

4: Mesopotamia *Model Category: Patterns of Action*

Investigating Action Patterns



Important ways of acting are learned from parents and other members of society. These differ from society to society, and tend to change very slowly.

Much of what you and those around you do every day follows “standard” patterns, simplifying life by helping you know how to act, and how others are likely to act.

Patterns develop as “standard” ways to solve the ordinary problems of everyday life—obtaining necessities such as food and shelter, avoiding conflict between people, making sure knowledge is passed along to the young, and so forth.

Some important sub-categories—Patterns of Action for:

- Work (Who does what kind of work? With whom? When? Where? Etc.)
- Exchanging goods and services (trading, buying, selling, etc.)
- Teaching the young. This may include both formal education (such as school) and informal learning (such as learning from other children and from watching adults)
- Controlling behavior considered wrong.
- Making important group decisions.
- Religious practices

This list could be very long. Other Patterns are associated with greeting, marriage, birth, death, dealing with nature, establishing how time is used, and so on.

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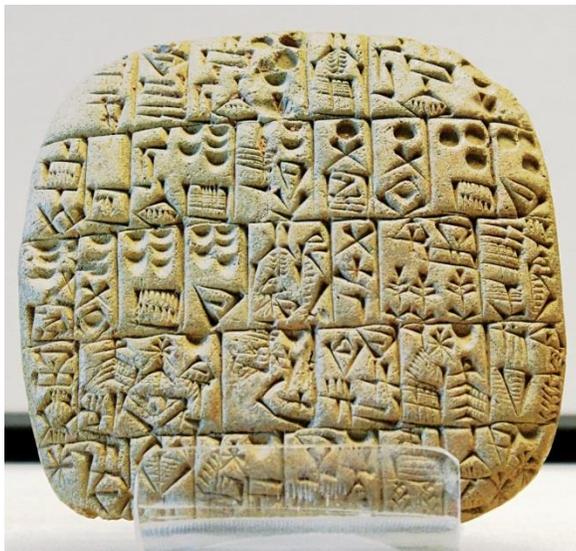
Investigation: Early Mesopotamian Patterns of Action

The earliest civilizations we know about began in Mesopotamia. That's when life became more complicated for many people. Those who lived in cities had to solve new kinds of problems—and their “standardized” solutions to these problems became important patterns of action. The list of patterns on Page 1 (work, exchanging goods and services, teaching the young, etc.) are categories related to problems and solutions. (“Work,” of course, was the focus of your study of Çatalhöyük, so you've already begun the study of action patterns.)

In unit 3 (Muddy Rivers), you investigated the setting in Mesopotamia. Some of the information in that section came from Herodotus, who visited Mesopotamia at least 2000 years after civilization began there. In this investigation, you'll look at life in Mesopotamia much earlier, closer to the civilization's beginning.

Working with others, analyze the data in the boxes. Identify general problems faced by many people, and the Pattern of Action used to solve it. (We'll occasionally ask questions that will help you with your analysis.) Record results in your journal.

What problems were solved by the development of writing like this? Where does this fit in the Model? What patterns of action are suggested by this (e.g. schools for scribes)?



<http://lemuseedesartsneko.eklablog.com/frise-chronologique-c23507644>

Mesopotamians were probably the first to develop writing. Using a reed sharpened to a pointed wedge, they wrote by making marks like these (“cuneiform”) on soft clay tablets. The tablets were then dried in the sun, and sometimes baked (for more permanent records). Archaeologists have found hundreds of thousands of clay tablets with writing like this, and have learned to read most of them, giving us much information about life back then.

Specialists—scribes—were taught to write and read the cuneiform tablets.

Many letters written on cuneiform tablets have been found. We'll give you translations of several. The first was written about 2200 BCE.

Each letter deals with one or more particular problems, but you'll need to infer more general problems and shared patterns of action, such as "a farm owner managing his distant workers." (Pattern: send a letter.)

Another problem: Getting letters delivered. How might this problem be solved?

The letter mentions a king. What problems and patterns of action does this suggest?

This is a message from Iskun-Dagan to Lugalra:

Cultivate the field and watch over the cattle! And, above all, do not tell me, "The Guti enemies are around, I could not cultivate the field." Post sentries at one-mile intervals, and you go yourself and cultivate the field! If the Guti try to attack you, take all the cattle into the village.

In earlier times, when Guti men drove away our cattle, I said nothing; I always gave you payment in silver anyway. But now I swear on the life of King Shar-kali-Sharri that if the Guti men drive off the cattle, and you cannot pay for them yourself, I won't pay you any silver when I come to town. Now won't you keep watch over the cattle!

I've already claimed from you the regular delivery of containers of barley.

This is a warning—pay attention! ,

Oppenheim, A. Leo, *Letters from Mesopotamia* 1967, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 71-72, in "Old Akkadian Letters" (JRAS 1932 p. 269) (adapted)

https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/letters_from_mesopotamia.pdf

What parts of setting, problems, and patterns of action are suggested by this picture? (Bas-relief from Mesopotamian (Sumerian) city of Ur, image created about 2500 BCE).



<http://factsanddetails.com/world/cat57/sub383/item2123.html>

The letters that follow are from the “Old Babylonian” period, which lasted from about 1900 BCE to 1500 BCE.

Continue your analysis of Mesopotamian problems and patterns, using these letters:

Tell the governor of the Inland Region, whom the god Marduk keeps in good health: Dingir-Shaga sends the following message:

May the gods Shamash and Marduk keep you forever in good health.

I was very pleased when the god Marduk promoted you to high office. I said to myself, “A man has been promoted who knows me; he will do for me what I want. Even those officials around here who do not know me personally will now do what I want when I send them a message.”

As to the case of the temple singer Nabium-Malik, a native of the town of Habuz, the man made a statement of complaint to me. I quote him: “Nobody ever issued a summons for me to do service as a porter. Now the governor of the Inland Region has sent me a notice, and after I refused to do this work, they took one of my slaves to hold until I agree to this work.”

This man, Nabium-Malik, is a member of my household; he is not a stranger. He is already performing six other work-obligations, and he pays the fees required of a high priest and a temple singer.

I am sending you herewith this tablet of mine. If you truly care for me, nobody must issue a summons for this man’s household.

Oppenheim, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 78-79, Fish, John Rylands Library No. 1 (adapted)

Tell the Lady Zinu; Iddin-Sin sends this message:

May the gods Shamash, Marduk, and Ilabrat keep you always in good health.

From year to year, the clothes of other young men here become better, but every year you let my clothes get worse. Indeed, you seem to work at making fewer, lower quality clothes for me. Even though wool is used up like bread in our house, you have made me poor clothes. The son of Adad-Iddinam, whose father is only an assistant to my father, has two new sets of clothes, while you fuss about even one set of clothes for me. In spite of the fact that you gave birth to me and his mother only adopted him, his mother loves him, while you—you do not love me!

Oppenheim, *Op. Cit.*, p. 85 in “Old Babylonian Letters” (TCL 18 111)

(Continued)

Message to the Lady Alitum from Aplum:

May the god Shamash keep you in good health!

The ladies Lamassum and Nish-Inishu came to me with tears in their eyes and their heads bowed. They said, “You want to abandon us and go to the city of Babylon without leaving us food for even one day!”

When you receive this message, send them thirty measures of barley, along with the other provisions I promised you for the girl.

They wept and pleaded, saying, “Help us, for all this we are going to be on the brink of starving.” They made me promise to give the barley and other provisions, so load the thirty bushels of barley in the boat for your sisters; otherwise they’ll complain all year.

Oppenheim, *Op. cit.*, p. 86, in “Old Babylonian Letters” (TCL 18 123) (adapted)

Tell Belshunu that Qurdusha sends this message:

May the god Shamash keep you in good health!

As you must have heard, the open country is disturbed; the enemy is prowling around there. I have already sent letters to Ibni-Marduk, to Warad and to you. Take a lamb from the flock to pay the diviner, so you can find out what is predicted to happen with the cows and sheep, and if they should be moved here to my neighborhood. If the enemy or robbers aren’t going to attack, bring them here, or else bring them into the city of Kish so that the enemy cannot take them. Also, take all the available barley into Kish, and then send me a complete report.

Oppenheim, *Op. cit.*, p. 88, in “Old Babylonian Letters” (TCL 17 27)

Samsuiluna-Sharrum message to the mayor and the council of the city:

May the gods Shamash and Marduk keep you in good health!

I am sending this tablet as a warning. No one should approach the house of the woman named Ummi-Waqrāt who interprets dreams. I bought that house and all its bricks. If someone even touches one of its bricks, I will go to court against all of you, as provided by the proper ordinance of my lord, the King Samsuiluna.

Oppenheim, *Op. Cit.*, p. 91 in “Old Babylonian Letters” (TIM 1 3) (adapted)

Tell Luga that Sin-Putram sends this message:

May the gods Enlil and Ninurta keep you healthy.

Lugatum moved his bulls to the fortified area to plant sesame, and my man Ubar-Lulu went along with them as ox driver. One of the bulls in his care died, so Lugatum's people came to me complaining of the loss. I questioned the ox drivers who were with Ubar-Lulu, and they stated, "The bull strayed away to eat grass, then fell down and died." I told Lugatum's people, "Go to Nippur, to the city where there are judges. Let them decide your case." The judges in Nippur gave their decision and handed Ubar-Lulu over to the Garden Gate so he could take the oath there. However, Lugatum won't accept this decision. Please take good care of Ubar-Lulu so he does not lose anything in this dispute.

Oppenheim, *Op. Cit.*, p. 94, in "Old Babylonian Letters" (PBS 7 7) (adapted)

Tell my lord that your servants Enlil-Bani, Sin-Abi, and Sin-Kasad send this message:

Regarding what our lord has written to us concerning the release of irrigation water, water has not yet reached us. Our ditches are cleaned out. Should Utu-Si-Sa withhold water from us when it arrives, we will report this to our lord.

Oppenheim, *Op. Cit.*, p. 95, in "Old Babylonian Letters" (TIM 1 6) (adapted)



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cylinder_seal

Important Mesopotamians had cylinder seals made for them to use, each one different, carved from hard stones, used to sign and seal documents. The seal would be rolled over the surface of wet clay to make cuneiform characters or an image (right above), to indicate the identity and authority of the sender.



Ziggurat at Ur. The façade has been reconstructed; ruins of the original are inside. Mesopotamians constructed these elevated structures within cities as religious sites.

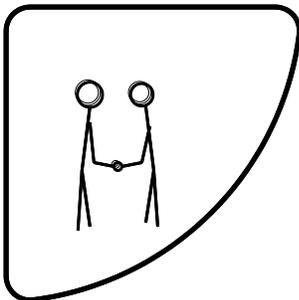
Most letters you've read mention gods, and suggest their importance to Mesopotamian people. What problems might these people feel are influenced by their religion?

Describe possible patterns of action connected with ziggurat buildings (part of "setting").

Identify and describe other parts of Mesopotamia's setting that are related to the problem-solving Patterns of Action you've identified.

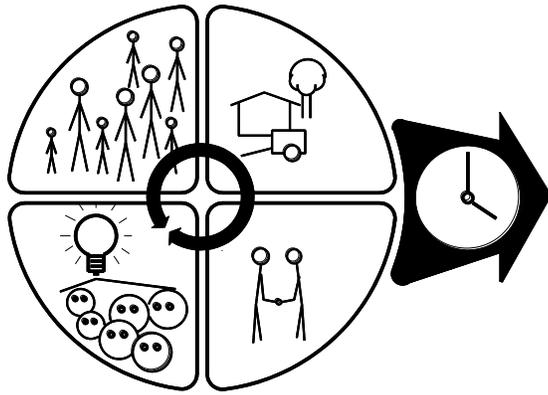
Follow-Up: Action Patterns Here and Now

Large, important patterns of action are built up of other subsidiary patterns. For example, the Pattern of Action "work" is usually divided into "production of goods" and "providing services." Each of these categories, in turn, may be analyzed to identify other patterns, forming (of course) a knowledge-organizing tree.



Generate a knowledge-organizing tree for patterns of action where you live, in one of these categories:

- *Teaching the young*
- *Food production and distribution*
- *Making decisions affecting many people*
- *Controlling behavior considered wrong*



For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:

The cultural differences between Çatalhöyük culture and early Mesopotamian civilization is huge. Instead of Çatalhöyük's egalitarian society, there's an obvious status hierarchy, with government—kings, judges, and other officials—and a wealthy religious establishment with a hierarchy of priests. Silver was used as currency, and large-scale irrigation required some kind of central oversight and control governed by rules to minimize conflict. Management of all this complexity required records and means of communicating remotely, so writing has become a necessity. The Mesopotamians were apparently concerned with management of time, as they were the first to divide the day into hours, minutes, and even seconds. They began to use wheeled vehicles pulled by animals.

The objective of this part is to introduce the meta-concept “patterns of action,” and develop the learner’s ability to identify these patterns, organize them to show systemic relationships, and trace the relationships between these action patterns and elements of that first meta-concept, “setting.”

Patterns of action, in the largest sense, are the methods developed for solving the main problems faced by societies—making decisions that affect many or all, adjudicating disputes, inhibiting disruptive behavior, growing and distributing food, educating the young, distributing goods and services, providing infrastructure for transportation and other common needs, healing the sick and injured, protecting the society from outside threats, and remaining on good terms with the forces of fate. (With regard to this last, the year to year inconsistency in the flow of the rivers on which agriculture and life depended was almost certainly a major incentive for religious practices in Mesopotamia.)

Religious historian Karen Armstrong:¹

“Like other people in the ancient world, the Babylonians attributed their cultural achievements to the gods, who had revealed their own lifestyle to their mythical ancestors. Thus Babylon itself was supposed to be an image of heaven, with each of its temples a replica of a celestial palace. This link with the divine world was celebrated and perpetuated annually in the great New Year Festival, which had been firmly established by the seventeenth century BCE. Celebrated in the holy city of Babylon during the month of Nisan—our April—the Festival solemnly enthroned the king and established his reign for another year.

“On the afternoon of the fourth day of the Festival, priests and choristers filed into the Holy of Holies to recite the *Enuma Elish*, the epic poem which celebrated the victory of the gods over chaos.”

April—as we found in Part 3 (Muddy Rivers)—was the month when the river flow peaked. Not much mystery in that timing of the Festival, or in its emphasis on victory over chaos. We see a pattern of action (festival) within another pattern of action (religion)—a common phenomenon, a pattern of patterns that occurred worldwide.

¹ Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God*, New York, 1993, Ballentine Books, p. 6

Religious observances tend to coincide with times of the year when fate hangs in the balance.

Notes on the investigations:

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Some learners may have difficulty in moving beyond the particular problems expressed in each letter to the general problem and the pattern used to solve it. For example, the first letter indicates a problem with cattle theft by a raiding group of “rustlers.” There’s particularistic action suggested by the letter writer to help solve this problem, but no *pattern* of action is indicated. The more general problem is the remote management of agricultural enterprises by absentee landowners who live in a city, solved by sending letters, which is a pattern of action. Another implicit problem is compensation of workers for their labor, and the corresponding pattern of action is the use of silver as currency. Still another is getting agricultural products to their city-based users. Apparently some method has been developed for transport and delivery of grain, although it’s not clear from the letter how this was done. Working in groups, so learners can bounce ideas back and forth, will assist with the process of identifying the significant action patterns.

It should be obvious that the system element “setting” is linked intimately with patterns of action. The major developments of Mesopotamian society—writing, domestication of animals, the wheel—each had large effects on the ways of acting of the people using these setting elements. The picture of the cart pulled by four donkeys, apparently carrying a soldier with spears (p. 3) is a rich depiction of some “setting” elements. (Incidentally, what may seem obvious—making a wheel by cutting a horizontal slice of a round tree trunk—won’t work, because the grain structure and radial cracks caused by drying of the wood cause a wheel made this way to disintegrate almost immediately. Early wooden wheels were made of boards cut longitudinally, along the grain, as indicated in the picture.)

The history of Mesopotamia shows a major pattern (but not a “pattern of action” in our usual sense). Karen Armstrong summarizes this series of events:¹

“The Tigris-Euphrates valley in what is now Iraq, had been inhabited as early as 4000 BCE by the people known as the Sumerians, who had established one of the first great cultures of the Oikumene (the civilized world). In their cities of Ur, Erech and Kish, the Sumerians devised their cuneiform script, built the extraordinary temple-towers called ziggurats and evolved an impressive law, literature and mythology. Not long afterward the region was invaded by the Semitic Akkadians, who had adopted the language and culture of Sumer. Later still, in about 2000 BCE, the Amorites had conquered this Sumerian-Akkadian civilization and made Babylon their capital. Finally, some 300 years later, the Assyrians had settled in nearby Ashur and eventually conquered Babylon itself during the eighth century BCE. This Babylonian tradition also affected the

¹ Armstrong, Karen, *op. cit.*, p. 6

mythology and religion of Canaan, which would become the Promised Land of the ancient Israelites.”

The cycle of civilizations rising, weakening and being conquered in turn by a new outsider group extended beyond Armstrong’s list. Assyria was conquered by Chaldeans (Aramean Semites), in 612 BCE, who were, in turn, overtaken by the Persians under Cyrus the Great in 538; then they were conquered by Macedonian Alexander the Great, in 333 BCE, bringing Greek culture to the region.

This bloody (literally) series of events is, in our opinion, simply too complicated to inflict on the memory of the young. We’ll deal with the general pattern of civilization growth, decay, and conquest by outsiders in later parts.

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