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Introduction

This book undertakes a study of ancient political life through the lens of one body of evidence: the cuneiform texts from Mari. By this approach, I am accepting the need to straddle two distinct demands that proceed from two different audiences. My focus on the archives, which are far from fully published, and which remain the subject of continuing reevaluation by specialists in the field, invites serious investigation of evidence the interpretation of which is by no means settled. This attention to Mari for its own sake requires that I present evidence and arguments with sufficient technical detail to demonstrate the basis for my ideas to cuneiform specialists. My interest in the larger issues raised by this Mari material, however, has involved me in literature far beyond my own specialization, and I mean to make the book as accessible as possible to the scholars and students whose fields I have trespassed.

The introductory material that follows is designed especially for those who know little about Mesopotamia or Mari and who may not be familiar with the conventions of Assyriological study of cuneiform texts. I begin by introducing the Mari archives and offering a historical overview of ancient Mari before addressing the specific issue of collective political forms. I close with observations about my methodological choices, particularly as they result in a text-oriented study.

A. THE MARI TEXTS

Excavations at ancient Mari (Tell Hariri) began in 1933–4 under the leadership of André Parrot, with a French team. A huge palace was discovered in 1935, and large numbers of cuneiform tablets rapidly began to appear (Margueron 1997, 143). By the onset of World War II, the majority of known Mari archives had already been found, though Parrot took up work again after the war and continued until 1974. In recent years, excavations have been led by Jean-Claude Margueron, and the site is still not considered closed.

Tells such as that of ancient Mari are regularly called "cities," but this term demands careful qualification, inspired partly by what we know and partly by what we do not. The site of Tell Hariri is enclosed by a mound in the form of an arc that represents about one third of a circle, roughly three to four kilometers from the modern channel of the Euphrates, within the flood plain of the river.[1] Almost all of the cuneiform tablets found at Mari come from the reigns of the kings who ruled there during the last half-century of its existence, conventionally dated to the early eighteenth century B.C.E. Much of what has been discovered within the existing site for that period served royal and ritual purposes: the main administrative palace and a subsidiary palace dominated by the royal harem, various temples, and large residences occupied by key Mari officials.[2] Even after centuries of use, portions of the tell appear never to have been built up, and no proper residential quarters have yet come to light.[3] Future excavations always yield new finds that embarrass those who argue from silence, but at this point, it seems that the "city" of Mari cannot be assumed to have housed a large population within its walls, beyond the significant number who depended directly on the king.

1. The Texts and Their Publication

The cuneiform texts from Mari reflect this public and royal setting. The overwhelming majority represent the palace archives of Zimri-Lim, the last king of Mari, who inherited significant numbers of tablets from his predecessor, a rival from a completely separate dynasty and region. Most of the texts reflect practical use rather than scribal training, and so we have little classical Mesopotamian literature and few lexical collections or texts from specialized scribal ruminations on divination or incantations.[4] Instead, we find two main types among the roughly 20,000 registered tablets and fragments: administrative documentation reflecting the daily affairs of various palace agencies and an unprecedented collection of letters. The detailed evidence for royal administration by itself would make the archives an important discovery, but it is the royal correspondence that is unique among cuneiform finds. With over 3,000 letters included, the sheer number is remarkable, but it is their range of interest and origin that represents their particular historical value. We have exchanges between kings of Mari and other rulers or towns and thousands of reports from high palace officials, district governors, generals, tribal leaders in royal service, diplomats and envoys on royal missions outside the kingdom, and miscellaneous others. There are letters between officials and even some intercepted enemy messages. Some missives are terse and purely informational, but many are more conversational, sometimes even verbose, to the modern reader's pleasure. From the sum of them it is possible to glean knowledge of widely diverse aspects of Mesopotamian society, with the advantage of historical coherence.

The voices are distinct, but they speak out of a single brief period, in which their varied experiences were ultimately interlocked.

Although most of the Mari tablets were discovered decades ago, their impact has been spread over the years of their gradual publication, so that new evidence continues to become available, as if from recent excavation. Even now, far fewer than half of the Mari documents have been published, and much important material has yet to emerge. There have been two main generations of Mari scholarship, and any use of Mari evidence must give special attention to the more recent work, whether textual or archaeological. After the initial discovery of the tablets in 1934, their publication was entrusted first of all to the venerable Assyriologist François Thureau-Dangin, whose leadership soon passed to Georges Dossin. Most of the Mari texts available to the public before 1980 were published by Dossin and his colleagues through a period roughly contemporary with the excavations of Parrot.

Impressive as were the tablets made available by 1980, they still represented only a small fraction of the whole, and after a transition aided especially by Maurice Birot, the baton was passed to a younger generation. In 1982, a new research team was formed under Jean-Marie Durand. This change of leadership not only reinvigorated the publication process, but also introduced a completely fresh analytical perspective, driven especially by Durand and Dominique Charpin.

The twenty years of Mari research since the early 1980s have produced a deluge of new texts and interpretive comment, and more evidence awaits publication. Much of this new material has not been digested by the larger circle of Mesopotamian specialists, not to mention scholars outside this field, and one goal of my project is to help extend the impact of the new research. My own serious work on the Mari archives began in the 1997–8 academic year, when I had the pleasure and privilege of a Paris sabbatical. During this stay, I benefited tremendously from the hospitality and intellectual vigor of the current group involved with Mari research, including especially (but not only) Durand, Charpin, and Bertrand Lafont. Even as I have actively sought to forge an independent perspective, based on a critical reading of both the textual evidence and current French interpretation, the extent of my intellectual debt to these scholars will be obvious to anyone familiar with their work. Naturally, my analysis diverges from theirs at many points. Nevertheless, I find many of their conclusions compelling, and my text citations rely heavily on the readings of their new editions.[5] In some cases, where my French colleagues' analysis is both important and potentially controversial, I offer my own rendition of their arguments, both for my readers' convenience and to add another voice in favor of these ideas.

The published texts themselves are scattered through a variety of venues that reflect the long history of work on them. Early discoveries by Thureau-Dangin and then each team that succeeded him were often presented in individual articles that can be difficult to track down. Dossin initiated the

first regular series of volumes devoted to Mari texts, entitled *Archives Royales de Mari* (ARM), which now includes up to volume XXVIII.[6] As work on the texts was revived under Durand's leadership, and Mari's historical situation became clearer, the earlier categories became increasingly problematic, and Durand has undertaken new classifications. In recent years, Mari tablets have been published in smaller blocks, especially in the series *Florilegium Marianum* (*FM*). Durand has recently completed three volumes that present new renditions of all of the Mari letters published before his leadership, with translations and notes for new readings based on fresh collation (direct examination) of the tablets. These appear as volumes 16–18 of the series Littératures Anciennes du Proche-Orient (LAPO), entitled *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari, I–III*. Obviously, any serious use of the written evidence from Mari calls for a working knowledge of French.

2. Navigating the Technical Terrain: The Language and the Writing System

Because this study of ancient political life is rooted in the writing that allows us to hear the categories and interpretations of the participants, I have built large parts of the book around evaluation of specific words and the texts that carry them. This means that readers who are not familiar with the ancient languages in play will be invited to tolerate a certain dose of the unfamiliar in order to understand what this evidence offers to the broader study of human society. I offer the following comments with the hope of making this obstacle less imposing.

Almost all of the essential evidence for collective political traditions in the Mari archives comes from the letters. As a whole, this correspondence is written in Akkadian, the Semitic language of eastern Mesopotamia, native to Babylon, Ešnunna, and Aššur during the early second millennium. Akkadian was used for correspondence in this period wherever cuneiform was used. In Iraq and Syria, the heartland of cuneiform writing, even nonnative speakers exchanged written messages in Akkadian, and good Akkadian at that. As in the other Semitic languages, most Akkadian verbs and nouns were derived from triconsonantal roots that were manipulated in various patterns to yield different meanings. For example, the Akkadian noun "counselor" (*mālikum*) is related to the verb *imlik* ("he/she counseled") and the noun "counsel" (*milkum*). The final *-m* on the nouns disappears soon after the period of the Mari archives, and the *-u-* before it is a case vowel that varies according to its function in phrases and clauses.

Most Syrians of this period spoke varieties of "West" Semitic dialects that were quite distinct from Akkadian, but we have little more than individual words that were rendered as if Akkadian. It is possible to distinguish Akkadian from West Semitic terminology in the Mari texts only by patterns of use as compared with the range of documentation from this period. In

this book, all Semitic words will be presented in the same italicized form. Words as such will be presented whole, as in *sugāgum* ("leader"), while actual citations of text will distinguish the separate cuneiform signs used to write them, each with its own phonetic value (e.g., *su-ga-gu-um*).

Throughout the history of cuneiform, the writing system preserved embedded within it the primary language of its earliest use. Because the earliest cuneiform writing incorporated almost no recognizeable indicators of grammar, and represented simple objects or actions by symbols developed from a pictographic method, it is difficult to demonstrate the language of its first creators, but it came to flower in southern Mesopotamia with speakers of Sumerian.[7] Sumerian was an agglutinative language that was not even remotely related either to the Semitic family or to any other known group. It seems to have ceased to be a living language at the end of the third millennium, one casualty of the same upheavals that led to the increased prominence of West Semitic speakers in eastern Mesopotamia during the early second millennium.[8] In spite of its recent demise as a spoken tongue, Sumerian enjoyed a tremendous literary popularity in this period, and it became an essential language of cuneiform scholars and scribes for centuries to come. Sumerian always constituted an unavoidable ingredient in writing through its continued use as a scribal shorthand, hiding the underlying forms of the languages actually spoken and read. Modern conventions for untangling the snarls created by this blended system vary, unfortunately. I distinguish Sumerian writings for Semitic words from the Sumerian vocabulary itself by rendering the former in upper case (e.g. URU, for Akkadian *ālum*, "town, settlement"), and the latter in lower case (simply "uru"). Assyriologists usually cite Sumerian words without italics in order to distinguish them more clearly from italicized Semitic words, in spite of the wider modern convention of italicizing all foreign terms.

In this book, the reader will encounter ancient words in two forms: specific vocabulary and proper nouns. When I refer to specific vocabulary, I use a form fully marked for vowel length, according to the standard conventions of Assyriology, such as *sugāgum* ("leader") or *merḫûm* ("chief of pasture"). Long vowels are marked with a macron, and long vowels formed from the contraction of two vowels are marked with a circumflex. Consonants are presented according to the conventions of cuneiform transliteration, and readers should recognize *-ḫ-* (/kh/), *-ṣ-* (/ts/), and *-š-* (/sh/). The emphatic *-ṭ-* is pronounced /t/ in common use. I always leave as such the laryngeal consonant written as *-ḫ-*, while recognizing that the cuneiform signs can represent a variety of other Semitic laryngeals. For example, the noun written as *merḫûm* actually includes the Semitic consonant *ʿayin* (transliterated as *merʿûm*), which cannot be distinguished as such with this writing system, but I render this and other such words in the forms yielded by their cuneiform spellings. This allows words and names of uncertain etymology to be presented consistently as written in the texts themselves.[9]

In the case of proper nouns, I have decided to preserve the basic pattern of consonants and vowels, according to the conventions of transliteration, with one exception. Names of places, people, and deities will not be marked with macrons for simple long vowels (e.g., Qaṭṭunan for Qaṭṭunān, Saggaratum for Saggarātum). Only final contracted vowels will be marked with the circumflex, because these change the stress in pronunciation to the final syllable (e.g., Kurdâ). Often the quality of the vowels in proper nouns is simply not certain, and my strategy allows me to refrain from forcing an interpretive choice on every name.

B. A SURVEY OF MARI HISTORY

To begin at the end, the city of Mari was destroyed by Ḫammurabi of Babylon in his thirty-second year, conventionally dated 1761. The site was never rebuilt, and the political center of this region moved upstream to Terqa, another old city from the previous millennium. At the least, then, it is clear that the history of Mari belongs to the third and early second millennia B.C.E., and no later. Dating the foundation of the site is less straightforward than dating its destruction. At the least, we know that a settlement existed at the beginning of the third millennium in the Early Dynastic period, whether or not earlier occupation might eventually be discovered. The problem is the scope of the earliest site. The current excavator, Jean-Claude Margueron, dates the settlement to the twenty-eighth century, and concludes that its massive enclosing mound must reflect a city at the center of a fully developed state from the very onset.[10] The mound would suggest a size of 100 hectares, unprecedented for this upstream region in this period.

It is not clear why Mari was founded. The soil is not good, rainfall is far too low to support agriculture, and irrigation was never possible on a scale that would explain a city of the scope suggested by Margueron. Margueron therefore proposes that the city was founded by an existing state-level society (from downstream?) in order to control traffic below the confluence of the Euphrates and the Ḫabur Rivers, with both the city and a 120-kilometer-long canal built at the same early date.[11] At the moment, there seems to be too little evidence to identify how and why such a large settlement was created.[12] We must keep in mind that no actual structures have been excavated for this early period, and we have no idea how much of the enclosed space was built up. Less well-known settlements with such circular enclosures often show little sign of a large population.[13] It is perhaps most prudent not to speak of early third-millennium Mari as the center of a unique "state" until we have more information.

This earliest settlement appears to have been abandoned before the establishment of an entirely new city, perhaps the first that can properly be called such, near the middle of the third millennium. Texts from Ebla, a large kingdom based in western Syria, south of Aleppo, show that Mari had become

the center of a major regional power, whose influence reached as far as the domains of its western rival. For this period, the excavations yielded monumental public buildings, including a palace and temples, along with part of a residential area. Excavations at Mari have unearthed only a few cuneiform tablets from this period from several different buildings.[14] Whatever the population at the time, the city was now home for a permanent population, a condition that is difficult to confirm for both the earlier and perhaps even the later periods.

I use the word "city" for the Mari site cautiously, recognizing the combination of large-scale public buildings and the strong possibility of a significant permanent population. By these requirements, I cannot confidently call Mari a "city" either before or after the middle of the third millennium. This great Euphrates center was destroyed by one of the early rulers of the Agade (Akkad) empire, which expanded across much of Mesopotamia from a base near later Babylon. An inscription known only from early second-millennium copies credits this conquest to Sargon, the founder of the Akkadian dynasty, in the mid-twenty-fourth century.[15]

After this destruction, Mari again lay empty for some uncertain period, to be rebuilt a third and last time toward the end of the millennium. During the period contemporary with the great southern Mesopotamian kingdom of Ur, Mari was ruled by men who called themselves "governors" (*šakkanakkum*), apparently with real success. Excavations show this to have been a time of major building projects, including a new palace and new temples. Margueron observes that the entire second-millennium site is made up of structures that were originally built in this "Šakkanakku" period, and Zimri-Lim's Mari had no properly "Amorrite" architecture.

In spite of the intensive excavation of this last stage of Mari occupation, there remain important questions. Margueron reports that he has begun excavating a residential quarter for the Šakkanakku settlement, but it will be necessary to know its size, the character of its population, and when exactly it was inhabited. Although the buildings of the Šakkanakku center were reused by the kings of the eighteenth century, it is not clear from the reports whether they were occupied continuously through the one to two centuries between the last Šakkanakku ruler and the arrival of Yaḫdun-Lim. If they were not taken over directly from the active institutions of a prior regime, we cannot have confidence that Yaḫdun-Lim adopted a long-lasting "urban" and administrative tradition. The Mari texts from the eighteenth century do not provide clear evidence for any substantial residential quarter, so it remains difficult to judge to what extent the last kings had to deal with the expectations of a long-standing native population.[16] There are no urban institutions identified with the city of Mari, such as collective leadership or the merchant community called a "quay" (*kārum*).

What was the economic basis for the obvious power flaunted by the enormous structures of third-millennium Mari? Margueron has argued that it

was ultimately the control of river traffic, especially for shipping wood downstream to southern Mesopotamian Sumer. It is possible, however, that some significant part of the Mari economy always depended on the steppe, the domain of the mobile herdsmen and their flocks. During the eighteenth century, the peoples of the steppe provided the power base for the kings of the "Lim" dynasty of Yaggid-Lim, Yaḫdun-Lim, and Zimri-Lim, who claimed to rule a "land of the tent-dwellers." We may treat this as a new second-millennium phenomenon, coming from "Amorrite" shepherd peoples, but the middle portion of the Euphrates had always flowed through pastoralist country. It may not be necessary to assume a fundamental economic change from the third millennium.[17]

The end of the third millennium was marked by changes that set the stage for Mari's last hurrah under the kings who left us the huge archives of the excavated tell. In southern Mesopotamia, the kingdom centered at Ur quickly lost its grip on the region and gave up ground on all fronts before falling to Elam, the major kingdom of southern Iran. The leaders of Ur identified the crisis especially with people identified as "westerners," or Amorrites (Akkadian *Amurrûm*, Sumerian Mar-tu), as shown by the "Amorrite wall" that Ur built to stave them off, without noticeable effect. These westerners were stereotyped as uncouth barbarians, but in fact, by the time of Ur's collapse, these West Semitic speakers were already integrated into the leadership of political centers quite close to Sumer.[18] After the destruction of the city of Ur itself, the power vacuum was immediately filled by Išbi-Erra, the commander of Ur's northern troops, who established his royal seat at the Sumerian city of Isin.[19]

The evidence for the transition from Ur III to Isin dominance is as fascinating as conclusions are elusive. This political shuffle stands at the center of what modern scholars have regarded as the end of Sumer and the emergence of West Semitic–speaking Amorrites in positions of power across Mesopotamia. Ancient scribes were preoccupied with the transition as well, as seen in the early second-millennium "Old Babylonian" versions of various texts presented as products of this crisis. A letter that purports to be from Ibbi-Sîn, the last king of Ur, to Puzur-Numušda, governor of Kasallu(k), has the Sumerian ruler castigate Išbi-Erra as "not of Sumerian stock, a man from Mari, with a dog's intelligence" and "a monkey from the mountains."[20] Other copied texts from advocates of Išbi-Erra and his Isin dynasty embrace this foreign origin. He comes from the mountains, indeed, but as the shepherd appointed by the gods Anu and Enlil.[21]

In fact, Išbi-Erra seems to have been born to the royal family of Mari, and his influence at Ur reflected a long period of close relations between the two states.[22] If this makes him "Amorrite," it is by a western identity that is already rooted in a major late third-millennium center. It may be that he had nothing to do with the specific tribal groups named two or three centuries later, but the curious identification of a king from the Euphrates

valley with the mountains of cedar suggests that later Amorrites, at least, may have made him their own. By the eighteenth to seventeenth centuries, West Semitic royal names appear all over central and southern Mesopotamia, and it seems clear that "westerners" had come to dominate the political scene across all of Syria-Mesopotamia.

In southern Mesopotamia of the early second millennium, which Assyriologists call the Old Babylonian period, the Amorrite rulers accommodated themselves comfortably to the admired culture of old Sumer and Akkad, and in the written evidence, their western roots are obscured by the overlay of the eastern languages and ways. We have archives for this period from Isin, Larsa, Babylon, Nippur, Sippar, Umma, Ur, Ešnunna, Shemshara, and other southern and central sites, along with northern sites, including Chagar Bazar (Ašnakkum?), Ishchali (Nerebtum), Tell Leilan (Šeḫna/Šubat-Enlil), and Tell ar-Rimah (Qaṭṭarâ), and westward all the way to Tell Atchana (Alalaḫ) and then south to Ebla. Along the Euphrates, the largest finds come from Mari, but texts from this period also were discovered further upstream at the old centers of Terqa (Tell Ashara) and Tuttul (Tell Bi'a). More than any of these, the tablets from Mari display the active role played by social and economic traditions foreign to southern Mesopotamia in societies with such Amorrite roots. On the social side, Mari shows a complex world of far-flung tribal affiliations that pertain to both settled and mobile "nomadic" peoples, and to those both at the fringe and at the hub of political power and its fortified palace centers. On the economic side, the Mari texts indicate the importance of large flocks of sheep and goats, in a pastoralism that was most often carried out in the country steppe by tent-dwelling shepherds who moved seasonally across fairly long distances. Although the Amorrite influence on southern Mesopotamia was already centuries-old by the time of our Mari archives, these texts perhaps offer our best view of the Amorrite culture, as described in ancient writing.

The period of our early second-millennium archives was both brief and turbulent. A king named Yaḫdun-Lim made Mari the center once more of a large realm, taking advantage of its reputation as the ancient capital of the region. Yaḫdun-Lim, who mentions only his father, Yaggid-Lim, as a predecessor in this royal line, gained control of a long stretch of the Euphrates River valley, west as far as Tuttul, which he made the second capital of his realm. Downstream, his kingdom immediately abutted the domains of Ešnunna, the major power of south-central Mesopotamia. Rather than challenge Ešnunna, Yaḫdun-Lim worked to extend his rule northward into the basin of the Ḫabur River, in competition with Samsi-Addu, the king of Ekallatum, on the Tigris River.[23]

Yaḫdun-Lim defined both his core population and his conquests upriver in tribal terms that are examined at length in Chapters 2 and 3. He himself is associated with the Binu Sim'al, or Sim'alites, "Sons of the Left (Hand)," while his defeated enemies ruled peoples known to belong to the Binu

Yamina, or Yaminites, "Sons of the Right (Hand)." The duality of left and right hands by itself shows that these two groups understood themselves to be related, perhaps with some king of geographical basis for distinguishing their territories. These groups may be called "tribal" because their primary definition is by family affiliation under headings not defined by residence in a particular settlement, which is the most common way of identifying people (e.g., "sons of Terqa").

Yaḫdun-Lim was not able to establish a lasting Sim'alite base at Mari. His son Sumu-Yamam replaced him under less-than-straightforward circumstances, and Sumu-Yamam in turn perished soon afterward, evidently at the hands of his own officials. To some extent, Sumu-Yamam's fall not only benefited but may have been hastened by the looming power of Samsi-Addu, the long-standing king of Ekallatum.[24] Samsi-Addu soon seized Mari and the Euphrates-based dominions that had been held by Yaḫdun-Lim, which seem to have had no strong local force left to fend him off. With this achievement, Samsi-Addu could truly claim to rule the lands between both the Tigris and the Euphrates, the first explicit "Mesopotamian" kingdom.[25] Samsi-Addu was also an Amorrite, and the *kispum* ritual text found at Mari shows that his family claimed a heritage both in Sargon's great dynasty at Agade (Akkad) and in the Numḫâ tribe. During the reign of Zimri-Lim, the Numḫâ tribal people were associated especially with the kingdom of Kurdâ, between the Tigris and the Ḫabur Rivers, and they were not part of the Sim'alite-Yaminite duality that dominated Mari affairs under the "Lim" rulers.[26] Samsi-Addu identified himself with pastoralist ancestors whom he called "*ḫana* (tent-dwelling?) *yarrādum*," which Durand understands to be Amorrites who had "come down" to the Euphrates valley.[27]

By this point in his career, Samsi-Addu was fairly old, and he created a clever and successful new structure in order to govern his expanded realm. Samsi-Addu divided the kingdom into an eastern section, with Ekallatum still at its center, and a western section, centered at Mari. He placed his older son, Išme-Dagan, over the east and set up his younger son, Yasmaḫ-Addu, as king of Mari and the western dominions. The old king himself retained a firm hold over ultimate decision making, but he left his sons their own capitals and took up an intermediate location in the Ḫabur River basin at the town of Šeḫna (Tell Leilan), which he renamed Šubat-Enlil (Charpin 1987b). By this strategy, Samsi-Addu could maintain a direct royal presence in three main parts of his kingdom, and the stability of the arrangement through the last years of his lifetime bears witness to its effectiveness.[28]

At Mari itself, Yasmaḫ-Addu reigned with full royal status for eight years, but had already held responsibility for some time for the region that Samsi-Addu had taken roughly ten years earlier (Villard 2001, 10–14). After Samsi-Addu's death, however, neither Išme-Dagan nor Yasmaḫ-Addu was capable of maintaining the vast kingdom of their father. Yasmaḫ-Addu quickly lost his Euphrates capital to a revived coalition of Sim'alites, finally ruled by