Gudea and the Gods: Intersecting Policy and Prophecy

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The Third Dynasty of Ur (2100–2000 b.c.e.) was a sort of Sumerian renaissance, a time of great social and economic growth. In previous generations, worship at temples, the shrines of the gods, had been paramount among the population. In this era, however, a reallocation of powers occurred. The power of the palace, an edifice reflective of economic and political glory, began to eclipse that of the temple. While the intertwining of religious and political leadership was significant before, this shift interlacing politics and religion gave Ur III political leaders almost monopolistic power. Differentiation between the responsibilities and authority of king figures and religious leaders was blurred, thus creating a central node of political and religious leadership. Gudea of Lagash, a ruler in Ur c. 2100 b.c.e., was both clairvoyant and king, best typifying Ur III’s particular node of leadership. His illuminating prophetic record is contained in “the Cylinders of Gudea,” which details the religious instructions he received in a dream to build a temple and the political and economic means he utilized to carry out those instructions. In contemporary studies, the cylinders and other Gudean texts have been examined in depth; however, little has been said about the junction of politics and prophecy during his reign. I propose that, his piety aside, Gudea’s prophecies forwarded his policy to create a demagogue of a leader. There is evidence in the Cylinders of Gudea that the prophecies contained therein augmented Gudea’s political power.

Dreams as Propaganda

Gudea catalyzed the Sumerian renaissance in Ur III. Though his physical reign was limited to the twenty-first century b.c.e., Gudea secured a lasting legacy by claiming divine correspondence. His series of prophetic dreams served to propagate his rule. The very nature of Gudea’s dreams are demonstrative of his...
twofold demagogic leadership. A. Leo Oppenheim remarks that while god-sent dreams are customary throughout the entire span of the Mesopotamian civilization and “instructions in such pious dreams are normally given by the deity in clear words, Gudea was informed by means of an enigmatic dream.”2 Susan A. Butler classifies this type of dream as symbolic-message: a type of dream chiefly recorded in Mesopotamian epics “where it occurs to heroic recipients, being a motif to propel the action. These literary symbolic-message dreams are always accompanied by their interpretations, which come from other heroic figures or deities.”3 This proves true in the case of Gudea’s dream. After receiving the symbolic message, Gudea asks the goddess Gatumdug to interpret.4 Her interpretations, given in a separate dream, accompany Ningirsu’s call to action—or rather, call to construction. I adopt S. A. Butler’s appropriation, describing Gudea’s dream as symbolic message rather than simply “message.” This appropriation, then, entails that Gudea’s prophetic behavior is like that of Mesopotamian epic heroes: deified characters intimately connected with the gods and capable of inspiring demagogic followings.

The nature and content of Gudea’s dreams are revealing. Beyond both of these facets, however, Gudea’s behavior when dialoguing with the gods is particularly interesting. His constant front of piety and humility—whether merely superficial or sincere—is especially notable. A. Leo Oppenheim explains, “The piously assumed naiveté of Gudea . . . is rewarded by the goddess, who . . . interprets to him all the features [of the dream].”5 Following her interpretation, Gudea desires a confirming “sign” both for his symbolic-message dream and Gatumdug’s interpretation of it. He maintains his pious attitude in approaching the gods. “After a prayer in which he again stresses his lack of knowledge, Gudea is promised such a ‘sign.’ [Ningirsu] appears . . . promising a sign which will determine unequivocally the very day on which the work should start.”6 The privilege of receiving a dream and then a sign illustrate the excessive piety and subtle power of their recipient, signifying the righteousness, faithfulness, and humility of Gudea and the gods’ subsequent pleasure with him.

Divine Association and Politics

These positive correspondences with the gods would have been viewed as causation for prosperity during Gudea’s reign. In the ancient Near East, the

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5. Oppenheim, “Interpretation of Dreams,” 211.
patron deities of cities rewarded reverence. Because Gudea was the king of a city-state, his personal deity, Ningiszada, and the deity of his province, Ningirsu, were thought especially important for the welfare of his kingdom. In return for Gudea’s piety, those deities caused his affairs to prosper and guaranteed the physical well-being of himself and his people by deflecting the attacks of demons, disease, and sorcery. Any calls to action were understood as necessary to follow in order to retain prosperity. Lagash prospered most brilliantly under Gudea. This prosperity was undoubtedly attributed to the blessings of the gods and consequently, the loss of it would be attributed to disobedience to, and resultant alienation from, the gods. As Gudea was associated with the gods, obedience to his orders could be viewed as essential to maintain the favor of the gods. Gudea could very well have used this Mesopotamian more as a motivational tactic, enlarging his ability to motivate workers. Whether Gudea purposefully capitalized on this folkway or not, it undoubtedly contributed to the facility with which he was able to complete Enninu. Even if it was unintentional, Gudea could very well have used this as a motivational tactic, capitalizing on the mores of Mesopotamian civilization.

Other such mores that advanced Gudea’s leadership were those associated with his claims of divine association. In the satirical Royal Chronicle of Lagash, Gudea is described as “not the son of either his mother or father,” though in this context the statement may be parodying the illogicality of that formulaic assertion. Jean-Jacques Glassner explains this as “a reference to an inscription of this king, as well as an adroit reapplication of an insignificant statement to give to Gudea the appearance of a founding hero, like Gilgamesh or Sargon.” I think, however, that this statement could be seen as a critique of prevalent Mesopotamian ideology: divine claim of origin. This interpretation is supported by other instances of the parody of kingship in this chronicle. Rather than adopting the title lugal, or “king,” Gudea was a self-affirmed ensi, or “governor” of Lagash. In the Royal Chronicle of Lagash, a parody of the flood, the term ensi is ridiculed. Glassner postulates, “only ‘governorship’ existed, an obvious satire by the author against the titulary of the kings of Lagash who, in the mid-third millennium, had used the title ‘governor,’ ensi . . . no doubt to show their devotion to the gods.” A continuation of this theme in the chronicle is feasible, if not expected. Gudea, then, was not wholly popular, like any demagogic leader. However, there is undeniable evidence that Lagash flourished into a Sumerian renaissance under Gudea. He had the time, power, and abilities during his reign to implement
a large-scale program of temple construction.\textsuperscript{14} The question continues though: what was the intersection of policy and prophecy of his reign? Incontestably, his so-called prophecy galvanized the completion of his temples, lending authority and import to his governance. Although Gudea’s piety and prophecy should not necessarily be doubted, it cannot be denied that Gudea’s power rested (at least in part) on these assumed revelations and that, intentionally or not, they were a crutch for the completion of his many temple projects.

This article is not meant to question the intentions of Gudea but instead examine the overlaps of policy and prophecy in Gudea’s reign. Perhaps inadvertently, Gudea’s power did rest on these prophecies. Enninu would not have been completed as effectively—or at all—without the aid of the awe and fear-inspiring divine “governorship” of Gudea, which inspired the people in much of the way the heroics of Mesopotamian heroes did. Certainly it can be assumed that Gudea was a well-liked figure, despite the minority voice of dissent in the Royal Chronicle, again, as Lagash “prospered most brilliantly under Gudea.”\textsuperscript{15}

As religiosity was such a central part of secular leadership in Ur III, prophecy greatly influenced Gudea’s rule. The heavenly component of Mesopotamian leadership coalesced with that of the political to create a vision of royal rule in which both leaders and followers recognized that their ability to act in concert with one another was facilitated by the gods’ assistance.\textsuperscript{16} Launderville continues, “The line between dream and reality and between what was possible and what usually happened was believed to shift when . . . the gods became more directly involved in human affairs. When a king acknowledged the divine source of his royal authority, he increased his sense of the stability of his rule, which in turn allowed him more room for experimentation.”\textsuperscript{17} When Gudea claimed divine association, whether through prophetic dreams, godly visitations, or claims of divine origin, he extended the circle of his infallibility. Gudea’s piety was insurance against political volatility.

 Tradition of Propagandist Literature

While Gudea’s literature may have been propaganda, this method of forwarding rule through text was not isolated. Gudea did not live in a vacuum; he propagated the literary customs of preceding governors and rulers. However, he nuanced tradition with his own particularities and in turn influenced the propagandist leaders who followed him. This is evidenced by Sumerian titulary before and after Gudea. William W. Hallo’s \textit{Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles}, suggests that, “titles form an essential appurtenance of kingship; they are passed from one king to the next and often from one dynasty to the next. . . . When

\begin{itemize}
  \item 16. Launderville, \textit{Piety and Politics}, 51.
  \item 17. Launderville, \textit{Piety and Politics}, 51.
\end{itemize}
a change in the titular occurs, the change appears as a conscious act in that
the innovating king replaces an existing title with a new one or with a resur-
rected old one.” 18 Such was the case with Gudea. He was not the first to adopt
the title ensi. Its use in Lagash is initially connected with Eannatum, a king
from the first dynasty of Lagash, who raised ensi from its subordinate connota-
tion of governorship to the status of a royal title. 19 A dynasty later, in Gudea’s
time, this title had fallen out of royal use. It had slumped back into its original
subordinate sense and been superseded by lugal, or king. 20 Gudea resurrected
the title. This may have been a hearkening back to the first dynasty of Lagash,
when the empire was first established, or an attempt to associate Gudea with the
great leader Eannatum. It also may have been adopted, as suggested earlier, to
demonstrate piety and humility in leadership. After Gudea employed the title,
his son, Ur-Ningirsu, did the same. 21 Gudea was a successful ensi; the title he
adopted continued to be used through the second dynasty.

Gudea maintained the general tradition of utilizing texts and divine
connections to forward prophecy. Gudea is unique, however, in his various
religiously saturated epithets, as well as in the length and, to an extent, content
of his texts. His many epithets include compounds of divine names and temples,
and he is the only Lagashian leader associated with the epithet “servant, beloved
of Gutumdag.” 22 This is, no doubt, due to Gudea’s serving the gods through the
construction of the temple Enninu, as recorded in the Cylinders of Gudea.

Cylinder A

Gudea’s various prophetic visions present the longest and most detailed
known narrative account of Mesopotamian temple building. 23 Comprised of
two cylinders, A and B, the Cylinders of Gudea provide the most evidence
in this article’s examination of the intersection of policy and prophecy during
his reign. Cylinder A of Gudea’s account contains the events culminating in
the construction of a great temple dedicated to the god Ningirsu: Eninnu. 24 It
begins with a prophetic dream given to Gudea from the god Ningirsu, patron
deity of Lagash. Brian E. Colless, in reference to Mesopotamian monarchs’
grandiose claims of being divinely fathered and nourished on divine milk,
asserts that “their statements were intended more for divine ears than human
ears. Thus the plea of King Gudea of Lagash to the goddess Gutumdag, ‘I
have no mother, you are my mother; I have no father, you are my father,’ is an

18. William W. Hallo, Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles, (AOS 43; ed. Henry M.
21. Hallo, Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles, 143.
22. Hallo, Early Mesopotamian Royal Titles, 134, 140, 143.
23. Claudia E. Suter, Gudea’s Temple Building: The Representation of an Early
Mesopotamian Ruler in Text and Image (Groningen: STYX, 2000), 75.
24. Suter, Gudea’s Temple Building, 75.
impassioned assertion of utter dependence.”25 However, whether or not Gudea’s assertion was intended more for divine than human ears, a passage in Cylinder A clearly outlines the rapport Gudea built with the gods:

> When you have fashioned his beloved emblem [. . .]  
> (Then) he will receive (even) your most insignificant words as exalted.  
> The heart of the lord is broad as heaven,  
> (The heart of) Ningursu, the son of Enlil, will be quieted for you,  
> He will reveal to you the plans for his temple.26

Not only is Gudea worthy to receive this divine charge, the above passage describes him as being worthy to then communicate with the gods, saying that Ningursu will exalt even Gudea’s most insignificant words. This scribal assertion reflects Gudea’s perceived power. When Gudea’s words and deeds were given deference by the gods, they thereby gained deference from his mere mortal subjects.

Cylinder A details a tax system instituted as a result of Ningursu’s command to build the temple:

> The Anunnaki gods of the land of Lagash,  
> In the building of the temple of Ningirsu,  
> Gudea in prayer and offerings,  
> They did accompany. For the faithful shepherd,  
> Gudea, in rejoicing It was established.  
> At that time, the ensi placed a tax on his country,  
> In his country [. . .] In the Gu-edinna of Ningirsu,  
> He placed a tax. In his built-up cities where men are established,  
> In the Gugishbarra of Nanshe, He placed a tax.  
> In ‘The wild bull that rises up (and) has no rival,’  
> That holds the white juniper for its king, In the [. . .]  
> Of Ningirsu, He let there be a tax, (and) he had his exalted emblem [. . .]  
> The [. . .] the emblem of Inanna, he had march ahead,  
> (All of this) in order to build the temple of Ningirsu.27

This text makes it quite clear that Gudea taxed his people for the construction of Enninu. It appears that Gudea either taxed places which had not been taxed before or increased taxes already in place, as taxes cannot be established or “placed” in sectors within which they already exist. Because of his prophecy, he was able to garner political and economic support. It is noteworthy that in the first phrase it is written that the Annunaki gods, minor deities in the Sumerian pantheon, accompanied Gudea in prayer and offerings. This divine support would have lent weight to Gudea’s already weighty authority. Gudea’s reputed rapport with the gods magnified his ability to

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collect money through political mandates. The fact that these increased taxes were necessitated by a temple-building project incited by a prophetic dream evidences the strong intersection of Gudea’s prophecy and politics. Furthermore, when establishing and collecting these taxes, Gudea let the emblems of the gods—whatever they happen to be—“march in front.” He propped the political, religious, economic pursuit of Enninu with a divine front—with visible evidence of his claim of the gods’ command and sponsorship. The very nature of the religious project, a temple, additionally motivated the people. Temples, as places of prophecies, would reinforce political and prophetic power. They were monuments to those who constructed them and also locations which the gods frequented—meeting-places between the spiritual and secular worlds where prophecy most often occurred. Not only did Gudea’s prophecy galvanize economic support, it may have led to the willingness of Sumerians to physically contribute as well. E. Jan Wilson, translator of the Cylinders of Gudea, suggests, “It is conceivable that Gudea was ordering the formation of labor gangs for the construction of the temple.”

Throughout Cylinder A, Gudea is described as a shepherd, righteous, often bowing his head, and a great executor—all characteristics coalescing to create a sort of spiritual image, propagating the prophetic nature of this political leader. Gudea’s positive correspondences with the gods would have been viewed as causation for prosperity during his reign. In the ancient Near East, the patron deities of cities rewarded reverence. In return for Gudea’s frequent worship, it was believed that the gods would cause his affairs to prosper and guarantee the physical well-being of himself and his people. Divine calls to action were considered necessary to follow in order to retain prosperity. Lagash prospered brilliantly under Gudea. This prosperity was undoubtedly attributed to the blessings of the gods. Conversely, the loss of it would be attributed to disobedience to, and resultant alienation from, the gods. Because he was prosperous, this mentality enlarged Gudea’s ability to motivate support. Whether Gudea purposefully capitalized on this folkway or not, it undoubtedly contributed to the facility with which he was able to complete Enninu. The ideologies of ancient Mesopotamia, coupled with Gudea’s prophetic, devout nature, increased the religious power of Gudea—thereby increasing his inseparable political power as well.

Cylinder B

Cylinder B of Gudea’s Cylinders delineates the inauguration of Enninu, which Gudea conducts with the gods. This divine responsibility further strength-
ens Gudea’s clout. It is apparent in Cylinder B that Gudea’s prayers were considered necessary for successful agricultural pursuits: “And the children of the lord Ningirsu, With Gudea’s good prayers, They approached the lord Ningirsu so that the great fields might raise their hands And the canals of Lagash Raise their banks.” Gudea’s “good prayers” were thought a necessary component to receiving good weather. This, no doubt, was prompted by Gudea’s reports of Ningirsu’s prophetic message of acceptance mentioned above. In Cylinder B, this idea of strengthened rapport with the gods is iterated when Gudea cries: “Oh Ningirsu! I have built your temple! May you enter into it joyously. . . . Make a good dwelling there! His cry was heard. The warrior, the lord Ningirsu, accepted the prayers of Gudea.” His two-way prophecy was considered to be a major cause of Lagash’s success and therefore increased the stability and power of his political reign.

Not only was Gudea receiving revelation from the gods, the prosperity in Lagash and Gudea’s reported prophecy proved to the people that the gods received or accepted the prayers of Gudea. The people—the children of the lord Ningirsu—supplemented their prayers with those of Gudea, thereby assuring themselves of success. Whether this was mandated directly by Gudea is questionable. I do believe, however, that Gudea’s propaganda of prophecy indirectly established Gudea’s prophetic authority, hence strengthening his strong political position.

When Gudea’s powerful leadership led to the completion of the temple, Ningirsu said:

You are my ruler who has determined the fate for the temple.
Gudea, son of Ningishzida, may your life be long!
The temple [. . .] Its awesome glory falling upon the country,
(Where) An and Enlil determined the fate of Lagash,
and the heroism of Ningirsu was made known to all the lands.

This passage indicates that the successful completion of Enninu was imperative to Gudea’s political reign: if the gods were pleased with it, they would bless him or his people. If the temple was impressive enough, it would stand as a lasting witness not only of Ningirsu, the god it commemorated, but also of Gudea, the man-god on earth who enabled its construction. The converse was also true. When the temple was completed, Gudea is described as mandating physical submission: “The ruler made (the people) in the city kneel, In the country, he made the people bow.” Because of his prophecy and religious authority, Gudea was able to compel the people into physical acts of religious submission. His political and prophetic prowess gave him the ability to influence his people into physical kowtowing—into kneeling not only before the gods, but before his power and temple.

In addition to Gudea’s architectural propagation through the temple, the cylinders record the erection of six stelae in various locations bearing epithets like “The king, the hurricane of Enlin, who is without equal (even) the lord Ningirsu, upon Gudea has looked favorably”; “The king at whose name the foreign lands tremble, (even) Gudea—the lord Ningursu has established his throne”; and “For Gudea, the lord Ningirsu has determined a good fate.” The names of each of these stelae is fascinating—detailing not only Gudea’s self-importance (in spite of his piety or in conjunction with) but also what the people saw to support Gudea’s prophetic and political authority. Even those who could not read could imagine and hear Gudea’s epithets. Cultural objects portraying ancient rulers were put on display to demonstrate the power of the powerful37—thus increasing ancient leaders’ power in this self-contained, self-fueled cycle of demagogic, prophetic policy. This idea continued even through the Neo-Assyrian Empire.38

**The Writing on the Wall**, by John Malcom Russell, conducts a study of Late Assyrian palace inscriptions, remarking that nonliterate and literate subjects alike were impressed by an inscribed surface, for it connoted the vast power and authority of the king who ordered its execution.39

### Conclusion

Whether or not Gudea was a genuine prophet, his prophetic characteristics were understood by Lagashians, largely because of his propagandist temple-building account, temple, and stelae. The node of prophecy and policy therefore increased the effectiveness of his rule and the renaissance it instigated. Gudea’s piety and supposed divine connection were perhaps props for a popular demagogue, influencing his government, policy, methods, and authority. He constructed many temples, but this in itself is not evidence enough to begin to decide. The real question is whether these temples were constructed out of deference for gods or in quest of a lasting legacy. Most likely, and most humanly, the answer entails elements of both motivations. Gudea could have been sincerely pious while at the same time a bit demagogical. Gudea may have had the best of intentions while at the same time masked these intentions with a pseudoprophecy—pretending a divine connection to gain support. Whatever the case may be, Gudea was certainly affected by the political and prophetical systems of Mesopotamia, and he in turn certainly affected both of these systems.

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