of the court
jester or the pairing of Alexander with Diogenes we can maybe see the rationale for
having such literature available at the royal library. A king, who basically wants
and has to be a good king, needs criticism. His power may lead him to an overesti-
mation of himself, as happened to Naram-Sin, and he may start to commit errors

34. Ibid., 546.
36. For a discussion of the Letter of Gilgameš and references to further literature, see George 2003:
119. LKA 62 has been edited and discussed by Edzard (2004).
38. This was already noted by Frahm 2004: 161. He states: “Halten wir den assyrischen Königen
der Sargonidenzeit aber immerhin zugute, daß sie – außerhalb der offiziellen Selbstdarstellung in den
Königsinschriften – auch für die emanzipatorische Spielart des Humors offenbar nicht ganz unempfän-
glich waren: Immerhin fanden sich auf Kuyunjik in den Trümmern der königlichen Bibliothek Assur-
banipals Bruchstücke des ‘Armen Manns von Nippur’, des ‘aluzinnu-Textes’, des ‘Dialoges des Pessimis-
mus’, einer Parodie auf das Formular der Wirtschaftsurkunden, der sogenannten ‘Love Lyrics’, deren
burlesker Charakter wohl kaum zu bezweifeln ist, sowie eine Reihe komischer Fabeln und Sprichworte.”
39. Unfortunately we have not much evidence for a court jester in Mesopotamia; the best candidate
which may in turn lead to him losing his legitimacy.\textsuperscript{40} A little criticism may prevent
the king from errors, and so intellectual opposition may fulfil a clearly defined function
within the state. To what extent the king accepted such criticism and how it
was formulated to be understood by the king without offending him was a matter
that had to be carefully considered by the well-educated intellectual.

\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{Cuthean Legend} offers an instructive example for this. After the loss of his troops Naram-
Sin asks in a spirit of self-criticism: “What has god brought upon my reign? I am a king who has not
protected his land and a shepherd who has not safeguarded his people” (10–12); Westenholz 1987: 273.
For a discussion of this passage, see Selz 2004: 173–74.

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