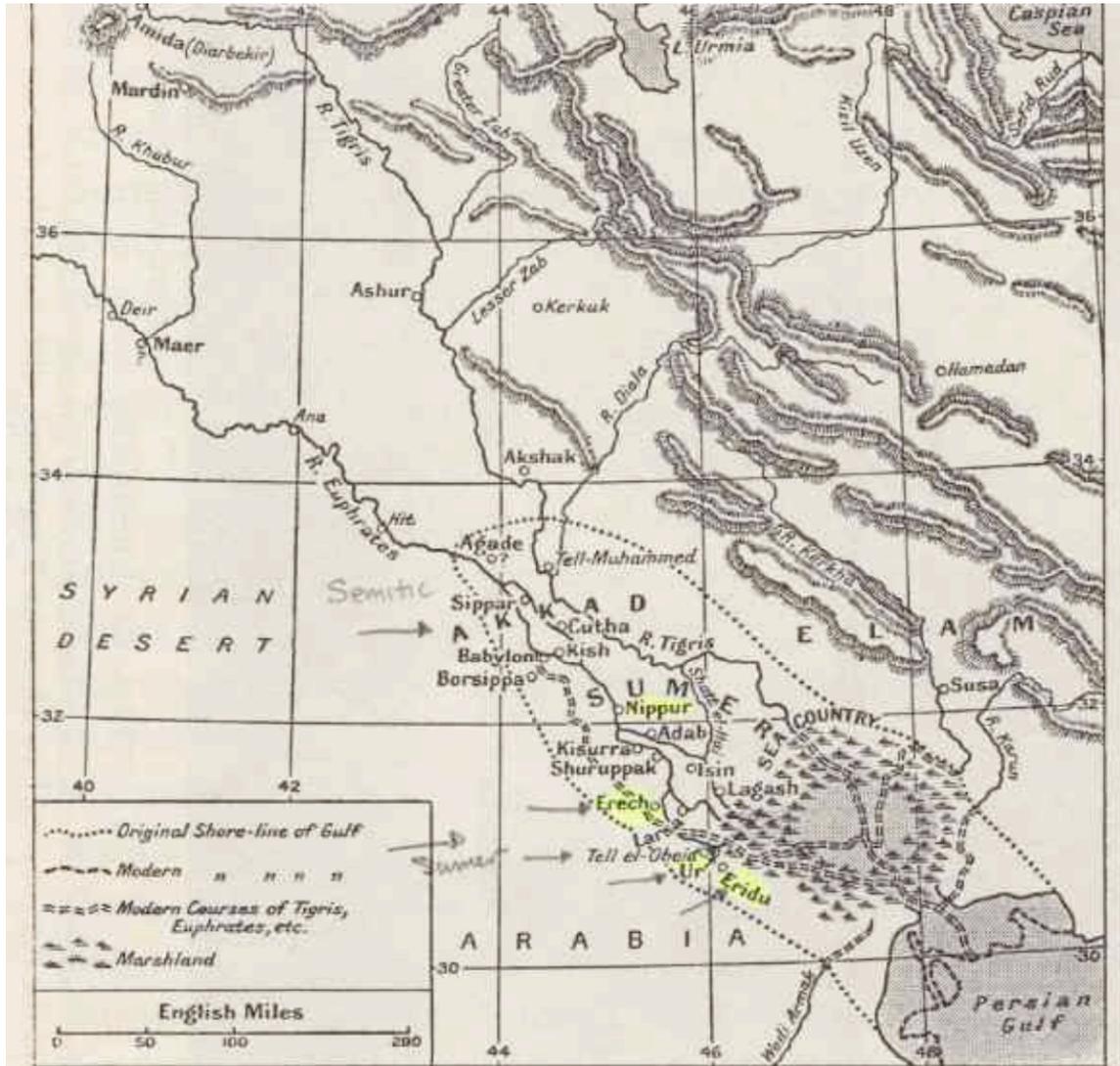


Geography of Sumer

4000 BC

During the 4th millennium BC the city of Uruk was dedicated to the fertility goddess Inanna and the shepherd god, Dumuzi. Uruk (Erech) lay in what is now, Southern Iraq,



2. MAP OF SUMER AND AKKAD

*From Harmsworth's "Universal History of the World,"
by permission of the Amalgamated Press, Ltd.*

where the sweet waters of the Tigris & Euphrates (the primordial father/creator god) meet the salt marshes and the salt water of the Persian Gulf (the primordial mother/creator god).

For two thousand years previous (6000BC), the climate had been warm and humid and the stone age people (Ubaid People) settled as the glaciers of the last Ice Age retreated.¹ The temperatures of that region began to steadily cool and the air was becoming drier. People slowly entered the fertile land of Sumer.

Over the years, immigrants from the dry lands of the steppes in Northern Iraq, settled in the fertile Euphrates valley of the South. Attracted by irrigation agriculture they built new villages on the river banks and clustered on ancient settlements which were the homes of the great gods upon whom prosperity depended. As the populations increased in size their ingenuity was challenged. They invented the plough and the sled for dragging grain. They designed chariots² and sails for ships so they could speedily deliver goods to other communities. Surplus food accumulated and was redistributed or used in trade for metals in Anatolia (Turkey). Spices, precious stones came from India and gold came from the deserts of Egypt. For their own part, they quarried obsidian, borrowed the idea of the potters' wheel and started casting copper alloys which began the era of industrial production.

¹ When the glaciers retreated they left behind inland lakes and rivers and sometimes, seas. The topography of Iraq shows the land to have a long passage of eroded terrain running down the middle of the country forming large gully or depression. To the west of the depression lies desert and to the east of the depression lie the steppes (plains) and mountain ranges. For images of Paleolithic art please refer to the Picture File on this site.

² Chariots had the axle attached to the wheels so the whole unit moved. Also, the chariots were drawn by onagers, wild asses. They were larger and stronger than donkeys, were pale in color with a large dark stripe down their backs.

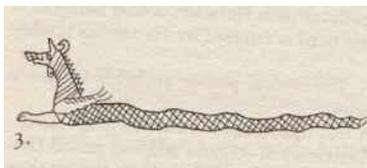


Palm groves were developed, fields and orchards were cultivated and in between lay patches of steppe and desert. Villages disappeared and the inhabitants clustered to make towns and cities. The authority of chiefs and priests expanded as the digging and maintenance of canals and equitable distribution of water required more administration.

Regardless of the ambitious irrigation projects, fertile land became more scarce. Those who owned more fertile land became more powerful and wealthy. Technical expertise grew, architecture and artistic accomplishment flourished, writing³ was invented to record transactions and finally, after 6000 years of relative peace, there arose armed conflict. Marauding hordes descended from the mountains⁴. Cities became fortified and

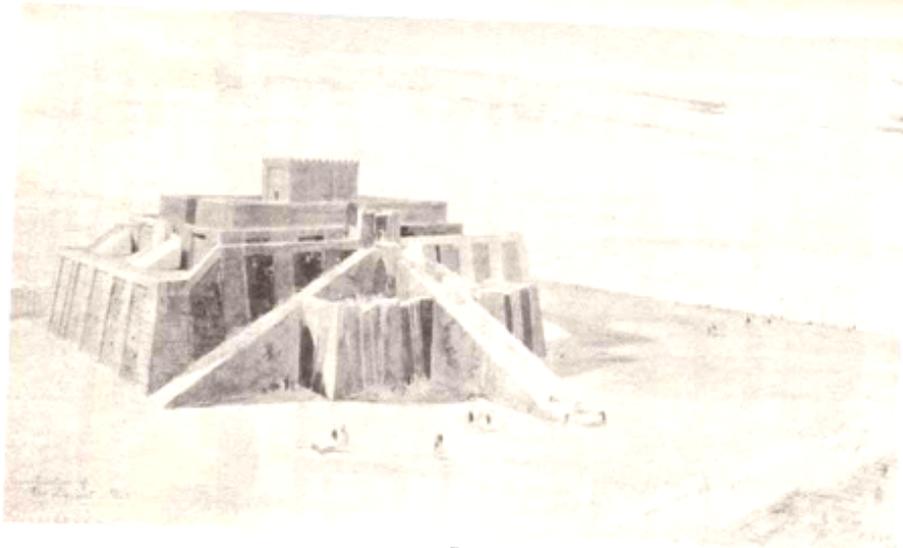
³ Writing evolved from pictographic style to phonetic style when scribes realized that the picture that named one thing sounded like the name of another. So they invented a symbol that conveyed the sound.

⁴The word for “mountain” is “kur”. The literal meaning is “foreign land”. Marauding hordes would descend from the mountains to pillage etc. “Kur” is also the name of the monster that lies curled in the space between the Underworld and the primordial ocean. The Kur is terrifying but is also the protector, a buffer between chaos and organized experience of life in the Aboveworld. Also, the door to the Underworld existed in the Lapis lazuli mountain. Inanna enters the Underworld through this portal.



well defined territories populated by priests, scribes, architects, artists, overseers, merchants, factory workers, soldiers, peasants, religious rulers, or war leaders. Sumer had become urbanized.

The huge ½ square mile city of Uruk (modern day Warka) was a coalition of two cities: Kullaba dedicated to An, the sky god and E-anna, the main dwelling place of Inanna, the fertility goddess and Queen of Heaven and Earth. In the center of E-anna stand the remains of a temple tower or ziggurat built in the 2nd millennium not unlike the Maya temples of the Yucatan and Central America. Underneath the remains seven previous temples have been unearthed dating back to approximately 5000 BC. (See floor plans and picture of earliest temples in Picture File). Excavations show one of the unearthed temples was divided into a pair. One side dedicated to Inanna and the other side dedicated to Dumuzi, her lover-fertility god. These temples were immense in size

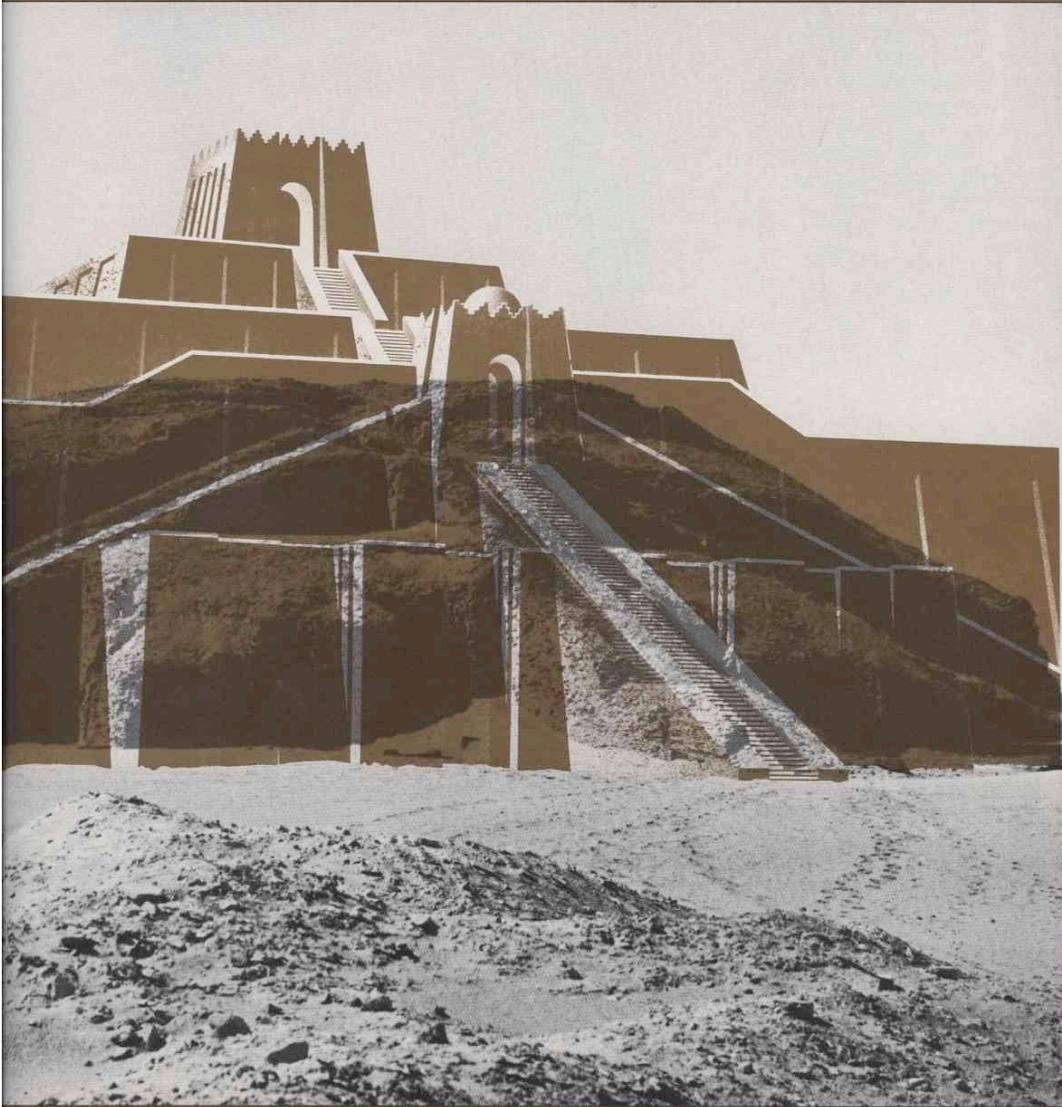


By permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London

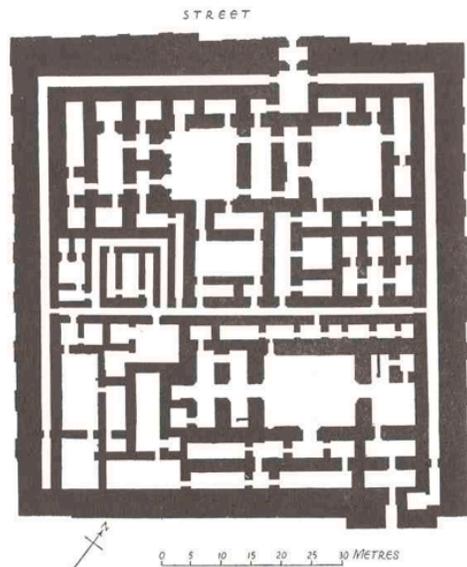
24. THE ZIGGURAT OF UR, RESTORED

From a drawing by F. G. Newton

including tall columns approximately ten feet in diameter, courtyard decorated in colorful mosaics in geometrical patterns. (See Picture File for temple features). In later centuries pink wash covered the inner walls representing the glaring sunlight. In addition there were brilliantly colored frescoes. The final temple rose 15 meters above ground, had a top or a staging area which contained the sanctuary where the priests of the sky god officiated.



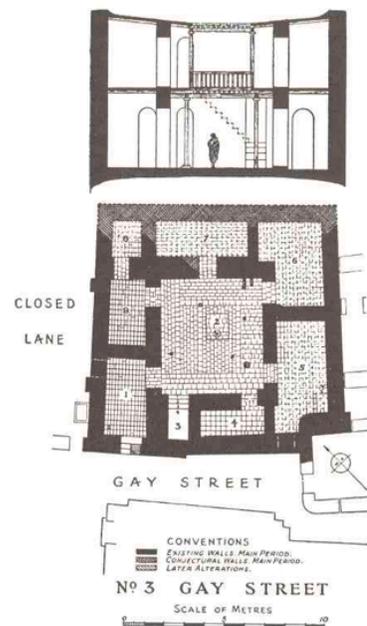
Houses were built of carefully arranged oblong baked mud bricks consisting of three buildings containing 2-4 spacious rooms each looking onto a courtyard



25. PLAN OF THE TEMPLE OF NIN-GAL AT UR

Founded by Bur-sin, king of Ur, 2220 B.C., and re-built by Enannatum the High Priest at Nannar and son of Lib-it-Ishtar, king of Isin, ca. 2080 B.C. The building includes two separate sanctuaries of the goddess and a chapel for the worship of Bur-sin

Based on the drawing by A. S. Whitburn, A.R.I.B.A., by permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London



26. PLAN AND RECONSTRUCTION OF A PRIVATE HOUSE AT UR, OF THE PERIOD OF THE ISIN AND LARSA DYNASTIES 2112-1935 B.C.

By A. S. Whitburn

From "The Antiquaries Journal," Vol. VII, by permission of the Society of Antiquaries of London

(See picture file for more images)

Excavations also produced cylinder seals (cylinders were engraved with a scene that was rolled onto hot wax, wet clay etc.) or stamps to identify a particular owner of baskets or jar stoppers. Just as today's miniature art of postage stamps signify what our civilization is concerned about, the ancient Sumerian stamp seals and cylinder seals give us clues to the concerns of the Sumerians.

The cylinder seal was made of semi-precious stone 1 ½ to 5" long and anywhere from ½ to 1" thick. They were pierced lengthwise with a hole so they could be worn on a string around the neck. The surface, when rolled on clay etc., of course, could be repeated. Scenes depicted massacres of prisoners, cattle walking in herds, gathered in pens or attacked by lions or mysterious ceremonies conducted by priests.

a



b



c



Various mythological scenes on cylinder seals. (a) The sun-god rising from the mountain. In the center Utu, the sun-god, rises from the mountain, with rays from his shoulders and a saw in his hand. To the right of Utu is Enki, the god of water and wisdom, who is accompanied by his two-faced minister, Isimud. To the left of Utu is a vegetation goddess, and next to her a hunter (ca. 2200 B.C.). (British Museum.) (b) The water-god in his sea house (Abzu) (ca. 2200 B.C.). On the extreme right is Enki, the water-god, enthroned in his sea house. To the left is Utu, the sun-god, with his rays and saw. The middle deity is unidentified. (British Museum.) (c) Divine journey (ca. 2200 B.C.). An unidentified deity holding a plow is traveling in a boat whose stern ends in a snake and whose prow ends in the body of a god propelling the boat. (Iraq Museum.)

Art objects found in Uruk show a fully developed civilization. Vases of alabaster, silver and hammered gold engraved with scenes and names of their owners. Also found were game boards constructed of shell, bone, lapis lazuli and red limestone hollowed out to contain the game pieces, a bull's head hammered of gold and bearded lapis lazuli, a wood sedan chair decorated with mosaic inlay and a gold lions' heads. (See picture file under "Objects" for more images.)

The thoughtful work of the Sumerians radiated over the entire Near-East influencing other oriental cultures. It is deduced that Egypt borrowed heavily from Sumerian culture. For example, cylinder seals and their designs of zoomorphic renderings were adopted. The design for the royal tombs and possibly the early Sumerian pictographs influenced Egypt's hieroglyphic language. Syrian architecture in the 3rd millennium had a strong Sumerian flavor. The Sumerian palace library held Sumerian and Semitic texts in cuneiform writing. Sumerian cylinder seals have been found in Iran, Turkey, Lebanon and Palestine. It is puzzling, however, that 300 kilometers north of Sumer, in the upper Tigris Valley, there is little or no evidence of the Sumerian culture. The inhabitants fought with maces and slings, made pottery by hand and ignored writing. It appears the Sumerians thought their northern neighbors to be foreign and culturally inferior.

Pure Sumerian culture ended in 1595 BC when the northerners (Hittites, Kassites) invaded and governed. The Sumerians never willingly bowed under their dominance. Interestingly, the conquerors piously collected old Sumerian texts, artwork and ceremonial activities implicitly showing honor and appreciation to this ancient civilization.

No one knows where the Sumerians came from. What can be deduced is that three original language groups settled in Southern Iraq: the Sumer, the Semites and a small group of unknown origin. All shared the same way of life, institutions, artistic traditions and religious beliefs. Each spoke a different dialect. Scientific examination of grave sites show that the Sumer speaking people may have originated in today's Armenia and Mediterranean regions. However, their language was not related to the Greeks, Hittites, or Indo-Aryans and is not related to any other language. Their myths and legends reflect rivers, marshes, reeds, tamarisks, and palm trees typical of Southern Iraq indicating they had always lived there. If this is true, then the people of Sumer were directly related to the Neolithic farmers in the region before 8000 BC.

Please see the Bibliography for sources of information and images. And please see Picture File under the categories of - - - - - for more Images.