

Political Freedom: A Greco-Roman Discovery?

Freedom to live and speak as one pleases with certain inalienable rights has become a hallmark of many modern societies, and often in the West this understanding of the individual's ability to act freely in political, economic, social, and cultural matters is said to begin in ancient Greece and Rome. But were Greco-Roman ideals and practices fundamentally different from other societies in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, or were there more similarities with other societies than classical scholarship has traditionally envisioned? Moses Finley and Kurt Raaflaub are two of the most well-known proponents of Greco-Roman exceptionalism in regards to the concepts of freedom and citizenship (Finley 1964, 1981; Raaflaub 2004). Yet, there are good reasons to question the long-held belief that earlier states, particularly in Mesopotamia, lacked any notion of political freedom (Jacobsen 1943, 1959; Liverani 1993; Van De Mieroop 1999; Barjamovic 2004; Vlassopoulos 2007; Von Dassow 2011). In fact, there is evidence that some Mesopotamian city-states held assemblies in which citizens had the freedom to speak their minds. Throughout the long history of the ancient Near East, various Mesopotamian communities possessed significant amounts of autonomy and local self-rule based on some wider notion of public participation in the political decision-making process. Any comprehensive understanding of the concept of freedom requires that scholars examine ancient Greece and Rome within the much larger context and diversity of states in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East: my paper seeks to provide an illuminating comparison between Greco-Roman political institutions and comparable political bodies found in the ancient Near East.

It must be stated that evidence for mass participation in politics in ancient Mesopotamia is much less extensive than for Greece and Rome. However, much like the Homeric epics, Mesopotamian stories concerning the hero Gilgamesh and the god Marduk show human and

divine assemblies and councils engaging in political discourse. There is also a very revealing school exercise found in multiple copies dated to the early second millennium BC that possibly records a real homicide trial in which an urban assembly decides the fate of three men accused of murder. The most telling aspect of this record is that the names and occupations of various members of the assembly show that men of apparently low status participated in public debate. Ultimately, my goal is to reveal the common ground that some ancient Mesopotamian city-states shared with Greece and Rome, not to argue that Mesopotamia states created democracy or republican institutions in the mold of Greco-Roman states. The developed political institutions of Greece and Rome along with writers able to articulate sustained political discourses about Greco-Roman practices and ideals left a much more lasting impact on later generations. Nevertheless, modern scholars should continue to follow in the spirit of Herodotus who wrote his history “so that human events would not fade with time, nor the great and wondrous deeds of both Greeks and non-Greeks would go without glory.”

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