

LIFE IN Mesopotamia

What was life like in the world's first cities?

By Victor Landauro

Along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Iraqis now toil to rebuild cities scarred by war. On the same soil where bulldozers clear the wreckage of bombed buildings, the world's first cities rose thousands of years ago.

Historians say that the first civilization ever began in about 3500 B.C. in Sumer, in what is now southeastern Iraq. Sumer was located in an area called Mesopotamia, Greek for "between the rivers."

The Sumerians were the first people to grow crops, construct tall buildings, and create a writing system. They also invented the wheel.

◆ Land of Plenty

The Sumerian civilization could not have begun without one key ingredient: water.

A limestone tablet with pictographic carvings from the late 4th century B.C.



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Mesopotamia's dry climate offered little fertile land and few natural resources. But centuries of flooding had deposited mounds of rich soil on both sides of the Tigris and Euphrates.

The Sumerians built a system of canals and reservoirs that tapped into the rivers. They also constructed **levees**, or banks of dirt, to control the seasonal floods.

By using the rivers to irrigate land, farmers could grow wheat, barley, sesame, and various fruits and vegetables. They learned to tame cattle, donkeys, and sheep.

With a plentiful food supply, many Sumerians gave up their

nomadic (wandering) existence. Families grew in size and began to form communities. Expanding communities, in turn, led to a need for goods and services.

To meet this demand, many people left their farms to become carpenters, weavers, and engineers. Traders brought gold, marble, cosmetics, timber, and spices from nearby lands known today as Syria, Iran, Turkey, and India.

◆ Life in the Big City

By 3000 B.C., about 12 cities thrived on the Sumerian plain. These urban centers, such as Ur, Eridu, Nippur, and Uruk, were



This stone carving, which dates back to 2300 B.C., shows the King of Ur (left), honoring the chief god of Ur.

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MESOPOTAMIA TIME LINE

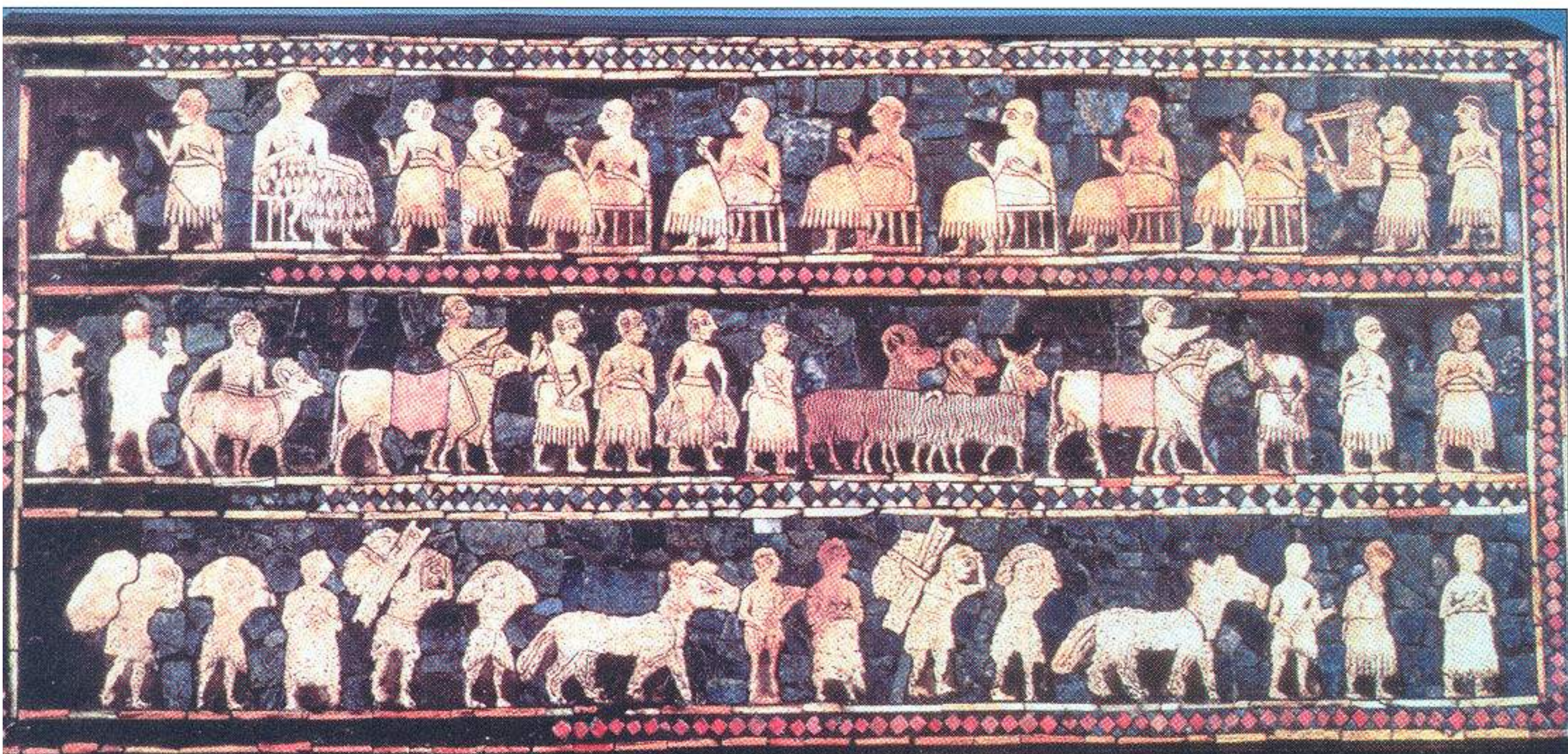
5000 B.C.

5000 B.C.: Nomads from the area that is now Iran begin to settle in southeastern Mesopotamia. These early settlers plant wheat and barley and tame animals.

3500 B.C.: The Sumerians settle along the Euphrates and begin to build **ziggurats** (temples). They also create a crude writing system.

3000 B.C.: Nippur, Ur, and Eridu become the leading Sumerian cities. Sumerian writing evolves to include cuneiform letters.

2750 B.C.: Gilgamesh, the hero of Sumerian legends, becomes king of the city-state Uruk.



"The Royal Standard of Ur," a mosaic from the Sumerian Royal Graves of Ur, created in 2750 B.C., depicts daily life in peaceful times.

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called **city-states**—independent areas with their own government and culture. Tens of thousands of people lived in these cities and their surrounding villages and farms. The fiercely competitive city-states often waged war over land and water rights.

Most urban dwellers lived in one- or two-story mud-brick houses. They whitewashed the

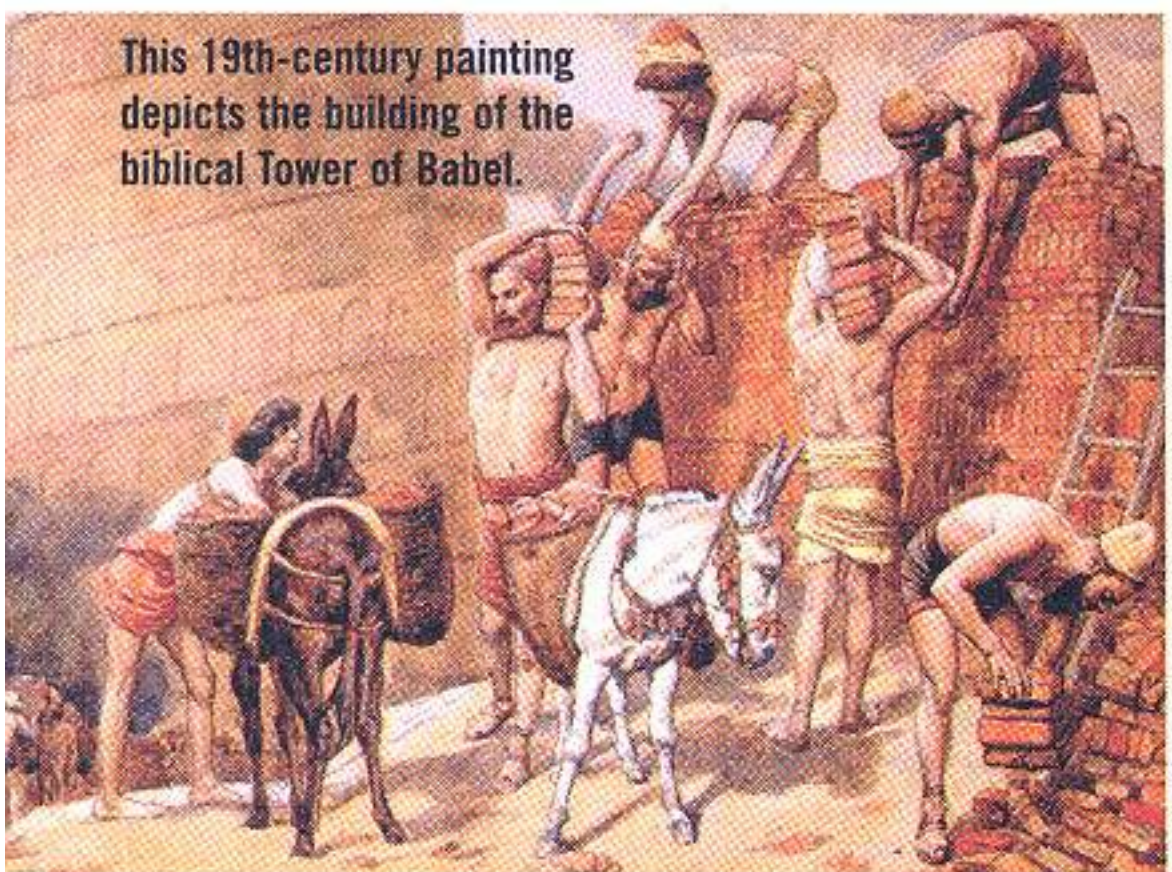
interior and exterior walls to keep rooms cool. Wealthy people built houses made of imported wood and stone.

Most women stayed at home to prepare meals, manage the household, and train their daughters to become wives and mothers. Women also worked as weavers, potters, and jewelry makers. They typically wore gowns tied at the shoulders with

their right arms exposed. Wealthier women wore elaborate headdresses made of metals and precious stones.

Men controlled nearly every aspect of life. They wore kiltlike garments and worked as soldiers, traders, farmers, and craftsmen.

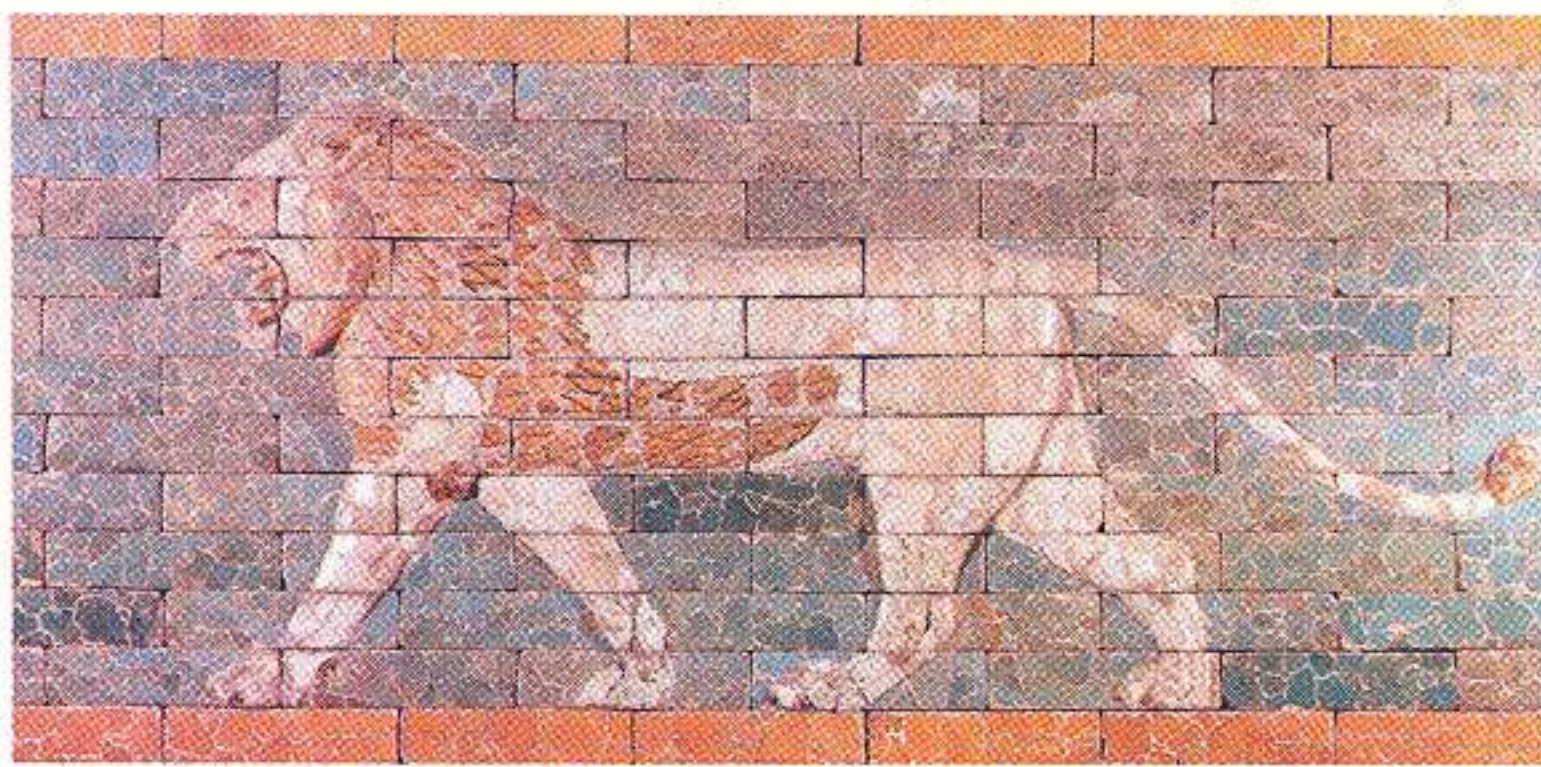
Sumerians believed that a personal god was assigned to each man. (Women were not deemed important enough for the gods.)



This 19th-century painting depicts the building of the biblical Tower of Babel.

THE JEWISH MUSEUM/ART RESOURCE NY

A lion representing the goddess Ishtar adorns the entrance to a Babylonian temple built in the early 6th century B.C.



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2250 B.C.: Ur-Nammu, king of Ur, creates one of the world's earliest law systems. The new laws call for the greater protection of widows, orphans, and the poor.

2000-1900 B.C.: Foreign invaders conquer areas of Mesopotamia. Ur, the most-advanced Sumerian city-state, is destroyed.

1800 B.C.: Hammurabi ascends to the throne of Babylonia. He unites all the city-states under one kingdom and introduces his own law code.

1100 B.C.: Mesopotamians begin to use iron to make tools and weapons.

600 B.C.: Construction begins on the Tower of Babel by the descendants of Noah, as told in the Bible.

Treasures Found—and Lost

Many of the Mesopotamian artifacts feared looted from the Baghdad National Museum are safe. Cultural officials in Iraq have discovered underground vaults where priceless artifacts were stored. Museum workers hid the relics before the Iraqi war began last March.

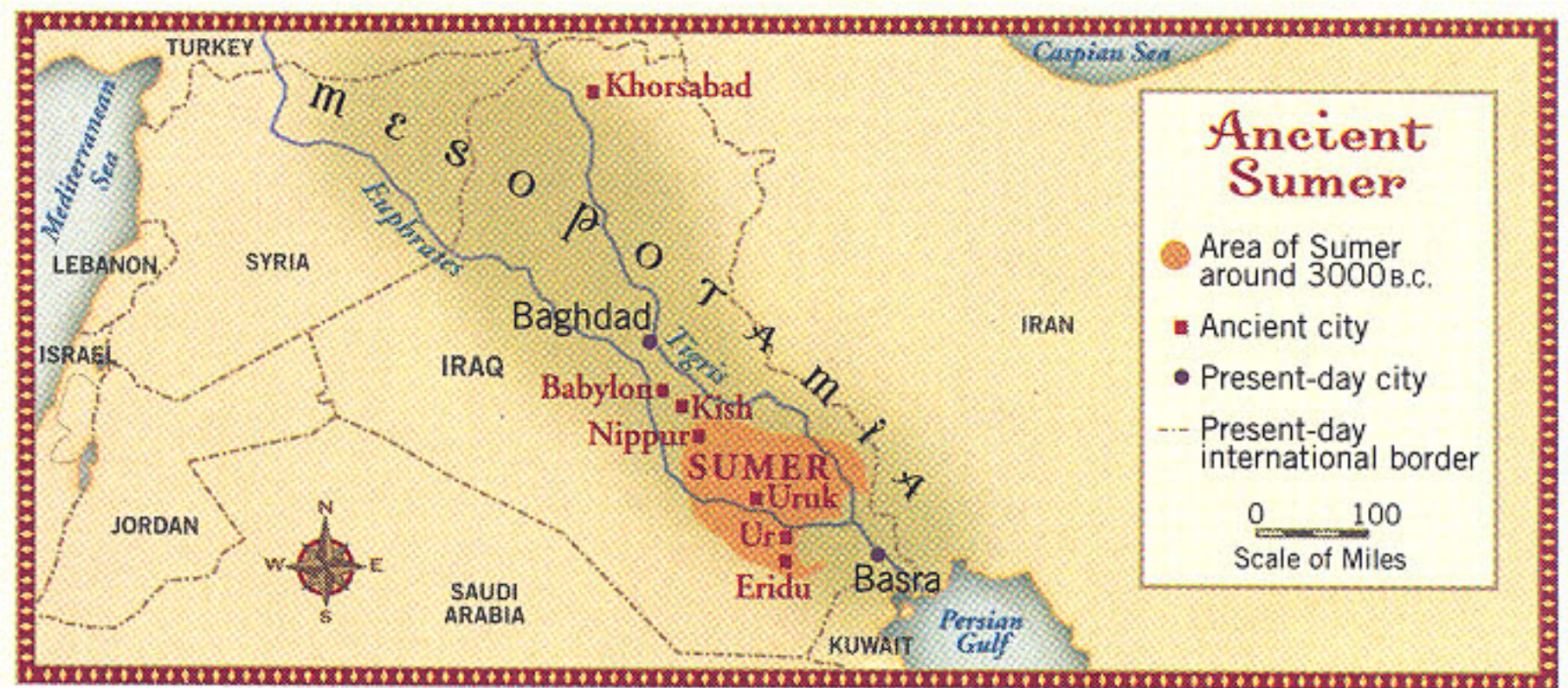
“It is a relief that so much of the museum’s main collection is safe and in good condition,” said Pietro Cordone, an official with the U.S.-led interim authority. Recovered items include gold bracelets, bronze bowls, and clay pots that date from the 6th century B.C.

But the looting of Mesopotamian artifacts continues in other areas of Iraq. Thieves have raided several major archaeological sites.

“I think much more is leaving the country now from these sites than from the museums,” says one archaeologist in Iraq.



Right: A painting of the 19th-century excavation of Khorsabad, the capital city of King Sargon II (721-705 B.C.).
Below: A map of the land “between the rivers.”



The men prayed to these gods for long and prosperous lives.

◆ Sumerian Inventions

Sumerians assigned a specific god to each city-state. They often fought wars over these gods.

As a form of worship, Sumerians built a pyramid-shaped temple in the center of each city-state. These seven- and eight-story structures, called **ziggurats**, were constructed with baked mud-bricks and dominated the skyline.

The rooms inside were adorned with murals and statues made from imported marble, alabaster, and colored stones. Temple farmers raised food and animals for religious sacrifices.

A king-priest ruled each city-state and helped to defend it. He also oversaw irrigation and agricultural projects, road and temple building, and the enforcement of laws.

The idea of monarchy began in Sumer. At first, community elders appointed a male to serve as a temporary ruler during a

A bull’s head decorates a lyre, circa 2550-2400 B.C.

time of crisis or war. When the emergency ended, the ruler would **cede** (give up) his leadership role back to the elders. But as time passed, these rulers became reluctant to give up power. Success in battle, interpreted as pleasing to the gods, could also extend a leader’s rule.

Temple priests helped the king-priest to administer religious and government duties. They surveyed land, distributed surplus grains, organized religious and educational services, and sponsored trade expeditions abroad.

All of this activity led to a need for record keeping. So, Sumerians created a written language of crude symbols. Early writers used sharpened reeds to draw **pictographs**, or “word pictures,” onto wet clay tablets. The tablets hardened into permanent stone records.

Eventually, the writing system was simplified into a series of wedge-shaped lines called **cuneiform** (*kyu-NEE-uh-FORM*). This alphabet allowed for greater freedom in expressing words and ideas. The Sumerian alphabet consisted of more than 600 symbols.

Since few Sumerians could read or write, they hired **scribes**, or pro-



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professional writers, to prepare documents for them. Scribes trained for years at schools, or **edubbas**. They studied mathematics, accounting, engineering, and literature. Only upper-class boys could attend such schools.

The ability to keep permanent records led to the creation of a legal system. The Sumerian king Ur-Nammu devised a set of rules that he hoped would help govern and unify all Sumerians.

His first laws called for the dismissal of corrupt government officials; he also established a standard set of weights and measures. Other laws protected widows, the elderly, and orphans. Royal scribes carved the laws onto clay tablets that were displayed throughout the city.

Sometime around 3500 B.C., an unknown craftsman built the

first wheeled cart. This device allowed farmers to haul heavier loads to market. The carts also served military purposes. Donkeys led chariots into battle, allowing soldiers greater speed and mobility.

◆ The Destruction of Sumer

Sometime in the 1700s B.C., foreign invaders conquered Mesopotamia. The invasion brought an end to the region's independent city-states. The Sumerian civilization died almost completely.

But Sumerian inventions lived on. From ziggurats, we have skyscrapers. From cuneiform tablets, we have newspapers, magazines, and other printed media. The world's school systems, codes of law, and alphabets all draw from this civilization that once sprouted between two mighty rivers. **JS**

Your Turn

WORD MATCH

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 1. city-state | A. give up |
| 2. ziggurat | B. pyramid-shaped temple |
| 3. nomadic | C. independent city and its surrounding territory |
| 4. scribe | D. professional writer |
| 5. cede | E. wandering |

THINK ABOUT IT

How did the invention of writing lead to other significant social, economic, and legal developments in Mesopotamia?