

## CONQUEST AND VENGEANCE

Etienne Rutkowski

History 100: History of the Ancient World

February 14, 2020

The empires of Mesopotamia evolved over thousands of years. During the Bronze Age collapse, beginning circa 1200 B.C.E., the center of power became the Assyrian Empire with its capital of Assur. The policies of the Assyrian Empire, which are outlined in its code of laws, would serve to both reflect the societal shifts during the collapse of the Bronze Age, and inform the worldview of empires that would arise after the Assyrian Empire's collapse. These policies were in part based on the Assyrian law code, which was known as The Code of the Assura (c. 1075 B.C.E.). This paper will examine how this code both reflected the society out of which it arose, and informed subsequent societies. The Code of the Assura focused on empire building by using political power and military might to control populations. It both reflected and informed a paradigmatic cultural shift by focusing less on 'top down' military structures, and more on the personal powers that could be obtained by individual citizens, through a strict adherence to the underlying moral reasoning embedded in the code.

The collapse of the Bronze Age reflected a turning point in human evolution, and the Code of the Assura reflects the social structures that were formed out of this transition. Importantly, "[the code] reflects admirably the social conditions existing in the country for which it was drawn up",<sup>1</sup> specifically its treatment of women. The code states that "whatsoever [a woman] brings with her---all is her husband's".<sup>2</sup> It also states that "[i]f a man meddle with the field of his neighbor, they shall convict him".<sup>3</sup> In many cases, "[w]ife[s] and daughters in the Assyrian Code are regarded entirely [...] as [...] the possessions of a man, over whom he has full authority".<sup>4</sup> These shifting worldviews were reflective of the social container in which they were

---

<sup>1</sup> Morris Jastrow, "An Assyrian Law Code." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 41 (1921), 2.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Arkenberg, ed., "The Code of the Assura, c. 1075 BCE." Internet History Sourcebooks

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Arkenberg, ed.

<sup>4</sup> Jastrow, 8

formed and, consistent with so many other points in history, they were determining factors in what would succeed them.

The nature of The Code of Assura informed both the changing ethics of the Assyrian Empire and the development of the empires that would come after it was overthrown. The increasingly vengeful tone of the Assyrian codes directly influenced the violent, war-obsessed, conquering Persian Empire, as “law and order appear to have been somewhat open to interpretation by those involved”.<sup>5</sup> In the code, “a man may strike his wife, pull her hair, [and] her ear he may bruise or pierce”,<sup>6</sup> and men could give any punishment to a disloyal wife, while the equivalent disloyal man would receive no punishment.<sup>7</sup> These exemplify the idea that the Assyrian Code was in part developed “due to the survival of the primitive (though natural) spirit of vengeance for an injury or wrong”;<sup>8</sup> This was a notable transition away from the comparatively compassionate Babylonian Empire; and therefore, the Assyrian Code was a turning point in the ethics of developing societies.

The greatest significance of the Code of the Assura lies in the way the code informed subsequent societies. The Assyrian Code of Laws “appears to have been fully as extensive as the Code of Hammurabi, if not more so”,<sup>9</sup> and as such it should be analyzed as an important historical document. The fact that a man could choose whether or not to give a wife anything in a divorce;<sup>10</sup> the division of inheritance was based on avenging blood; and the choice to spare life and seize land<sup>11</sup> (instead of a more bureaucratic focus on family relations as in Hammurabi’s code), are telling descriptions of the nature of Assyrian social structures. The code’s historical

---

<sup>5</sup> J.J. De Ridder, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137, no. 2 (2017), 422

<sup>6</sup> J.S. Arkenberg, ed.

<sup>7</sup> J.S. Arkenberg, ed.

<sup>8</sup> Jastrow, 6

<sup>9</sup> Jastrow, 2

<sup>10</sup> J.S. Arkenberg, ed.

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Arkenberg, ed.

importance lies in the fact that so much of what came after it would inform the ways in which Assyrian society was organized.

Any point in history is part of a continuous linear story, and The Code of the Assura is a glimpse into a specific time along that historical continuum. Ancient empires included a wide variety of cultures, leaders, and influential spheres. The Assyrian Code in particular marks a society transitioning between the Bronze and Iron Ages. The code reflects the societal transition at the end of the Bronze Age, and focused on conquest, vengeance, and power. It is clear that this code reflects human interactions that were becoming increasingly tethered to, and measured against, the ambitious empire building.

## Bibliography

Arkenberg, J.S., ed. "The Code of the Assura, c. 1075 BCE." Internet History Sourcebooks. Internet Ancient History Sourcebook. Accessed February 14, 2020. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/1075assyriancode.asp>.

De Ridder, J.J. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 137, no. 2 (2017): 422-24. Accessed February 14, 2020. doi:10.7817/jameroriesoci.137.2.0422.

Jastrow, Morris. "An Assyrian Law Code." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 41 (1921): 1-59. Accessed February 14, 2020. doi:10.2307/593702.