

Student Handout 3: Primary Documents from Mesopotamia¹ and Egypt

Document A (Mesopotamia): The Sumerian Goddess Inanna Looks After the City Agade (About 2000 BCE)

So that the warehouses would be provisioned
that dwellings would be founded in the city,
that its people would eat splendid food...
that acquaintances would dine together,
that foreigners would cruise about like unusual birds in the sky...
At that time, she filled Agade...with gold,
Delivered copper, tin, and blocks of lapis lazuli to its storehouses...
Its harbor, where ships docked, was full of excitement...
Its king, the shepherd Naram-Sin, rose like the sun on the holy throne of Agade..
Its city wall touched heaven, like a mountain....
Ships brought the goods of Sumer itself upstream [to Agade],
The highland Amorites, people ignorant of agriculture,
Came before her there with spirited bulls and spirited bucks,
Meluhhans [from the Indus valley, and] people of the black mountains,
Brought exotic wares down to her...
All the governors, temple administrators, and land registrars of the Gude'ena
Regularly supplied monthly and New Year offerings there.

Document A (Egypt): Praise for Pharaoh's New City (About 1300 BCE)

His majesty—life, prosperity, health !—has built himself a city, named “Great of Victories.” All men have left their towns and are settled in its territory. Temples of the gods Amon and Set, and the goddesses Astarte and Uto, mark its four quarters. Pharaoh is in it as a god. The Residence is full of supplies, its ponds with fish, its lakes with birds. Its granaries are so full of grain they come near to the sky. Onions and leeks are available for food, and lettuce, pomegranates, apples, olives. Its ships go out and come back to mooring, so it has supplies and food every day. One rejoices to live there. The small in it are like the great. The young men are dressed up every day, with sweet oil on their heads and newly dressed hair. The singers of “Great of Victories” are sweet, being taught at Memphis[the old capital of Egypt]. So live there content, Pharaoh—thou god!

¹ From Source: Gwendolyn Leick, *Mesopotamia: Invention of the City* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 70-71, 103-104,163. Some of the language has been simplified by Anne Chapman. In <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/units/three/landscape/03_landscape3.pdf> (p. 16-17) Accessed 6/4/10.

Document B (Mesopotamia): A Sumerian Father Gives Advice To His Son (About 2300 BCE)

My son, let me give you instructions.

Pay attention to them!

Do not beat a farmer's son, or he will break your irrigation canal....

Do not break into a house...

Do not speak with a girl when you are married, the [likelihood of] slander is strong...

Do not allow your sheep to graze in untested grazing grounds...

Submit to strength. Bow down to the mighty man.

Document B (Egypt): Instructions Of The Vizier Ptah-hotep To His Son (About 2450 BCE)

If you sit at the table of one greater than you, speak only when spoken to. Laugh after him.

When carrying a message from one great man to another, be accurate. Beware of making words worse through vulgar speech [slang], and so making for hostility between them.

If you have a son who listens to you and takes care of your property as he should, do not cut your heart off from him. But if he does not carry out your instructions, if his manners in your household are wretched, if he rebels against all you say, cast him off. He is not your son at all.

If you want to make friendship last in a home to which you have access as a master, a brother or a friend, beware of approaching the women. Do not do it.
Do not be greedy, or envious of your own kindred.

Love your wife at home as is fitting. Fill her belly, clothe her back. Make her heart glad as long as you live. Do not contend with her at law, but keep her from gaining control.

Bow your back to your superior, then your reward will be as it should be. Opposition to a superior is a painful thing.

Document C (Mesopotamia): A Sumerian Father Wants His Teen-Ager To Be A Scribe (About 2000 BCE)

...Why do you idle about? Go to school, recite your assignment, open your schoolbag, write your tablet, let your "big brother" write your new tablet for you. Be humble and show fear before your apprentice teacher. When you show terror, he will like you.... Never in my life did I make you carry reeds to the canebrake. I never said to you "Follow my caravans." I never sent you to work as a laborer. "Go, work and support me," I never in my life said that to you. Others like you support their parents by working... Compared to them you are not a man at all. Night and day you waste in pleasures.... Among all craftsmen that live in the land, no work is more difficult than that of a scribe. [But] it is in accordance with the fate decreed by [the god] Enlil that a man should follow his father's work.

Document C (Egypt): An Egyptian Father Wants His Son To Be A Scribe, About 2000 BCE

On his way to put him into the Writing School among the children of officials, he said to his son:

I have seen how the laboring man is burdened. You should set your heart on pursuing writing instead. The scribe's place is in the Residence City, and he shall not be poor in it. Men greet him respectfully, and he is not clothed in the workman's apron.

If you leave the school after midday is announced, and go rollicking in the street, it is not for you. If three loaves should satisfy you, but there is still no limit to your belly, fight against it.

I have set you on the way of god. The scribe reaches the halls of the magistrates. No scribe lacks food, being fed from the property of the King's House—life, prosperity, health!