THE SUMERIANS

LOST CIVILIZATIONS

PAUL COLLINS

LOST CIVILIZATIONS

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To my parents

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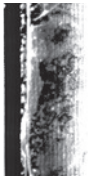

Chronology

c. 6000–4000 BC	Ubaid period
c. 4000–3800 BC	Early Uruk period
c. 3800–3500 BC	Middle Uruk period
c. 3500–3100 BC	Late Uruk period Proto-cuneiform, probably developed at Uruk
c. 3100–2900 BC	Jemdet Nasr period Proto-cuneiform adopted in cities across southern Mesopotamia
c. 2900–2350 BC	Early Dynastic period
2800 BC	Archaic tablets from Ur in Sumerian
2500 BC	Royal inscriptions and administrative texts in Sumerian; some Akkadian texts
c. 2350–2150 BC	Agade Empire
c. 2150–2100 BC	Lagash Dynasty Cylinders of Gudea are longest known texts in Sumerian

c. 2110–2000 BC	Third Dynasty of Ur Sumerian a dying or dead language, the official administrative language of the state; royal title 'King of Sumer and Akkad' introduced; literary texts composed, including stories of Bilgames (Gilgamesh)
c. 2000–1600 BC	Old Babylonian period Sumerian a dead language, school boys copy some Ur III texts, new literary works created, Sumerian King List copied and expanded
c. 1500–1150 BC	Kassite Dynasty Ancient temples excavated and rebuilt; Sumerian a literary language
950–610 BC	Neo-Assyrian Empire
669–*c.* 630 BC	Ashurbanipal reads Sumerian
610–539 BC	Neo-Babylonian Empire
539–331 BC	Achaemenid Persian Empire
331–141 BC	Seleucid Empire
141 BC–AD 224	Parthian Empire
AD 75	Last dated cuneiform inscription
224–641	Sasanian Empire
641–61	Rashidun Caliphate

661–750	Umayyad Caliphate
750–1258	Abbasid Caliphate
1258	Mongol forces capture and sack Baghdad
1401–1508	Black and White sheep Turkmen dominate Mesopotamia
1508–1638	Safavid Persian Empire
1638–1918	Ottoman Empire
1747–1831	Mamluk Dynasty Victorian scientists develop schemes of racial classification that are exploited by some to justify colonization and slavery
1845–1914	Thousands of antiquities shipped to Istanbul, London, Paris, Berlin, Chicago and Philadelphia
1849–90	Sumerian and Akkadian languages identified
1914	British invasion and occupation of Mesopotamia
1920	Iraqi revolt against British Mandate
1921	Kingdom of Iraq established
1922–39	Thousands of antiquities shipped to London, Chicago, Oxford and Philadelphia
1924	Gertrude Bell's antiquities legislation introduced

1926	Baghdad Antiquities Museum opens
1932	Britain declares Kingdom of Iraq independent
1941	British invasion and occupation
1958	July Revolution
1966	Iraq Museum in Baghdad opens
1968	Ba'ath Party takes power
1974	Iraqi antiquities legislation abolishes division of finds
1979	Saddam Hussein becomes Iraqi president Looting of sites in advance of U.S.-led invasion
2003	U.S.-led invasion and occupation Looting of Iraq Museum
2014–17	Iraqi Civil War; defeat of ISIS/Da'esh north of Baghdad
2019	Iraq's museums open seven days a week


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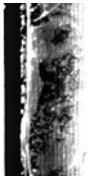


ONE
Origins

> After the kingship descended from heaven, the kingship was in Eridu. In Eridu, Alulim became king; he ruled for 28,800 years.[1]

So read the first lines of the Sumerian King List. Although several versions of the List have survived, the most extensive, as well as the most complete, now resides in the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, many thousands of miles from the place where it was composed. It takes the form of a small block of clay, about the size of a modern house brick, known to specialists as a 'prism'. Perforated through its length, perhaps so that it could be rotated on a vertical spindle for reading, the prism is inscribed on each of the four sides with two columns of wedge-shaped (cuneiform) script, used here to write the Sumerian language. Based on information in the text, this particular version of the King List can be dated to about 1800 BC. We are less clear, however, about precisely where it was written, since the prism had been sold in Iraq to the English collector Herbert Weld-Blundell shortly before 1923, the year he gave it to the Ashmolean along with many other cuneiform tablets (a story to which we will return later). It may have been plundered from the site of Tell as-Senkereh (ancient Larsa), one of the thousands of abandoned settlement mounds – often described by the Arabic word *tell* – that lie scattered across the flat plains of southern Iraq.

The document lists a succession of cities, their rulers and the length of their reigns. It is not history as we would understand it, but a combination of myth, legend and historical information.[2] This is a work of scholarship, carefully crafted by learned scribes

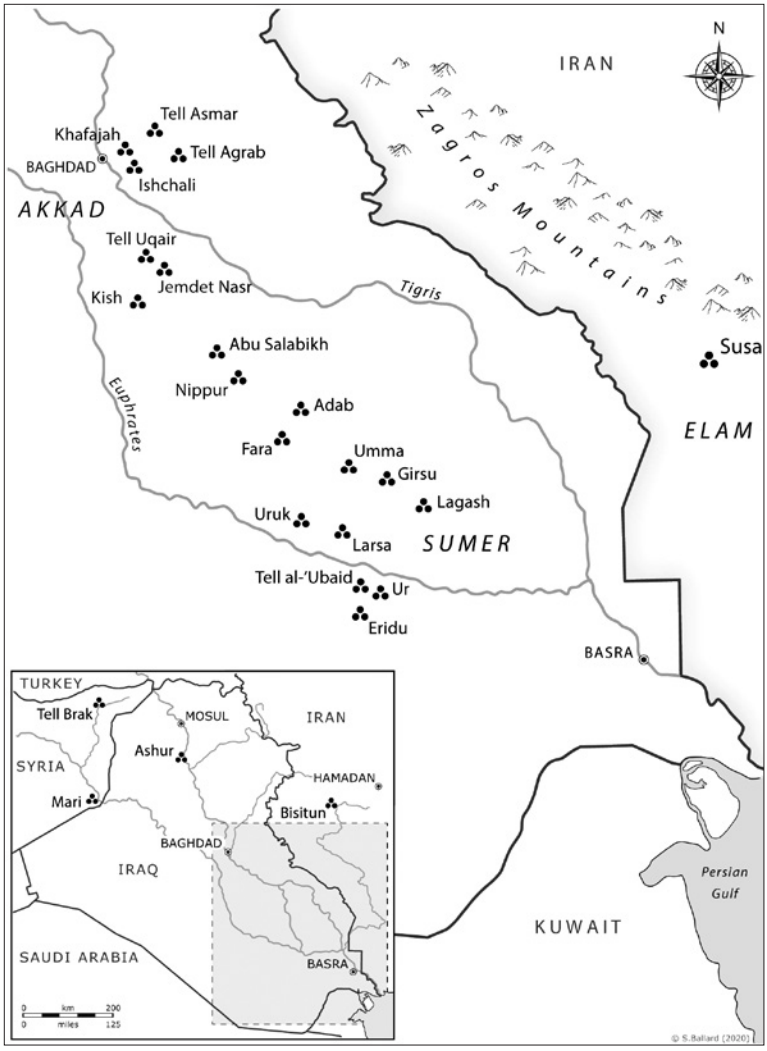
Baked clay 'prism' inscribed with the so-called Sumerian King List, *c.* 1800 BC.

to connect the politics of their own time with the mythological origins of kingship in a deep past. It seems to have been composed to imply that the dominion of Mesopotamia (the region comprising approximately present-day Iraq and eastern Syria) could only be exercised by one city at a given time and for a limited period as determined by the gods – and for these particular intellectuals it all began at Eridu.

What remains of Eridu lies today in a dusty, featureless desert, some 35 km (22 mi.) west of the River Euphrates in southern Iraq. Six thousand years ago, however, the headwaters of the Persian Gulf lay much further north than they do today, and the small town was surrounded by freshwater reed marshes, fertile alluvial soil and waterways giving access to the open sea. Life was based on fishing and the herding of cattle, sheep and goats, together with the cultivation of wheat, barley, apples, figs and groves of date palms. Eridu was one town in a network of settlements that had developed on the riverbanks across a landscape of flood plains formed by branches of the Tigris and Euphrates in the southern half of Mesopotamia.

As early as 2500 BC, Mesopotamian texts link Eridu with the god Enki, whose temple was located there. He was the god of sweet, fresh water and therefore closely associated with its life-giving properties. Over time, however, Enki also came to be identified as the source of divine knowledge that had, at the very beginning of time, established civilization, which was understood as the rule of kings. To the scholars of Mesopotamia, looking back in time for the start of something significant had become important for understanding their present.

The search for such beginnings is a familiar concept to us. Magazine articles, books, television series and museum exhibitions all recognize people's fascination with the origins of things, whether that be the first humans, the earliest farmers, the world's oldest cities, the start of writing, the birth of art and so on. These moments act as markers in time that can in some sense be grasped in the longer history of humanity and also offer ways of explaining familiar features of our own world. Such an approach comes, however, with challenges. When we ask a seemingly straightforward question



Map of southern Mesopotamia showing sites mentioned in the text.

about the beginning of something, it can very quickly devolve into debates over semantics – what do we mean exactly by terms such as 'city', 'writing' or 'art', or indeed when exactly can anything be said to truly start? For most modern historians, the past is less a series of firsts or even specific events and more a complex process of change over time. Nonetheless, a general fascination with origins persists, and this is often linked to questions about the rise of

'civilization'. This is another term that is difficult to define very clearly. It is often represented by a list of specific (depending who is selecting them) technical or aesthetic achievements, or understood as representing a particular stage of cultural development. Civilization has been – and very often still is – viewed as a process by which a society or place reaches an 'advanced' stage of social and cultural development and organization, often by comparison with Western societies, which are viewed as the most complex (and therefore superior) way of living. The current difficulties in defining these terms were not always so apparent, and, as we will discover, certainties about their meanings have been fundamental in shaping how the Sumerians have been understood and imagined.

As was the case in Mesopotamia, looking back in time always serves some purpose in the present. We in the West (problematic as this simplified term is) have incorporated a number of past cultures and peoples into our own history and identity, often in relation to their role in shaping our 'civilization'. Some play large roles, such as ancient Greece and Rome; 'rediscovered' by the West, starting with a fourteenth-century Renaissance, they have come to embody notions of perfection and order, especially in politics and aesthetics. Other 'lost' civilizations that were 'discovered' by Western adventurers and archaeologists include ancient Egypt, which today occupies a seemingly very familiar place in our lives; through the 'mysteries' of hieroglyphs, pyramids and mummies, it presents a heady mix of orientalized otherness but with imagined accessibility.[3] The societies of Mesopotamia, albeit less overtly, have also played their own distinct role in shaping mainstream Western culture. Like the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, some of the region's peoples, such as the Assyrians and Babylonians, were never entirely 'lost', since echoes of them persisted in biblical and classical accounts, which were widely read and quoted in the West, as well as in Arabic and Persian texts, which had a much narrower circulation outside the regions where those languages were spoken. In European imagination, the Assyrians of northern Mesopotamia were associated with biblical oppression, but with the uncovering of their royal palaces at Nimrud and Nineveh in the mid-nineteenth century they could

be linked with Victorian enterprise and science (so, for example, King Sennacherib, who established Nineveh as the Assyrian capital around 700 BC, is depicted on the Albert Memorial in London's Hyde Park as the embodiment of engineering). At the same time southern Mesopotamia was understood as the home of the Jewish Patriarch Abraham and the site of the Tower of Babel.[4]

The Sumerians, however, were completely unknown – and not just in the West – until some 150 years ago, when they began to be untangled and constructed from the archaeological and textual evidence uncovered in Iraq and Syria. The mysteries of who they were, where they came from and what they looked like were so difficult to define, at least initially, that they were never imagined or claimed to the same extent as were places such as Egypt, which had a much longer relationship with Western thought. They had no iconic monuments, such as the Egyptian pyramids, for example, that had withstood the ravages of time and through which a connection might be established.

The Sumerians were first 'discovered' in the second half of the nineteenth century, by which time European states, supported by military power, had established conditions in which explorers, diplomats, merchants and scholars could travel to Mesopotamia, record their impressions and bring home objects as souvenirs for their own enjoyment or for display in museums. To European eyes, the modern 'Oriental' peoples of the Middle East were largely detached from the region's ancient populations, whose appearance in biblical and classical texts looked to make them European by default. It seemed evident, therefore, that they 'belonged' to the West, as did their monuments and artefacts.[5] Backed by military and economic muscle, the European powers harvested the remains of the past, colonizing antiquity as much as they did the living communities of the region. Indeed, a recurring theme of this book is warfare and ownership. Conflict in the Middle East brought Europeans to the region, first as mercenaries and military advisers, and then as invading armies. The colonial soldiers were preceded, joined and followed by scholars of antiquity, interested in answering questions initially constructed around ideas of race. As the evidence for the Sumerians was unearthed and deciphered it

became closely woven into narratives about the origins of Western civilization. While empires and ideologies were pitted against each other, often in bloody wars of unimaginable ferocity, through much of the twentieth century, a reassuring picture of the Sumerians emerged as a peaceful people responsible for the invention of nothing less than cities, writing and the wheel; they could even be credited with experiments in democracy. Indeed, in 1963 Samuel Kramer, an eminent scholar of Sumerian language and texts, felt confident in describing an ancient people

> remarkable not only for their material progress and technological resourcefulness, but also for their idea, ideals, and values. Clear-sighted, level headed, they took a pragmatic view of life and, within the limits of their intellectual resources, rarely confused fact with fancy, wish with fulfilment, or mystery with mystification.[6]

Kramer might as well have been describing the best of his own liberal arts students at the University of Pennsylvania. Even when the language used to describe the Sumerians is less extravagant, the role of a peaceful and learned people as the ultimate source of fundamental features of modern life remains attractive and popular. In his search for the origins of Western civilization in 2010, for example, the historian Richard Miles found the answer some 6,000 years ago, 'when the heads of several different [Sumerian] family groups resolved that their chances of a prosperous and secure future would be enhanced if they worked together as a more or less permanent collective'.[7] In this way, 'while most of the rest of humankind struggled to progress beyond simple agricultural techniques, the Sumerian people, all across the flat plains of southern Mesopotamia, were enjoying many of the benefits and trappings of a civilized urban life.'[8]

The Sumerians are understood today, therefore, as a distinct people, speaking a common language and sharing a common culture, who occupied the region of southern Iraq in approximately 3500–2000 BC. It was there, in the world's first cities, that they created the earliest civilization, inventing writing and developing

'Sumerians' from the Seventh International Sand Sculpture Festival in Pêra, Portugal, 2009.

sophisticated systems of governance, architecture, agriculture, astronomy and mathematics. These Sumerian achievements established the foundations of successive Mesopotamian civilizations, influenced the societies of the wider Middle East, and lie at the root of our own urban, literate world.

This book is an account of how we have come to understand the Sumerians as much as an introduction to their history and culture. The Sumerians were never simply lost and found, but they have been reinvented a number of times, both in antiquity and in the more recent past. To some extent this is a story of ancient and modern myth-making. We now understand that there is no such thing as an accurate representation of the past, but instead only successive approaches, inevitably influenced by our own cultural roots and biases. By exploring how the Sumerians have been constructed by archaeologists, art historians and philologists (among many others) over the past 150 years, it is possible to consider what we think we know, how we know it and also why we should care.

Before starting that journey, a few words about terminology. I hope the reasons why we use the terms 'Sumerians' and 'Sumer' will become clear in the coming pages, but the name Mesopotamia needs an explanation at the beginning. It is a Greek term meaning 'between rivers', first used by geographers in the Hellenistic period, that is from around the third century BC, to describe an area bordered by the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The word and its definition were adopted by Western writers from the Renaissance onwards. In Arabic accounts, however, the term *al-'Iraq* (the shore of a river and associated grazing land) had been used since at least the eighth century for the vast alluvial plains south of Baghdad.[9] This southern region is sometimes referred to as Babylonia by historians and archaeologists. In this book I will follow the conventional use of the name Mesopotamia when describing the region from antiquity until the 1920s, after which it becomes more appropriate to refer to the modern countries of Iraq and Syria.

East meets West

In looking for a beginning to our story, a good place to start is not, as might be expected, on the lowlands of Iraq but instead further east in the highlands of Iran during the time of one of its most famous rulers, the Safavid dynasty emperor Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1588–1629).

When Shah 'Abbas inherited the throne of Persia, the country was in a perilous state. The Turkish Ottoman Empire dominated the Caucasus as far south as Tabriz, as well as Mesopotamia to the west. Indeed, much of western Iran was under threat from Turkish forces, and in 1590 the region was actually lost to them. It was little better to the southwest, where the Portuguese Empire was controlling – and taxing – the flow of maritime trade with Iran from the Island of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. To counter these military and economic challenges, Shah 'Abbas saw advantages in forging alliances with European powers, and so, in what was a novel policy for a Safavid ruler, he began to welcome visits from foreigners and non-Muslims. The western kingdoms were keen to engage commercially, and soon luxuries such as Iranian silk began to be

exchanged for gold and silver. Over ten years, and with the help of English advisers, Shah ʻAbbas reformed his army and extended a firm control over Iran's provinces. By 1598 he had established a new and magnificent capital at Isfahan, filling it with parks, palaces, pavilions and mosques and prompting a French visitor to describe it in the 1660s as 'the greatest and most beautiful town in the whole Orient'.[10] Buildings were beautifully embellished, and a popular form of decoration in residential palaces was square tiles arranged in large panels to form figural scenes with characters set in a landscape, occasionally including representations of individuals in European dress. Such foreigners included representatives of the Dutch and British East India Companies, European ambassadors and Catholic priests, as well as military adventurers who mixed in the cosmopolitan society of Isfahan.

They were joined by a wealthy aristocratic Roman called Pietro della Valle, who had left Italy in 1614 to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Having achieved that goal two years later, and considering himself something of a soldier, he joined a caravan and headed for Baghdad with the ultimate aim of offering his services to the Christian-friendly Shah against the Ottomans. In Baghdad della Valle fell in love with Maʻani Jowayri, the daughter of a Nestorian Catholic father and an Armenian mother, and after getting married the couple set off together for Isfahan. Their timing was unfortunate, however, because Shah ʻAbbas was away on campaign. After waiting a year in the capital, della Valle decided to take the initiative and journeyed to the royal court in northern Iran. Although he was granted an audience, the Shah seems to have found little use for the Italian, and towards the end of 1618 della Vale, who by this time was unwell, returned to Isfahan to recuperate. After living in Iran for nearly three more years he made the decision to travel back to Europe via India, and so in October 1621 husband, wife and an adopted daughter set off south towards the Persian Gulf.

While passing though the city of Shiraz, della Valle took the opportunity to travel some 60 km (37 mi.) to the northeast and visit the ruins of Persepolis. In a dramatic setting at the foot of the Kuh-i-Rahmat Mountain of Mercy) lie the remains of the city

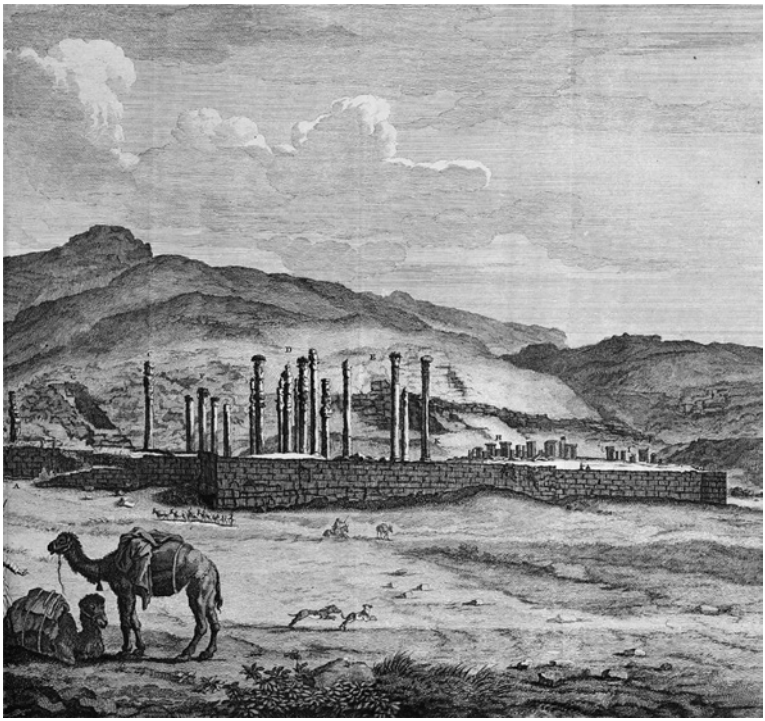
Glazed tiles from Iran showing a man in European dress with Persian ladies, 1640–50.

established by Darius I (r. 522–486 BC) as the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. At its heart had been a complex of magnificent royal palaces and columned halls on top of an enormous artificial platform of stone. For educated Europeans, Persepolis was famous for its associations with Alexander the Great, who, according to the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily, ordered that the palaces be burned to the ground during a drunken party in 330 BC. These buildings had been constructed largely from bricks, which, following the abandonment of the site, had crumbled or been robbed to leave only a stone skeleton of columns, gateways and relief carvings. Della Valle was not the first European to visit the ruins – the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone explored Persepolis in 1320, as did the Venetian Ambassador Giosafat Barbaro in 1474 – but with the opening of Persia under Shah 'Abbas the site became something of a tourist destination with a steady trickle of sightseers. It is, however, della Valle who has left us the earliest surviving description of a script formed from wedge-shaped stokes inscribed across many of the stone monuments. In a letter sent to a friend in Venice, he drew (inaccurately) five of the signs, speculating (accurately) that they represented a form of writing which should be read from left to right. It was those inscriptions that would later prove fundamental for the decipherment of the script and the languages it conveyed. This would not be the last time that della Valle would see such

wedge-shaped writing, and his next encounter would be in the heartland of ancient Sumer.

Continuing south, the family reached the Persian Gulf, where Maʿani, who was several months pregnant, caught a fever. Tragically their child was stillborn, and Maʿani died shortly afterwards. Della Valle had her body embalmed in camphor wax in order to take it back to Rome to be interred in his family tomb. He was, however, prevented from travelling on to India because the seaways were blocked by Persian forces who were attempting, with the assistance of English ships, to expel the Portuguese from Hormuz Island. Victory for Shah ʿAbbas meant the Persian Gulf reopened for travellers, and in 1623, with Maʿani's coffin covered with clothes at the bottom of a large leather chest, della Valle sailed for the west coast of India.

That year the Safavid emperor also defeated the Ottomans in Mesopotamia, taking control of Baghdad and with it access to the



Engraving of Persepolis from *Voyages de Corneille le Brun* (1718), plate 118.

holy Shi'i shrines of Kazimayn, Karbala and Najaf. With Safavid regional power in the ascendance, della Valle sailed from India to the port of Basra in southern Mesopotamia. From there he followed the River Euphrates north towards Aleppo and the Mediterranean. Ever the curious observer, however, he stopped en route to explore interesting sites, including the remains of a massive solid brick structure in the desert west of the town of Nasiriyah:

> June the nineteenth [1625] . . . I went in the forenoon to take a more diligent view of the ruins of the above-said ancient building. What it had been I could not understand; but I found it to have been built with very good Bricks, most of which were stamped in the midst with certain unknown letters which appear'd very ancient. I observed that they had been cemented together in the Fabrick, not with lime, but with bitumen or pitch, which, as I said[,] is generated in these Desarts: whence the Hill upon which these ruins are, is call'd by the Arabians, Muqeijer, that is, Pitchy . . .
>
> June, the twentieth, Surveying the above-said ruins again I found on the ground some pieces of black Marble, hard and fine, engraven with the same Letters as the Bricks, which seem'd to me to be a kind of Seal like what the Orientals use at this day . . . Amongst other letters which I discovered in that short time, two I found in many places, one of which was like a jacent Pyramid thus, ▷, and the other resembled a Star of eight points in this form ✳.[11]

Della Valle was probably the first European to visit the site of Tell al-Muqayyar (the Mound of Pitch), the remains of the ancient city of Ur. The mud-brick structure he describes is all that survives of a vast ziggurat or temple tower that once dominated the sacred precinct at the heart of the city. As we will explore later in more detail, the ziggurat of Ur was constructed around 2100 BC. It was usual at this date for a large number of the sun-dried bricks used in temple buildings to be impressed with a handheld stamp containing the name and titles of the ruler who had commissioned the building, as well as the name of the god to whom it was dedicated.

Bricks from the ziggurat at Ur were regularly stamped with a short text in Sumerian naming King Ur-Namma (*c.* 2112–2095 BC) and the moon god Nanna. Della Valle's Star is very evident at the start of the inscription (Sumerian *dingir*, 'god'), while the 'jacent Pyramid' is at the end (Sumerian *du*, 'to build').

Della Valle eventually arrived at Rome in 1626, and there he wrote of his adventures. Although the collection of objects he had gathered on his journeys does not survive, later European travellers would also collect fragments of clay and stone inscribed with the wedge-shaped writing and make copies of longer inscriptions. The script seems to have been first called 'cuneiform', from the Latin *cuneus* ('wedge'), by Thomas Hyde, Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University, in 1700.[12] But others would prefer 'arrow' or 'cuneatic' writing. These scholars began to address the challenge of its decipherment. The first accurate copies of some of the Persepolis inscriptions were made by a Danish adventurer, Carsten Niebuhr, in 1778. He recognized that there were three kinds of cuneiform script at the site: the simplest one had about forty signs, whereas the other two had many hundreds. It was speculated that the former might be an alphabetic system, and so this script became the main focus of interest and some success was had in identifying phonetic or alphabetic values. Perhaps the most important of the discoveries among these early endeavours was made by the German schoolteacher Georg Grotefend, who in 1802 noticed a recurring pattern in the signs. Owing to his familiarity with later non-cuneiform Persian inscriptions, and working with the knowledge provided by ancient Greek writers that kings Darius I and Xerxes (r. 486–465 BC) had their capital at Persepolis, Grotefend deduced correctly that these patterns probably read 'Xerxes, great king, king of kings, son of Darius, king of kings' and 'Darius, great king, king of kings, son of Hystaspes'.

It would take several more decades before these Persian texts could be read in detail, or – more immediately relevant for our story – the code of the other cuneiform inscriptions with many more signs could be cracked. This would be enabled throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by increasing commercial, political and military contact between European empires,

particularly those of Britain and France, and the rulers and people of the Middle East.

Mesopotamia known and unknown

The discovery that inscriptions at Persepolis contained the names of Persian kings such as Darius and Xerxes would have come as little surprise to scholars of the early nineteenth century. Since the time of the Renaissance, wealthy families had provided their sons – and, much less frequently, their daughters – with an education that offered a good grounding in the geography and history of the classical world and the Holy Land. A fundamental part of this schooling was reading the surviving works of Greek and Roman authors, some of which contain accounts of the so-called Orient (essentially the lands of north Africa and those to the east of the Mediterranean Sea), with references to some of its ancient peoples, such as the Persians, Assyrians and Babylonians. As did the biblical texts, these classical sources also recorded the names of some of the greatest ancient cities of the region, including Babylon, Nineveh and Ur, often associating them with romantic, exotic and sexualized tales of autocratic rulers. Although European explorers would later claim to have discovered these sites – something that has successfully entered much of the literature – in fact, their locations, along with those of many other cities across Mesopotamia, were well known to local populations since many retained their ancient names. Indeed, Arabic and Persian accounts as early as the tenth century make mention of them, and descriptions of the ancient settlements of Mesopotamia were available even to the Western world through the work of travellers such as Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (1130–1173):

> Thence it is two days to Mosul, which is Assur the Great, and here dwell about 7,000 Jews . . . Mosul is the frontier town of the land of Persia. It is a very large and ancient city, situated on the river Hiddekel [Tigris], and is connected with Nineveh by means of a bridge. Nineveh is in ruins, but amid the ruins there are villages and hamlets, and the extent of the city may

> be determined by the walls, which extend forty parasangs [approximately 200 km (125 mi.)] to the city of Irbil.
>
> Thence it is a day's journey to Babylon, which is the Babel of old. The ruins thereof are thirty miles [48 km] in extent. The ruins of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar are still to be seen there, but people are afraid to enter them on account of the serpents and scorpions.[13]

European interest in the antiquities of Mesopotamia grew with increasing economic and political involvement with the Ottoman Empire, which had reclaimed the region from Safavid control in 1638. The English in particular were keen to gain commercial advantage, and having helped to push the Portuguese out of the Persian Gulf now replaced them in the shape of the British East India Company.[14] The Company had been founded in 1600 to trade with the East Indies, establishing trading posts or 'factories' in India and then China; between 1641 and 1660 and again from 1723 it operated a factory at Basra to trade in pearls, Arabian horses and dates.

By the middle of the eighteenth century direct Ottoman control over much of Mesopotamia had weakened, and power lay in the hands of Georgian mamluks (elite soldiers who had been taken as boys from Christian families in Georgia and converted to Islam). They had established a dynasty in Baghdad, and extended their authority south to Basra. The mamluk rulers sought to modernize their military forces as well as develop the local economy, and so began to cultivate links with the British. These approaches were very welcome in London, since the East India Company had already begun what would develop into the bloody conquest and colonization of India using its own private army; as a route to the subcontinent, Mesopotamia now took on strategic importance. In 1764 the East India Company's representative in Basra was recognized as the British Consul responsible for the overland mail from England to India and with a duty to intercept despatches of rival French and Dutch agents. The region's significance for the Company (as well as the British government, which had effectively outsourced its foreign policy to it) increased further following

Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which resulted in the appearance of the French navy in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. A British political agent was appointed to the mamluk court in Baghdad, and this was soon followed by the opening of a British Consulate in the city.

In early 1808 a young man of 21 named Claudius James Rich arrived in Baghdad with his wife, Mary, to take up the post of East India Company Resident. He had been granted a military cadetship in the Company five years earlier, but his abilities were soon recognized and Rich was appointed a junior clerk or 'writer' and then secretary to the British Consul-General for the Mediterranean in Cairo. He was by all accounts a brilliant linguist, becoming fluent in Arabic, Persian and Turkish and with more than a passing knowledge of French, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac and Mandarin Chinese. Rich also had antiquarian interests, and during his time in Mesopotamia he carried out investigations into a number of ancient sites, including digging into the mounds of Babylon, mapping the walls of Nineveh and collecting a number of small antiquities, including stone seals and cuneiform tablets.[15]

Among the monuments that Rich noted was a large stone sculpture in the countryside just to the south of Baghdad. The same statue was later visited by the Scottish traveller Sir Robert Ker Porter, who saw it in 1818 and describes 'a large fragment of a figure, which the same gentleman [that is, Rich] saw lying in the desert about midway between Hillah and the site of Seleucia. It consisted of the lower half of the statue of a man in a sitting posture; the legs were naked, and closed together in the Egyptian style; the hands rested on the thighs. It was cut in a bluish basalt.'[16] This is probably the earliest Western account we have of what would be recognized as sculpture of the later third millennium BC, when hard, dark stones such as basalt were popular choices for Sumerian rulers. It is possible that because of its enormous weight the statue had rested for thousands of years close to where Rich and Porter saw it. The sculpture was later removed to London, and it now resides in the British Museum, along with the remnants of the collection gathered by Rich that were purchased from his widow; in 1821 Rich had visited Persepolis and made copies of

the cuneiform inscriptions, but while in Shiraz he contracted cholera and died.

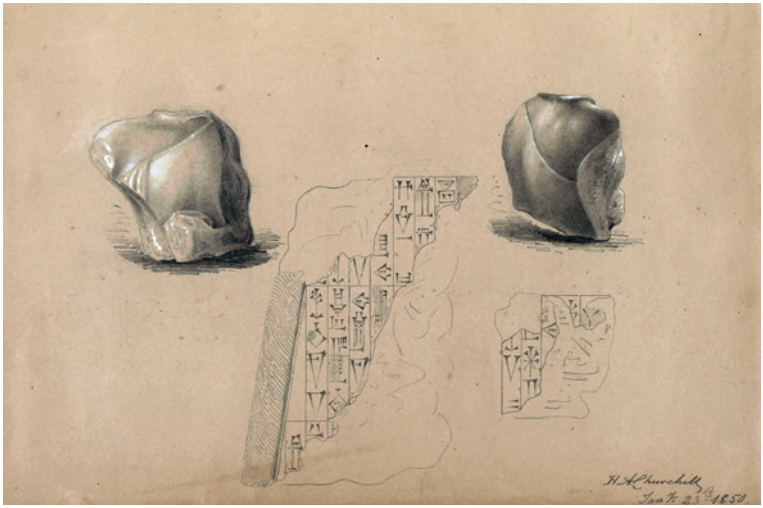
Claudius Rich laid the groundwork for further antiquarian investigations in Mesopotamia over the following decades. Since these endeavours were also led by representatives of European powers, it is perhaps not surprising that scholarly curiosity quickly became linked to imperial rivalry. Competition for ownership of the region's ancient past – as much as over its commercial and political activities – soon led to the digging up of vast numbers of objects and their removal to museums in London and Paris. The Ottomans, who had wrested back control of Mesopotamia from the mamluk pashas in 1831, soon faced a frenzy of archaeological interest in the northern province of Mosul. It began in 1842, when the French consul Paul-Émile Botta had trenches dug in the mound known as Kuyunjik, part of ancient Nineveh, before shifting his attention to Khorsabad (ancient Dur Sharrukin). There his locally employed workmen uncovered spectacular Assyrian stone reliefs of the eighth century BC, the finest of which were dispatched to the Louvre Museum in Paris. This encouraged the British ambassador in Constantinople to sponsor his own search for antiquities

Stone sculpture mentioned by Robert Ker Porter in *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia* (1822).

by Austen Henry Layard at Nimrud in 1845 and, when the funding for the work had been taken over by the British Museum, also at Kuyunjik. The inscribed monuments and thousands of cuneiform tablets recovered from these sites would play a significant role in the translation of cuneiform and the identification of the Sumerian language.

It was, however, the threat of warfare that brought the European representatives physically closer to the Sumerians. In 1839–40 hostilities had threatened to break out over frontier disputes between the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Mediation was offered by the British and Russian empires and the four powers agreed a Commission to resolve the disputed boundary, but its work didn't begin until 1849. The British representative, Colonel William Fenwick Williams, appointed to his staff a geologist, William Kennett Loftus, and the Commission followed the Tigris south from Mosul to Baghdad, then on via Hillah and Diwaniyah to Basra. Throughout the journey, Loftus took careful notes of the ancient sites they passed, such as Nineveh, Babylon, Nuffar (Nippur), Warka (Uruk) and Tell al-Muqayyar.

At Tell Hamman, to the north of Warka, Loftus discovered three fragments of a stone sculpture. The head and arms were



Drawing by Henry A. Churchill of inscribed stone sculpture fragments removed from Tell Hamman in 1849.

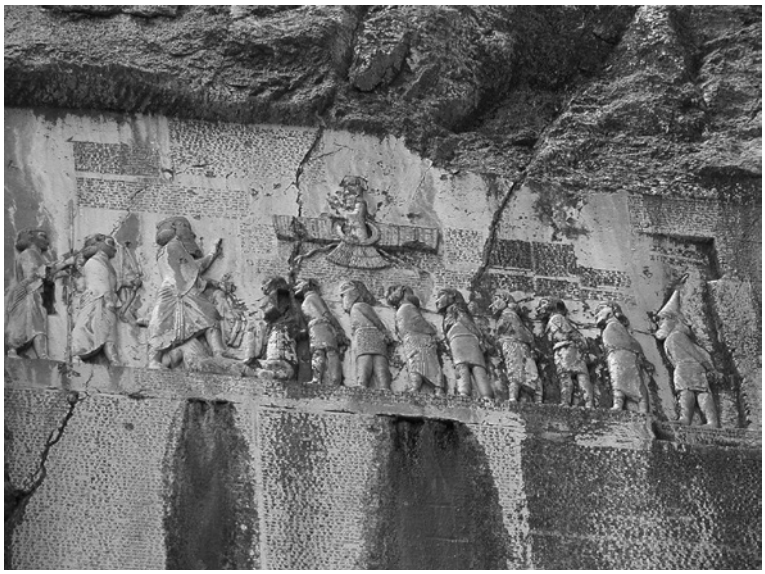
missing and the body had been broken at the waist with a separate splinter of stone. On the right leg was carved a badly worn cuneiform text. This can now be identified as a Sumerian inscription of the ruler Gudea (about 2150 BC), but although it could not be read in 1849, Loftus nevertheless recognized its significance:

> Statues of Babylonian workmanship being extremely rare, I packed the pieces in the best manner which circumstances would admit, and brought the awkward loads on the backs of our mules to Busrah [Basra], whence they were shipped for England. These fragments, I believe, are the only specimen of an undoubted Babylonian statue in Europe; but I am sorry to remark that they still lie neglected in the vaults of the British Museum.[17]

Loftus obtained leave from Colonel Williams to return to Warka and dig there on a small scale in 1850, and he would go back four years later, uncovering examples of wall mosaics formed from thousands of small baked clay cones. These would later be shown to come from monumental buildings constructed during the second half of the fourth millennium BC. Meanwhile, between 1853 and 1855 John Taylor, the East India Company's agent and British vice-consul at Basra, explored Ur, Abu Shahrain (Eridu) and Tell al-Lahm (Kuara) on behalf of the British Museum. In this way the foundation was laid for later, more ambitious excavations that would reveal Sumerian monuments. Key to identifying the ancient people, however, were cuneiform inscriptions, and a leading figure in their decipherment was Taylor's immediate superior in Baghdad, Henry Rawlinson.

'King of Sumer and Akkad'

Henry Creswicke Rawlinson had entered the East India Company's military service in 1827, at the age of seventeen. Six years later, with a recognized aptitude for languages, he was sent to Iran to support the training of the Shah's army. Rawlinson became interested in the country's ancient monuments, and in 1835 he copied cuneiform



Cliff relief and cuneiform inscriptions of Darius I at Bisitun, Iran, *c.* 520 BC.

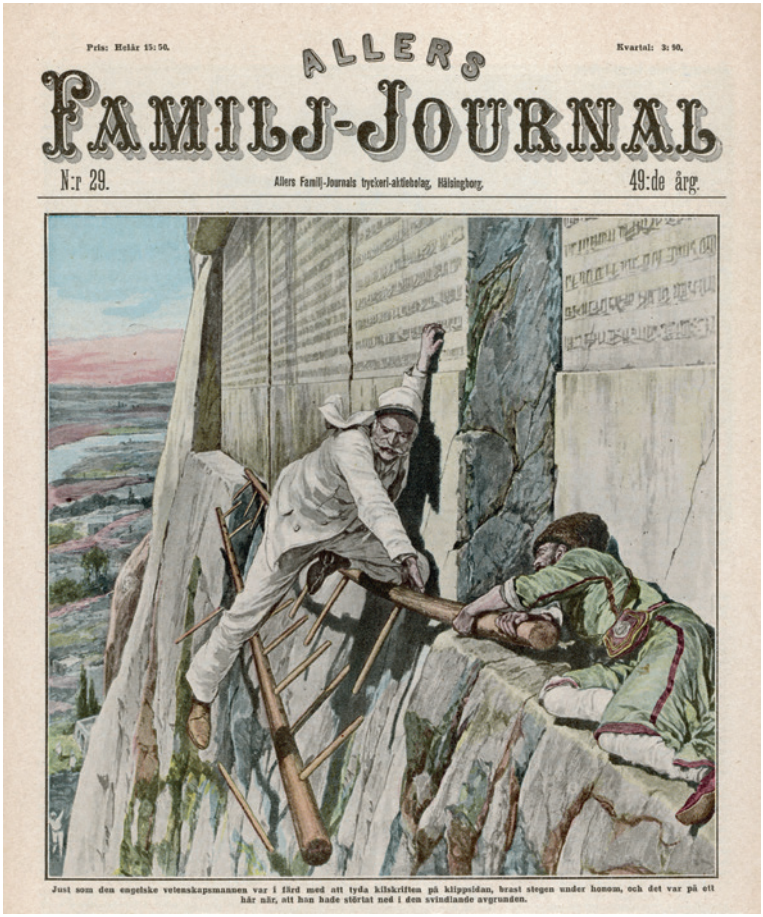
inscriptions at Mount Elwand near Hamadan. Building on Grotefend's findings, he began to work on the alphabetic text (which recorded the so-called Old Persian language), becoming familiar with similar inscriptions carved at the site of Naqsh-i Rustam close to Persepolis, as well as at Bisitun (or Behistun) in western Iran. The latter text had long been known in the West, but was among the most challenging physically to reach. The inscriptions surround an enormous carved relief on a cliff face some 100 m (330 ft) above the ground, overlooking the Great Khorasan Road (part of the famous Silk Route). Dating from around 520 BC, it depicts the Achaemenid Persian king Darius I in heroic pose, crushing an enemy underfoot, with representatives of nine rebellious peoples roped before him. Surrounding the scene are long inscriptions in the three different systems of cuneiform.

It is often – in fact usually – stated in modern histories of the decipherment of cuneiform that the Bisitun inscription provided Rawlinson with the key through which he was able to reveal all the languages of ancient Mesopotamia. But this is something of a modern myth. In 1836 Rawlinson climbed up to the ledge of the relief (he was not, as some accounts describe, let down from the

top of the cliff using ropes), where he made copies of the Old Persian inscription.[18] The other carved texts were much more difficult to reach, and were not in any case Rawlinson's principle interest. He returned to Bisitun in 1844, took squeezes (paper casts) of the second type of cuneiform and recopied the Old Persian, a complete translation of which he published. This was a major accomplishment and established him as a leading figure in cuneiform studies.

It was not, however, until 1847 that Rawlinson copied the text of the third cuneiform inscription at Bisitun, which he did using a telescope from the ground and by hiring a Kurdish boy to climb the cliff and rig a sort of bosun's chair to make squeezes. This account was subsequently transformed into one of dramatic adventure, as vividly imagined in an illustration from the 1920s, in which Rawlinson – fitting into an imperial stereotype of English bravery and leadership in the search for knowledge – risked his life to record and then decipher the inscriptions. In fact, by this date other scholars had made significant advances in understanding the languages recorded by the other forms of cuneiform. Rawlinson and Bisitun have however entered popular imagination, since the story compares easily with that of Jean-François Champollion's decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs using the Rosetta Stone in 1822. It was also helped by Rawlinson's growing political and social stature as the East India Company's political agent in Turkish Arabia (1843–9) and then His Majesty's Consul-General at Baghdad (1851–5), during which time he supervised excavations on behalf of the British Museum. The result is that he is often credited with being the 'father of Assyriology'.

Throughout the 1840s, however, a number of other scholars were making good progress in translating the non-alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions. The second system was shown to record a completely unknown language. Now called Elamite, it appears to have been spoken in the region of southwest Iran, if not further across the plateau, from the third millennium BC onwards, but because there are so few surviving inscriptions it remains poorly understood. The third system, however, would prove fundamental in the identification of the Sumerian language. Credit for this must



Magazine cover of 1920, with illustration by Richard Caton Woodville Jr of the imaginary dangers faced by Henry Rawlinson at Bisitun.

go to the Reverend Edward Hincks, rector of Killyleagh, County Down, Ireland.[19] A Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, he was a brilliant linguist and devoted his spare time between clerical duties to the decipherment of ancient scripts, including cuneiform. In 1846 Hincks made a decisive breakthrough when he recognized that the script was syllabic, so that each cuneiform sign could stand as a speech sound to build up words, in the way the English word 'water' is composed of two syllables: 'wa' and 'ter'. This enabled him to match signs from the Persian monuments with Mesopotamian inscriptions: 'I have found the name of Babylon in

the inscription on a piece of baked clay, shaped like a barrel, brought from the ruins, and in those on a few of the bricks. I have also found the name of Nineveh on the bricks brought from that place.'[20] Hincks now realized that 'the Assyrian and Babylonian languages appear to have much in common with the Semitic language.' In other words, they belonged to a group of languages that share common characteristics in grammar and vocabulary that today are represented by Arabic and Hebrew, among others. Assyrian and Babylonian are in fact just dialects of a single language now called Akkadian.

Until this point Rawlinson had been maintaining that the third cuneiform system was alphabetic, but he now recognized that this was incorrect: 'I am indebted to him [Hincks] indeed for a most notable discovery, one in fact which has proven of more use to me than my Behistun key.'[21] Indeed, three years later Hincks was able to show that individual cuneiform signs could have several readings. Depending on where it appeared in a text, a sign could stand for different syllables or even entire words. The sign with

Reverend Edward Hincks, *c.* 1850, oil on canvas.

the sound value *ki* could, for example, also be used to write the Akkadian word *ersetu*, 'earth'. Crucially, Hincks recognized that this suggested cuneiform had been developed to write a different language, one in which *ki* meant 'earth'.

This 'different' language would eventually be identified as Sumerian, and key to its understanding was the discovery that among the many thousands of cuneiform tablets that had been found at Nineveh and catalogued in the British Museum were some that were bilingual, often with a line of text in Akkadian paralleled by one in Sumerian. It was obvious that Sumerian was not a Semitic language, since it had an entirely different structure from Akkadian. Here, again, Hincks led the way in identifying it as an agglutinative language, which scholars at the time called Scythian or Turanian. Agglutinative languages, such as modern Hungarian, Turkish and Finnish, start with a word root that never changes, and new meanings are created by adding parts to the beginning (prefix) or the end (suffix). In Finnish, for example, *talo* = a house, *talossa* = in a house, *talossani* = in my house.

There was, however, no agreement on what the new language should be called. Many scholars preferred 'Old Chaldaean', evoking the name of a people mentioned in Assyrian inscriptions and also known from the biblical reference to 'Ur of the Chaldaeans', home of the Patriarch Abraham. It was another brilliant linguist, the German-born but French-naturalized Jules Oppert, who suggested in 1869 that it should be called 'Sumerian'. He had recognized in parallel with Hincks that the non-Semitic language was agglutinative, and suggested the name 'Sumerian' based on an ancient royal title. This was the Akkadian phrase *šar mat Šumeri u Akkadi* (the letter *š* is pronounced 'sh'), which means 'king of Sumer and Akkad'. Oppert's suggestion was controversial until 1889, when a bilingual cuneiform text was deciphered that referred in Akkadian to *lišan šumeri*, 'the Sumerian language'. This was equated with the Sumerian word *emegir*, but, given so little was known of the new language, the Akkadian term was adopted to describe it. It now seemed very possible that there had been a place called Sumer and that a Sumerian language had been spoken there.

A brief aside

The cuneiform script can appear especially daunting, with its various signs formed from little wedges. After describing how it was deciphered, it is therefore worth pausing to consider the script and how it works a little more, not least because the Sumerians are so regularly claimed as its inventors. Whereas the system in front of you is alphabetic, 26 letters that can be arranged as needed to provide a guide to the sound of spoken words, the earliest Mesopotamian system (known to specialists as proto-cuneiform script) used signs to indicate entire words. Drawn with a pointed stylus in the soft surface of clay tablets that could be held easily in the palm of the hand, these signs could be pictographic – that is, they looked something like the thing being referred to (so two wavy lines representing the outline of a river stood for 'water') – but they could also be used to suggest verbs and abstract ideas: the drawing of a foot could mean 'to walk' or 'to stand firm', for example. The latter could also be expressed by abstract symbols that would not have been immediately recognizable to those who didn't know the system, such as when we use £ or $. In addition, there were combinations of signs that could convey more complex meanings, so that a stylized human head with a profile of a bowl beside it indicated 'ration'. Some syllables were needed to represent proper nouns, and, because most of the early tablets are accounting records or inventories, numerical signs were also important.

By the early third millennium BC syllables had begun to be combined to express Sumerian. The Sumerian word for barley is *she*, pronounced as in shepherd, so it was possible to use this sign whenever you needed that sound in another word or chain of words. In the same way, the word for 'mouth' in Sumerian was *ka*, and the sign to write it could also be used for the sound 'ka', and so on. Some words with different meanings sounded very similar (think of 'there' and 'their'), so different signs were needed to write them – the Sumerian words for 'thread' and 'ox', for example, have the sound value of 'gu'. It's actually quite a straightforward system, but the drawback is that it uses several hundred signs and therefore required time to memorize them all, as well as training

in writing. The result was that being a scribe became a profession, and the knowledge was usually passed from father to son. The early system of drawing outlines of signs in clay gave way to signs made using the squared edge of a reed stylus, which resulted in a characteristic triangular head and pointed tail. The script had become cuneiform.

TWO
The Sumerian Problem

As scholars began to grapple with understanding Sumerian – and there were very few texts available at the time from which it could be reconstructed – a question emerged about whether it was indeed a non-Semitic language. Known later as the 'Sumerian Problem', this produced a highly charged, acrimonious scholarly debate. The arguments made on both sides were embedded in notions about race, and these would play a fundamental role in shaping ideas about the Sumerians well into the twentieth century; to some extent they are still with us. What, therefore, was meant by the term 'race' as the languages of ancient Mesopotamia were being revealed?

By the mid-nineteenth century the concept of race was taken for granted in the West as a way of explaining the populations of the world and their histories. 'Types' or 'races' of people were understood to have developed in specific geographic locations. There was an assumed link between language, religion, culture, technological abilities and human spirit, and these all came together to form particular emotional and physical characteristics. The result was a world that could be divided between stereotypes – such as rational Europeans and despotic Orientals – as well as by face shape, skin colour, hair type and so on.[1] Some races were judged to be superior to others, and it will come as little surprise to discover that it was European Caucasians (part of a so-called Aryan racial group) who were placed on top; these belonged to the most advanced civilizations, having evolved from more 'primitive' forms of living. The more primitive ways of life in the past were thought

Examples of racial types from D. A. Mackenzie, *Myths of Babylonia and Assyria* (1915).

to find parallels in contemporary societies around the world, with the result that there was a sliding scale along which certain races were judged to be more 'advanced' or 'backwards' than others.

Today race has been abandoned as a category by biologists and social scientists. Modern discoveries and techniques, such as DNA analysis, have demonstrated that neither the physical nor emotional characteristics that were used to define races actually map on to genetic data. In fact, genetic variations between humans are so gradual that it is simply not possible to draw lines between them other than as a very subjective exercise. People can, of course, identify themselves with others based on external appearance (whether that is by skin colour or by choice of clothes and hairstyle, for example), but that is shaped more often by social assumptions or expectations than by anything else, and we certainly cannot assume that these would have been the same in the past as they are today. Indeed, it is now recognized that the people of Mesopotamia themselves had no category for 'race', and that the concept is a cultural construct of our own recent history.[2] Although thoroughly discredited, the idea of racial stereotypes lingers just below the surface of contemporary society, finding its most vitriolic outlet in the diatribe of white supremacists and their talk of a superior 'Aryan race'.

So, when in 1856 Jules Oppert asked 'What people first invented this [cuneiform] kind of writing?', he defined the question as a 'highly interesting ethnological inquiry'.[3] Since language affiliation was understood to be synonymous with racial affiliation, it seemed possible to answer it. As described above, the language that Oppert named as Sumerian was classified as belonging to the family of 'Turanian' languages, sometimes called Scythian. This was believed to be the original 'Aryan' language, so it sat at the root of the languages of Europe, and hence also of its cultures and nations. The study of Sumerian therefore became related to issues of Western identity on the basis that Aryan races were considered responsible for all the achievements of human civilization.[4] It also stood in contrast to the Semitic languages of Mesopotamia, and so the work was on to explain Mesopotamia's history through two competing races, 'Aryan' and 'Semite'.

For some scholars, however, such a conclusion was unfounded, since they argued that Sumerian had never been a spoken language – and hence there were no Sumerian people. The leading anti-Sumerian proponent was Joseph Halévy, a specialist in Semitic languages.[5] In an article published in 1874, he argued that Sumerian was an artificial language, a scholastic tool invented by Semites.[6] Although Sumerian was agglutinative in form and therefore appeared similar to modern Turkish, Hungarian and Finnish, Halévy was able to demonstrate convincingly that there was no affinity between the ancient and modern languages; it is a conclusion that remains accepted by modern linguists. In fact, Sumerian is a so-called isolate, since it has no connection to any known language, as is the case, for example, with Basque, which is spoken today only in a region of the western Pyrenees.

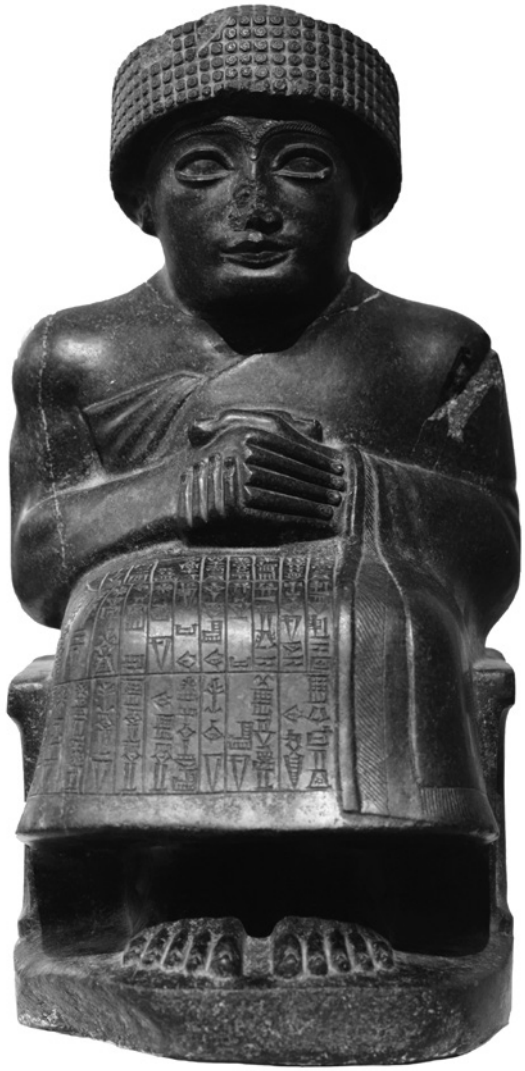
Halévy's other conclusion, however, that Sumerian was an esoteric, 'priestly' code, was immediately challenged. One of his most vocal opponents was Oppert, and over the years the debate between the two men became more personal and bitter. To some extent, Halévy was probably reacting against anti-Semitism; that is, a prejudice against Jewish people (or, as the thinking of his day constructed it, the Jewish race) that permeated European and North American societies. But the evidence was building against him as by the 1890s many hundreds of Sumerian cuneiform inscriptions were being identified. It was increasingly accepted that a non-Semitic language must have been spoken in ancient Mesopotamia, and the term 'Sumerian' became generally accepted to describe it. Nevertheless, Halévy continued to publish his opinions on the matter for almost half a century, and died in 1917 without having changed his mind.

A tout prix, trouvez des têtes!

While it was thought that a Sumerian race could be identified by their language, the same assumptions that underpinned this notion also allowed for them to be recognized through their physical features. As early as the eighteenth century human racial differences had been formulated by measuring skulls. The anatomist Petrus

Camper used the technique to develop a system for representing heads in profile, where variations in angles were defining factors in classifying them.[7] The ultimate test was how much difference could be observed when the profile was compared with Classical statues such as the *Apollo Belvedere* in the Vatican, on an understanding that the Greeks not only were European but had mastered the art of realism. While this was an exercise in Enlightenment knowledge creation, by the later nineteenth century the idea of racial difference had become an instrument for racial profiling and prejudice. Humans were divided into types, from the dolichocephalic (long, thin head) to the brachycephalic (short, broad head). In measuring a human skull, it was also possible for its volume to be calculated, and with it brain size. It was assumed that a larger brain meant greater intelligence, a conclusion that could then be applied to an entire race. Needless to say, studies concluded that European Caucasians were the most intelligent. Today this reads like nonsense, but at the time it was cutting-edge science, and perhaps even more astonishing was the belief that these same techniques could be applied to statues and relief carvings to determine racial types. The examination of monuments, which were understood as attempts at records of perception, even if they didn't meet the level of accuracy reached by the ancient Greeks, could make an important contribution to this racial science.

A problem with identifying the Sumerians was that there were so few sculptures from southern Mesopotamia. A 'breakthrough', however, came with the uncovering of a number of truly impressive examples by the French vice-consul at Basra, Ernest de Sarzec, who, in common with many of his European political colleagues, filled his time between duties with antiquarian research. Sarzec's local informants had pointed out to him the mounds of Tello (thought for many decades after the discovery to be the ancient city of Lagash, but now known to be the town of Girsu, within the larger state of Lagash), where inscriptions and sculptures were being dug up. The upper part of a slightly larger-than-life diorite statue of a man had been found at the foot of a tell, and this encouraged Sarzec to begin excavations. In 1877, having received approval from Sheikh Nair of the Muntafiq Arabs, who effectively ruled the area independently



Seated statue of Gudea of Lagash, *c.* 2150 BC, from Tello, Iraq. The head and body were excavated separately.

of the Ottomans, he began work. The lower part of the colossal statue was discovered resting at the top of the tell upside down, and showed that the complete figure was that of a seated man wearing an ankle-length robe that left his right shoulder bare. A long Sumerian cuneiform inscription covered the front of his robe

below his knees. Between 1877 and 1881 Sarzec found eight more massive statues, some standing, others seated. The inscriptions identified them as representions of Gudea, the ruler of the state of Lagash, who had dedicated them to his gods. The enormously heavy sculptures were shipped to Paris; there they were exhibited and received very enthusiastic responses, some people judging them to be superior even to Assyrian art, so that they found a home in the Louvre Museum (where a department of 'Oriental Antiquities' was accordingly established).

While the inscriptions identified the statues as Sumerian, there was a problem in that their heads – and therefore answers to what the Sumerians looked like – were missing. 'A tout prix, trouvez des têtes!' (At all costs, find heads!), wrote Léon Heuzey, the Louvre's new curator of Oriental Antiquities, to Sarzec. A couple of sculpted heads were found at Tello and measured, but because they were fragmentary assigning them to either Sumerian or Semite proved controversial. Nonetheless, racial profiling could help, since Semites were thought to be bearded – after all, the Bible had criticized shaving, and the reliefs of the Semitic Assyrians depicted kings and some of their officials wearing very long, curling beards – and the Tello heads were round and clean-shaven, and one without a headdress was bald; these must be Sumerians. This conclusion appeared to be confirmed in 1903, when the body of a statue was found that fitted one of the heads and Heuzey assembled the two fragments to create the first complete representation of Gudea. It now seemed possible to distinguish the Sumerians based on their physical appearance. This was made apparent in 1889 at the Paris Universal Exposition, which included an exhibition chronicling the progress of civilization through the history of human labour:

> Here in one building were groups of men and women, life size, illustrating the first French cave-dwellings, dressed in skin and working with paleolithic implements; the Cro-Magnon man and his wife carving an antler; ancient Mexicans manipulating agave fibre; the dolmen-builders at work on a model which is actually a cast of one of the most celebrated in Europe; a group of men working in flint quarries; the first smiths, in

> the persons of a group of Congo negroes, operating with stone tools and monkey-skin bellows; a group illustrating the Bronze Age, tent makers and dwellers, Chinese potters and cloisonné-workers, Assyrian sculptors surrounded by typical furniture and cuneiform inscriptions, Grecian potters producing the beautiful black and red ware often called Etruscan, Roman matrons spinning and weaving, and perhaps others.[8]

At the centre of the display, set in front of a plaster cast of an Assyrian relief from Nimrud, was a clothed and painted plaster cast based on one of the seated statues discovered by Sarzec. Its head was based on the modern human skull of an Arab from near Baghdad, an assumed racial descendant of the Sumerians.

The excavations at Tello produced many more remarkable objects, including stone relief sculptures with yet more depictions of Sumerians. It remains frustrating that so little is known of the context of these objects, since Sarzec and his workmen had great difficulty distinguishing between the mud-brick constructions and their earth fill, but they were almost certainly associated with temple buildings. Some of the reliefs depicted Gudea in the presence of bearded and thus Semitic gods. How to explain this seeming anomaly? It was interpreted by some as clear evidence for Semitic populations in southern Mesopotamia before the arrival of the Sumerians, who had simply adopted the deities of the conquered race, but a second Sumerian problem was emerging: where did they come from?

The Americans arrive

Until this time it had been European political and commercial interest in the Middle East that had resulted in the uncovering of the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia. In 1883, however, the American Oriental Society decided, with clearly nationalistic overtones, that 'England and France have done a noble work of exploration in Assyria and Babylonia. It is time for America to do her part. Let us send out an American expedition.'[9] This was driven to a large extent by a strong tradition of biblical studies

Reconstruction of Gudea of Lagash at the Universal Exposition, Paris, 1889.

in universities across the United States, where Mesopotamian antiquities could be used to illustrate and illuminate the Old Testament. The following year the so-called Wolfe Expedition visited many of the major sites across Mesopotamia with the aim of identifying somewhere suitable to excavate, highlighting among others the site of Nippur, some 180 km (110 mi.) south of Baghdad. To secure the permit to excavate, a close relationship

was developed with Osman Hamdi Bey, the director of the Imperial Museum in Constantinople (now Istanbul). Following a model established by French archaeologists, the University of Pennsylvania issued Hamdi Bey with an honorary degree in 1894, ten years after new regulations had come into force that identified all antiquities as the property of the Ottoman state and targeted the illegal smuggling of objects abroad. This would challenge the expectations of future foreign expeditions on which of their finds they would be able to export.

By 1889 funding had been secured and the University of Pennsylvania's Babylonian Expedition began work at Nippur. Led by John Punnett Peters, Professor of Hebrew, with John Hayes as photographer and the Assyriologist Hermann Hilprecht as epigrapher, the expedition focused its efforts largely on the area around the remains of a great ziggurat. The southern end of this mound was named Tablet Hill after the expedition's most significant find of tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets and fragments that, in addition to administrative and legal documents, turned out to contain the most important collection of Sumerian literature ever to be recovered from Mesopotamia; the tablets were divided between Constantinople and Philadelphia. These discoveries were made against a backdrop of enormous challenges for the excavators. Funding was inadequate; it proved difficult to find local labourers; and, to top it all, the expedition became embroiled in a blood feud that resulted in local tribesmen plundering the camp, established on top of Nippur's west mound, and setting it on fire. The situation was certainly not helped by personality clashes, primarily between Hilprecht and Peters, that turned extremely acrimonious.

The Sumerian language begins to be understood

It would be a long, slow process of piecing together and translating the thousands of tablets recovered from Nippur, but by the time the excavations were concluded, in 1900, significant advances were being made in understanding the Sumerian language. The publication in 1905 of *Inscriptions de Sumer et d'Akkad* by François Thureau-Dangin demonstrated that a basic understanding had

Baked clay cylinders of Gudea of Lagash, from Tello, Iraq, *c.* 2150 BC.

been achieved. The book included translations of some of the many texts inscribed on monuments discovered by Sarzec at Tello. In fact, some 40,000 cuneiform tablets had been found there and, because Sarzec had failed to appoint effective guards, perhaps the same number were plundered from the site during his absences and sold on the antiquities market; these are now dispersed in museum collections around the world. Among the most important Sumerian texts translated by Thureau-Dangin, however, were those inscribed on a pair of large hollow clay cylinders just over half a metre (2 ft) high that Sarzec had found in a drain in the first months of digging. From these we learn that Gudea was commissioned to build the temple of Ningirsu, patron of Lagash, by the deity himself, who gives instructions to the ruler in a dream. The second cylinder describes the consecration of the temple, its furnishings and the introduction of different gods into the building. Texts such as these revealed the names of the gods of Sumer whose cults were focused on specific cities. Thus the supreme deity Enlil resided at Nippur, for example, while the moon god Nanna was worshipped at Ur, and the patron of Uruk was the goddess Inana (or Inanna).

'The oldest statue in the world'

The Sumerian cuneiform inscription on the right shoulder of the limestone figure reads: 'For the [temple] E-sar. Lugaldalu, king of Adab'. The name Lugaldalu is known only from this 78-centimetre-high (31 in.) statue. He is depicted in the standard guise of a figure dedicated in a temple, clasping his hands in front of his chest and wearing a tufted skirt. The eyes and eyebrows, which meet over the nose, would once have contained inlays. The discovery of the statue in 1904 at Tell Bismaya (ancient Adab), approximately 65 km (40 mi.) north of Tello, ushered in several decades of archaeological work that has shaped modern notions of the Sumerians. The story of the statue following its excavation also highlights the often dubious practices by which objects might be acquired for modern collections.

Although the excavations that uncovered Lugaldalu were conducted by Edgar Banks on behalf of the University of Chicago, the statue is today in the Museum of Ancient Oriental Art (Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi) in Istanbul. By the date of its discovery, scholars in the Ottoman Empire were as active as those in the West in the search for what was perceived to be the very essence of nations, races and civilizations. Revealing racial origins had become a means to uncover the cultural roots of a nation. For the Turks, who as we have seen speak an agglutinative language, an affinity was assumed with the ancient Sumerians, despite the conclusion of philologists that none exists. As a result, the material remains of the Sumerians being revealed by European and American-led excavations in the Ottoman provinces of Mesopotamia became increasingly integrated into the historical account of the Empire. As has already been noted, since 1884 all archaeological finds were regarded as the property of the Ottoman state, and their export was regulated by a Department of Antiquities. Some of the antiquities retained by Turkey were displayed in a purpose-built museum that opened in 1891 in the grounds of the Topkapı Imperial Palace in Constantinople.

These regulations were a frustration to foreign excavators and their sponsors. Banks would, like many of his successors,

Statue of Lugaldalu, king of Umma, from Bismaya, Iraq, *c.* 2500 BC.

attempt to find ways around them – that is, break the law. We know much about his work because he has left us a very lively account of the excavations he led at Bismaya between 1903 and 1905.[10] The book's subtitle, *A Story of Adventure, of Exploration, and of Excavation among the Ruins of the Oldest of the Buried Cities of Babylonia*, provides a description worthy of a man who would go on to have a short-lived film-making career in Florida.[11] Banks had studied Semitic languages and history as an undergraduate at Harvard College and then under Professor Friedrich Delitzsch in Berlin, where he obtained his doctorate in 1897. He was understandably keen to visit Mesopotamia, and, since many past excavators had held consular positions, he submitted applications and was eventually appointed U.S. consul at Baghdad. When he arrived in Mesopotamia he discovered that his pay was so meagre that he had no choice but to resign his job, but before travelling back to the United States he identified a site suitable for excavation, settling on the famous name of Tell al-Muqayyar, ancient Ur.

After raising the necessary funds through the University of Chicago, Banks sought permission from the authorities in Constantinople to begin work, but after nearly a year of waiting he was refused permission, ostensibly because the Arabs of the surrounding region were in revolt. Undaunted, he applied for permission to excavate other sites, and on 26 September 1903 the authorities finally issued a *firman* (permit) for him to work at Bismaya. By the following year, and after he had recruited some 120 men from the local tribe as diggers, considerable progress had been made in uncovering ancient buildings and associated artefacts, including fragments of stone vases inscribed in Sumerian. Banks would later recall the moment on 26 January 1904 when he made what he considered his most important discovery:

> Abbas, a bright, young Arab from Affej, raised his head above the trench at the west corner of the tower where his gang was working, and with an unusual twinkle in his eye, excitedly motioned to me. Before I had time to reach the trench the men of the gang burst into a joyful chant to announce a discovery and the hope of double pay for the day, and seizing their guns,

> they fired them into the air and waved their picks and hoes and baskets above their heads. The hundred or more men of the other gangs paused in their work and gazed enviously to learn the cause of the sudden outburst. As I climbed into the deep trench, the bright-eyed Abbas ceased his antics long enough to point to a smooth, white surface embedded in the foundation wall, and placing his lips close to my ear, whispered, '*suret*,' – 'a statue.'[12]

The chronology of the statue was very poorly understood given the limited evidence available. A sequence of Mesopotamian rulers could be reconstructed to some extent from Assyrian and Babylonian documents, as well as the Bible, and the earliest historical rulers were considered to be Sargon of the city of Agade (or Akkad/Akkade) and then his grandson Naram-Sin, who, tradition claimed, had dominated much of the region. It seemed possible to calculate dates for these two kings based on an inscription of King Nabonidus (r. 555–539 BC), which records that during his reign a monument of Naram-Sin 'not seen for 3,200 years' had been uncovered. Scholars of the early twentieth century accepted this figure as accurate and therefore placed Naram-Sin at about 3750 BC, with Sargon dated to 3800 BC. The statue of Lugaldalu was found below bricks stamped with the name of Sargon, and therefore could be placed in the earliest phases of Sumerian kingship, as early as 4500 BC. Banks was therefore able to report to the University of Chicago that he had found 'the oldest statue and inscriptions in the world'.[13] He followed up with an article for *Scientific American* entitled 'Statue of the Sumerian King David'; the cuneiform signs on the statue's shoulder were read initially as the Da-udu, which, Banks felt, 'explains the name of the biblical king as of Sumerian origin':[14]

> The oldest statue in the world, that of King David, which I discovered at Bismya, shows the Sumerians to have belonged to a straight-nosed, stout race of people who shaved their heads and faces, and who wore as their only garment a short skirt about the loins. A dozen similar statues from about

Gypsum head with ivory eyes (modern blue fill), from Bismaya, Iraq, *c.* 2100 BC.

2800 BC were found at Telloh, and a number of statuettes have fixed the Sumerian type.

The excavations at Bismya yielded many inscriptions from the time of Sargon and Naram-Sin, and among them are ordinary business documents written in the Semitic language. They are therefore the earliest Semitic documents known, coming from the time of the appearance of the Semites in the world's history.

> Another discovery of still greater interest to the student of Semitic history was made at Bismya. A workman while excavating along the south-edge of the ruin of the Bismya temple, struck a hard substance with his pick. Taking it up, he began to brush away the dirt, and a magnificently preserved marble head appeared. The face, unlike anything before discovered in Babylonia, is thin and covered with a mustache and a pointed beard of a strikingly Semitic shape . . . The nose is specifically Semitic . . . This head is not Sumerian; the Semitic features, the fact that it was found with various Semitic inscriptions, and in a city occupied by the earliest Semitic kings, points unmistakably to the conclusion that we have the head of a Semite.[15]

These were major triumphs for the expedition, but life at Bismaya was not any easier for Banks or his workers than it had been for the excavators at Nippur. Terrible and frequent sandstorms plagued the camp; much more troubling were the increasing attacks by bands of armed robbers. As the heat of summer increased it was decided to close the excavations until conditions improved. Many hundreds of artefacts had been found, as well as nearly 2,000 cuneiform tablets, and all were destined for Chicago, but what to do about the Ottoman export regulations? In the end the crates of antiquities were simply listed on the relevant documentation as holding 'honey and manna'; the mislabelling of exports as a means of smuggling antiquities remains a common practice to this day, part of a dark trade in looted objects. At Bismaya attacks by marauding bands continued to pose a threat to the excavators, and Banks became worried that his greatest prize, the statue of Lugaldalu, would be stolen or broken up. An opportunity was therefore taken to load the sculpture on to a horse, which carried it to the Tigris River, from where a boat transferred it north to Baghdad. The statue was hidden under a bed in the home of the American consul, and it is clear from the surviving correspondence that Banks hoped to send it to Chicago, although recognizing at the same time that this might come with consequences:

> should it be known that it is in our possession in Chicago, trouble might follow and it must therefore be kept in secret for a number of years. On the other hand the statue is of such immense value that it is worth running considerable risk. I doubt if ever again we find anything of greater value.[16]

The claim of 'saving' an object because of its perceived intellectual value remains a familiar justification for exporting artefacts illegally. In the case of Lugaldalu, however, the Turks came to believe that Banks must have stolen the statue, and refused permission for the excavation to continue. With increasing pressure from the American Legation in Baghdad, Banks resigned as excavation director, and six months later, in August 1905, the statue was 'recovered' and handed over to Turkish officials.

The origins of the Sumerians

While the Sumerians were being incorporated into the story of the Ottoman Empire, the same was happening in Europe and the United States, where the search was on for the origins of Western civilization. Among the many scholars engaged in this pursuit was Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1868–1926). She would not only be instrumental in creating the modern country of Iraq, but help to shape its national identity by stressing the importance of the region's past, not least as the place where the Sumerian civilization had flourished.

Born into the family of a wealthy industrialist in County Durham in the north of England, Bell was among the first women in Britain to have access to a university education; she was awarded a first-class degree in modern history by the University of Oxford. Supported by her family money, Bell then travelled extensively, including lengthy stays in Persia (1892) and journeys through Palestine and Syria (1899–1900), which she described in beautifully written letters to her father, Sir Hugh Bell, and in published books, as well as through photography. History and archaeology helped to inform Bell's view of the world, and she held a rather idealized and romanticized view of the Orient. For her the rural

tribal communities held a timeless charm, unlike the region's cities, which she felt had been corrupted by attempts to embrace Western modernity. In common with many of her contemporaries, Bell writes repeatedly 'not of Arabs, Turks and Kurds, but of "the Arab", "the Turk" and "the Kurd", suggesting thereby that there was an essential type which, [like the Sumerians and Akkadians,] once uncovered and excavated, would unlock a true understanding of the motives, preferences and worldviews of all Arabs, Turks and Kurds.'[17] As such she became deeply immersed in scholarly debates about the origins of Western civilization, especially its debt to the cultures of the Middle East. It was Bell's journeys into Mesopotamia in 1909 and 1911 that had a particularly significant impact on her thinking, not only introducing her to the current affairs and people of that land but exposing her to its ancient cultures and ruined cities. Included in her itineraries were visits to German excavations at Qal'at Sherqat (ancient Ashur) and Babylon.

At Ashur, the German archaeologist Walter Andrae was directing the clearance of extensive areas of the ancient city. This included the remains of a temple that had been rebuilt repeatedly from the middle of the third millennium BC. There, a range of stone sculptures that paralleled the statue from Bismaya were found in an early level. They consisted of standing and seated figures dressed in fringed robes or tufted skirts, and had presumably been dedicated to the gods. Andrae would later suggest that they had been placed on brick benches along the interior walls of the shrine so as to be in perpetual attendance of the god who resided there. No such early sculptures had been found at Babylon, where much of the remains being uncovered dated from the first millennium BC, but Bell was able to discuss the origins of the Sumerians with another German archaeologist, Robert Koldewey, who had been directing excavations at the site since 1899. In a letter to her father of 31 March 1914, Bell records that she

> Breakfasted at 6.30 with K [Koldewey] and we walked out to the diggings . . . There must be a prehistoric civilization of which we know nothing . . . He thinks the uralt [ancient] population

was certainly Semitic. The Sumerians came onto the top of it, absorbed it and were influenced by it.[18]

Since, as was being inferred from the linguistic evidence, the Sumerians were an Aryan race, they must have brought civilization to southern Mesopotamia (and the Semites) from outside the region. But from where? The deserts to the west of Mesopotamia were associated with Semitic populations, so it seemed obvious that the Sumerians must have come from the east. The reconstruction of a 'Turanian' family of languages into which Sumerian was placed pointed to their homelands as somewhere in Central Asia. This conclusion appeared also to find support in the Bible, which remained an important source for reconstructing the past: 'And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there' (King James Version, Genesis 11:1–2). 'Shinar' was equated with the Akkadian name 'Sumer', a natural assumption given that both terms seemed to refer to southern Mesopotamia. It is possible that this may be an echo of the Akkadian term, which continued in use into the first millennium BC.[19]

The idea of a migration of a distinct people from the east would imbed itself into scholarly thinking. As late as 1970, the director of French excavations at the site of Mari in Syria, André Parrot, could ask the question: 'Where did the Sumerians come from?' His answer came with conviction. 'Doubtless from the East,' and 'what has emerged beyond doubt is that the Sumerians were not the first inhabitants of Mesopotamia. Thus the Bible text implies without doubt that there was at one time a migratory movement, the point of departure of which was in the East and which ended in Mesopotamia. We have no hesitation in identifying the "families of the sons of Noah" with the historical Sumerians.'[20] Such notions would be challenged, as we will discover, when excavations and the development of new theories in the final decades of the twentieth century revealed a much more complex and nuanced picture of the past.

THREE

Invasion, Occupation and Ownership

By 1900 the West had been colonizing Middle Eastern antiquity for nearly a century, claiming it as part of its own story and taking ownership of its physical remains as objects were removed to its museums. Its direct involvement in the region's politics had become even more pronounced as a result of Anglo-Russian rivalry for influence in Iran and Central Asia. This so-called Great Game came to a formal end in 1907, when it was agreed that Persia should be divided into spheres of influence. While Russia controlled the north of the country, British interests lay to the south, especially the approaches to India. The central area was left under the rule of the significantly weakened Qajar shahs. The history of the Middle East would now be shaped directly by the colonial powers, and in that story a fundamental role would be played by one of the region's resources: oil.

Persia under Shah Mozaffar od-Din (r. 1896–1907) faced a financial crisis, not helped by the extravagant lifestyles of the ruler and his predecessors. In 1901 the concession to explore for oil in southwestern Iran was sold by the shah to a British entrepreneur, William Knox D'Arcy. Seven years later drillers struck oil, and in 1909 the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC, the ancestor of British Petroleum) was formed, with an agreement that left the majority of control in British hands. With oil-fuelled internal combustion engines increasingly replacing coal-fired propulsion, this offered the potential for Britain to free itself from its dependency on oil from the United States. The British government therefore purchased a controlling share (51 per cent) of APOC,

giving it control not only of the oilfields but of the refinery port of Abadan near the Persian Gulf, from which the oil was shipped. Crucially, Abadan was on the border with Ottoman-ruled southern Mesopotamia, and military interest in the region became more focused.

By 1914 the European nations had coalesced around two centres of gravity: the Triple Entente, comprising Great Britain, France and Russia; and the Central Powers, comprising Germany, the Habsburg empire of Austria–Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. When war broke out in Europe, Britain's chief concern in the Middle East was to protect its control of the Suez Canal, its access to India and APOC's vital oilfields in Persia. Ottoman control of Mesopotamia was a clear threat, and in November 1914 British forces, mainly Indian soldiers, seized control of Basra and by the next year had begun to advance up the Tigris. There they faced disaster at the town of Kut al-Amara, which was besieged by an Ottoman army (between 7 December 1915 and 29 April 1916) before some 13,000 survivors surrendered, many of whom were marched to imprisonment and died en route. Within a year, however, the British had regained the advantage, and they moved upriver to enter Baghdad unopposed on 11 March 1917.

Shortly after capturing Baghdad, General Stanley Maude issued a general order to regulate the preservation of archaeological sites and the antiquities trade, and promised high penalties to anyone desecrating an ancient monument. Sites such as Babylon, uncovered, of course, by German archaeologists, could now be claimed by the British invaders, and became something of a tourist destination for off-duty soldiers. Smaller Mesopotamian objects made unusual and portable souvenirs. One example is a small statue uncovered by Indian Sikh soldiers of the British army digging trenches at Istabalat (or Istabulat), some 13 km (8 mi.) south of Samarra on the River Tigris, 'near the foot of a small mound of ruins', in advance of a major battle between the British and the Ottomans in April 1917. The front of the figure has been damaged by the pick of the soldier who discovered it. Donated to the Ashmolean Museum by the regiment's commanding officer, it was published in 1920 by Stephen Herbert Langdon, professor of

Assyriology at the University of Oxford. He endeavoured to place it in its historical and cultural context:

> Indications of early settlements of Sumerians at Assur on the upper Tigris, have been discovered by German excavations there. Certain philological, religious and cultural evidence exists for assuming that this race came originally from Russian Turkestan, and in consequence their first settlements in Mesopotamia should have been on the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates. The marble monument supports this interpretation of their early migrations . . . The face though rudely delineated, reveals successfully the features characteristic of the Sumerian race.
>
> A head of a limestone statuette found in the lower strata at Assur belongs to the same period, has the same racial characteristics, and the same inset eyes . . . The lower strata at Assur have yielded statuettes garbed in the same woollen petticoat which was the national Sumerian dress from the earliest period.[1]

The idea of a national dress in the form of a 'petticoat' or, as Langdon also described it, a *kaunakes* (the Greek term for a cloak described in Aristophanes' work *The Wasps*) seemed to be an additional attribute in the racial identity of the Sumerians. Langdon wrapped himself in complications by assuming (a recurring word in this book to date) that the tufted garment must have originated in a hot climate, since it left the upper part of the body bare. If the *kaunakes* was introduced to Ashur from the warmer south, what date were the northern sculptures, since they could not belong to the first generation of Sumerians who had come from Central Asia? Round and round the arguments turned. The thought that the outfit might have a specific ritual role did not occur to Langdon.

Acquiring the Sumerians

'It is curious', wrote Henry (Harry) Hall, an assistant in the British Museum, 'that the first excavations of the British Museum on this

Votive statue from Istabalat, Iraq, *c.* 2400 BC.

site [Ur] should have taken place during the Crimean War, and the next during the Great War of 1914–18. In each case war gave an opportunity to archaeology.'[2] This was certainly true for British archaeologists, who were keen to start excavations as soon as possible, in the guise of protecting the region's ancient heritage:

> On the receipt of certain reports from Mesopotamia, the Trustees of the British Museum applied to the military authorities for leave to attach an archaeologist to the Army in the field, with a view primarily to the protection of the antiquities from unnecessary injury, and secondarily to the taking of such opportunities as might present themselves for excavation. Permission was readily given, and Captain R. Campbell Thompson, of the Intelligence Service, himself formerly an assistant in the British Museum and an Assyriologist of the first rank, and then fortunately on duty in Mesopotamia, was commissioned to start the work. He, after a short investigation of Ur, decided to dig at Shahrain [Eridu], where in 1918 he carried out a trial excavation, consisting chiefly of pits sunk to ascertain the stratification of the mounts, which was of considerable importance . . . Although there was a desire to excavate at Warka (Erech [Uruk]), Senkereh (Larsam) or Yokha (Umma) it wasn't possible because it lay outside 'the protected zone' of the Army, and liable to attack from the then very restless and turbulent marsh tribes of the Muntafiq: the whole region between the two rivers was unsafe, and an 'incident' was undesirable.[3]

Hall took over from Reginald Campbell Thompson when the latter returned to England on leave. Using Turkish prisoners of war as his labourers along with some paid locals, he also dug at Ur and Eridu. It was, however, at Tell al-'Ubaid that Hall began to uncover more than just the remains of prehistoric pottery, mud-brick buildings and inscriptions. This small site some 5 km (3 mi.) northwest of Ur would produce spectacular objects that spoke to the artistic skill of the Sumerians. On the remains of a prehistoric settlement, a temple had been erected there around 2500 BC. Although nothing survived of the mud-brick temple building, the platform on which

it had been constructed remained almost intact – the facades had been faced with baked bricks, which had protected it from the elements – with a staircase that led to the top. At some point the temple itself had been either deliberately dismantled or destroyed, but some of its decoration had been removed (possibly from interior rooms, rather than from the temple facade as Hall and later excavators suggested) and heaped up at ground level beside the staircase. Among the finds was an extraordinary relief formed from sheets of copper over a bitumen core, showing a lion-headed eagle grasping the haunches of two stags. The monstrous bird was known from Akkadian texts as the Anzu, and the name may be read in Sumerian as Imdugud. Other copper animals included four lions with inlaid eyes of shell, white stone teeth and red jasper tongues. Two of the animals had forepaws and were perhaps intended to guard a doorway. In addition, there were the remains of palm logs covered with stone and mother-of-pearl mosaics, which must have formed elaborate columns. Later excavations at al-'Ubaid revealed more copper animals in the form of standing bulls, as well as friezes with inlays of cows and birds and a scene of milking. A dedicatory inscription in Sumerian was also uncovered that recorded the dedication of the temple to the goddess Ninhursaga by King A'annipada of Ur. Hall's discoveries were sent to the British Museum, where

Copper alloy frieze of a lion-headed eagle grasping deer, from Tell al-'Ubaid, Iraq, *c.* 2500 BC.

they would be described as 'very interesting examples of early Sumerian art'; the prehistoric pottery was considered to be 'of great archaeological interest and importance'.[4]

From Mesopotamia to Iraq

By the 1920s a historical outline of early Mesopotamian history had been reconstructed from the evidence of cuneiform texts, including so-called king lists and later literary compositions that were largely understood as reporting a historical reality. It was a story that continued to be shaped by ideas of race. The Sumerians arrived in Mesopotamia and established a series of cities. As explained by Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, keeper of the department of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum, some, such as Kish, rose to political prominence as a 'city of royalty':

> The names of some of the primitive kings of Kish and Agade are Semitic, and it is certain that, as far as any tradition extends, there were always Akkadians, i.e. people of Semitic race and language settled in Northern Babylonia. Thus the ancient name of Babylonia, 'Land of Sumer and Akkad,' corresponded with a true ethnographical distinction.[5]

This period ended when the Sumerian cities were conquered by the Semites under Sargon (*Šarru-kin*, Akkadian for 'the king is true', that is, the legitimate ruler), who established a dynastic empire from his city of Agade. The Agade Empire was ended in turn by an invasion from the east by a people called the Gutians. At this point the Sumerians revolted and a ruler of Uruk expelled the invaders. The city-state of Lagash flourished under Gudea, and he was followed by a dynasty of kings ruling at Ur. In the reign of Ibbi-Sin, however, 'during a sudden raid made by the Elamites [of southwest Iran] he was taken prisoner, and apparently as a result of this disaster, the sovereignty passed from the Sumerians to the Semites,' and Isin became the 'city of royalty' in place of Ur.[6]

This sequence of events was based to a large extent on an accepted notion that civilizations were like living organisms, being

born, maturing and dying. This 'rise and fall' motif was fundamental in shaping the way history was believed to be played out over time, and it remains an unhelpful way of thinking about the past even today. It was clear that further archaeological excavations in southern Mesopotamia were needed to refine the details of this narrative, and the timing seemed perfect to undertake them. The territories of the Ottoman Empire were being partitioned between the victorious powers following the end of the world war, and in 1920 the League of Nations awarded to Britain a mandate to control Mesopotamia, the aim, as explained in Article 22, being the 'rendering of administrative advice and assistance . . . until such time as [the country is] able to stand alone'.[7] This offered Western museums and universities the opportunity to continue excavations, but on a previously unimagined scale. Needless to say, it was understood that any discoveries would be removed to the sponsoring institutions, where they could be properly studied but also displayed to a public eager to see the latest finds from their new imperial territories. While the French public had access to the Sumerians through the statues of Gudea in the Louvre, visitors to British and American museums had little material to engage with except cuneiform tablets. Hall's discoveries at al-'Ubaid suggested what might lie waiting to be uncovered.

All these possibilities, however, were put on hold in Mesopotamia only months after the mandate had been granted. Resentment against British policies led to mass demonstrations in cities with wide opposition to the occupation. Hall would later recall the British response in the lead-up to an insurgency in the casual tones of colonial authority:

> The Muntafiq tribes, always unruly, and always defiant of the Turk, were by no means inclined to sit down peacefully under the new rule of the British, and they objected to paying taxes to them quite as much as to the Turks. In fact, some chiefs were distinctly rebellious, and had to be chastised by an occasional [RAF] bombing expedition in the marshes, though people who lived in rush-huts on reedy islands were poor targets and had little to lose if they were hit.[8]

Dissent soon led to full-scale revolt. The British reacted by expanding their earlier approaches to crushing opposition, and the insurgents were bombed by eight RAF squadrons supported by armoured cars and ground troops. Over the five months of the revolt, perhaps as many as 10,000 Iraqis were killed, while British and Indian deaths numbered around nine hundred. For the British government, however, the real impact was financial; the revolt cost them some £40 million. This was intolerable, and they looked for a more indirect, and cheaper, means of controlling the territory. The answer was found in Cairo in 1921, at a conference at which British officials discussed the future of Mesopotamia. Among those present was Gertrude Bell, whose knowledge of the region and its people had been recognized to the extent that she had been assigned to the so-called Arab Bureau in 1915 by British Army Intelligence (where she joined other archaeologists such as David Hogarth and T. E. Lawrence). The following year Bell was sent to Basra, and when British troops took Baghdad in 1917 she was relocated there with the title of 'Oriental Secretary'. At the Cairo Conference, Bell argued successfully that Prince Faisal (son of Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca and ruler of the Hijaz) should be appointed ruler of a newly created Kingdom of Iraq. Following Faisal's coronation, in 1922 an Anglo-Iraqi treaty was signed that allowed for local self-government while giving the British control of foreign and military affairs.

Throughout these years, British and North American universities and museums had been applying to resume excavations in southern Iraq. The need for a law to enable this was recognized in the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, and shortly after it was signed a department of antiquities was created. At the request of King Faisal himself, Bell was appointed honorary director, and she began to draft an antiquities law. She made it clear that all archaeological finds would now belong to the new Kingdom of Iraq but, although the finest artefacts would remain in the country, foreign expeditions could expect a fair share of the finds.[9] Such rules regarding the dispersal of antiquities were being shaped by developments in the wider region, especially in Egypt, where a revolution against British Protectorate occupation had led to the British government

issuing a unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence in 1922. Existing antiquities laws in the country were tightened as nationalist Egyptian politicians demanded greater control. Rather than a fifty-fifty split between the Cairo Museum and the excavator, as had been the general practice (although this tended to refer just to significant objects, rather than the mass of small finds), everything would now belong to the state, and any concessions of material to foreign expeditions would be discretionary. This change had an impact on the most famous discovery of that year – if not of any year – Tutankhamun's tomb. Despite the expectation by Howard Carter and his sponsor, Lord Carnarvon, that the older *partage* (division) agreements would continue to apply, all the finds from the tomb were to remain in Egypt.

These developments alarmed the directors of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, who had just agreed to sponsor excavations at Ur: 'The new law in Egypt abolishing the right of half the division will likely affect Iraq and make it more difficult for an Expedition in future to take away anything of importance,' wrote George Gordon from Philadelphia to Sir Frederic Kenyon in London.[10] Nevertheless, the two institutions would not only acquire some of their greatest 'treasures' as a result of the excavations – indeed, some that had the potential to rival even those of Tutankhamun – but they would help to define the Sumerians in people's imagination until the present day.

Ur 'of the Chaldees'

As we have seen, Tell al-Muqayyar, ancient Ur, with its mounds of stamped bricks, had long been known. Hall records that the site had become a popular destination for British soldiers, and that 'every officer and man who visited Ur had gone off with one [brick] or a piece of one under his arm as a souvenir, whether for himself or for some masonic lodge in which he was interested; for . . . a brick from Ur of the Chaldees was one of the most acceptable presents that a British Lodge could receive.'[11] Freemasons were interested in Ur because the site is credited in the Hebrew Bible with

being the home of the Patriarch Abraham, a key figure in Masonic tradition. This biblical connection played an important part in imagining the ancient city, and as new excavations got underway reports in the press and popular publications would often situate Ur as 'the home town of Abraham', rather than a Sumerian city.

The man chosen to direct the British Museum–University of Pennsylvania Museum Joint Expedition (a term suggesting adventure with overtones of military conquest) was Charles Leonard Woolley, an experienced archaeologist who before the war had worked in Egypt and Sudan and at the site of Carchemish (straddling the modern Turkey–Syria border). This new project was, however, an undertaking on a very different scale from those projects, with up to three hundred workmen from nearby villages employed over periods of four months to a year. The southern part of Iraq remained a very unstable place following the establishment

Stamped brick of Ur-Namma, from Ur, Iraq, *c.* 2100 BC.

of the Kingdom, and armed guards were considered necessary against the possibility of attack from tribes that were constantly on the move. Despite the challenges, tangible results were produced in the first year, including the discovery of a remarkable sculpture. As Director of Antiquities, it was the responsibility of Gertrude Bell to decide on the division of finds, and she records the first occasion in a letter to her father of March 1923:

> It took us the whole day to do the division but it was extremely interesting and Mr Woolley was an angel. We had to claim the best things for ourselves but we did our best to make it up to him and I don't think he was very much dissatisfied. We for our part were well pleased. The best object is a hideous Sumerian statue of a King of Lagash, about 3 ft high but headless. It has a long inscription across the shoulder in which they have read the King's name, but it will go back to London to be completely decyphered [*sic*] and then return to us.[12]

The royal statue is another instance of a votive statue wearing a tufted skirt, but this example is made of diorite, a stone not found in southern Mesopotamia but imported from sources in Iran or Oman. It is inscribed on the upper right arm with a long Sumerian inscription that details a land transaction, suggesting that the figure was made to record a gift. It includes a special name given to the statue, 'Enlil loves Enmetena'. King Enmetena was a ruler of the city-state of Lagash around 2400 BC, and so it is surprising that his statue was unearthed at Ur. It clearly had an interesting ancient history, but it also has an interesting modern life, since it was among the objects looted from the Iraq Museum during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. At some point the statue was smuggled across the border into Syria and found its way to New York City, where it was tracked by the FBI and eventually returned to Iraq.

In 1923, however, there was no museum in Iraq, and the antiquities retained from the division of finds were piling up and needing a home. Bell managed to convince the administration to give her a room in one of the government offices. In this small, rather confined space, she laid out the Iraqi share of the Ur finds, each object

Statue of Enmetena of Lagash, from Ur, Iraq, *c.* 2400 BC.

carefully labelled in both English and Arabic. Her law on antiquities was finally passed in June 1924, and although it stated that the Iraqi government would appoint a representative to any foreign excavators and that the Baghdad Antiquities Museum would get the first choice on objects, it was very generous to foreign archaeologists, allowing them not only to receive a substantial share of the artefacts uncovered but to export them more easily than had been the case under Ottoman law. In 1926 Bell finally found a more suitable space for her museum, and she wrote to her stepmother: 'it will be a real museum, rather like the British Museum only a little smaller.'[13] She managed to persuade King Faisal to open the museum – or rather to open the one functioning room, since the rest was still being built. Sadly, Bell didn't have much time to enjoy the result of her work: she died on 12 July 1926 from an overdose of sleeping pills.

The royal tombs of Ur

Between 1922 and 1926 significant progress had been made at Ur. Woolley's workmen and boys had cleared the vast ziggurat and uncovered other public buildings in a great enclosure built by King Ur-Namma towards the end of the third millennium BC. These could be identified from associated cuneiform inscriptions, and included the large E-nun-mah (House of the Exalted Prince), which may have been a storehouse before being converted into a temple; the Giparu, a temple to Ningal (the wife of Nanna) and residence and burial place of the priestesses to the moon god; and the E-hursag (Mountain House), a small palace. Woolley had also found evidence of burials containing fragments of gold and beads of semi-precious stones in a trench dug close to the ziggurat. This was in 1923, but he recognized that his workforce had insufficient experience to excavate the graves, and therefore focused on the surrounding architecture. In 1926, however, Woolley returned to the trench and started to uncover a vast cemetery. It contained as many as 2,000 burials spread over an area measuring approximately 70 by 55 m (230 by 180 ft). Of these, some 660 burials lay below levels attributable to the dynasty of Sargon of Agade. Most were simple inhumations, in which the body, wrapped in reed matting

or placed in a coffin, was set at the bottom of a rectangular pit accompanied by objects, possibly personal belongings or items thought necessary in death. A number of burials stood apart, however, in terms of their wealth, architecture and evidence of ritual, including human sacrifice. Although there were a number of rich graves, Woolley identified sixteen as possessing all these characteristics, and termed them 'royal', assuming that they contained Ur's deceased kings and queens.

The excavation of these royal tombs was not easy. The soil into which the burials was cut and subsequently covered was composed of dumped rubbish, which was soft and very unstable, but it was also acidic with a high level of salinity, which meant that it ate away at any organic material, including skeletal remains. In addition, nearly all the tombs had been partially destroyed or robbed in antiquity, probably when later tombs were dug into them. There was, however, sufficient evidence remaining, including a number of almost complete tombs, for Woolley to make some generalizations. Each royal tomb contained a chamber formed from limestone rubble (some with several 'rooms') with a domed or vaulted roof of mud-bricks. This was constructed at the bottom of a pit, some more than 10 m (33 ft) deep, accessed by a stamped mud ramp. The principal body was placed in the stone chamber and surrounded by the most extraordinary range of vessels and other objects made of copper, gold, silver and different stones, as well as jewellery and inlay formed from lapis lazuli, carnelian, agate and shell. On the floor of the pit there might also be a sled or wheeled vehicle pulled by oxen or equids. The bodies of other humans might be included in the tomb chamber, but there were many more in the pit outside. As was the principal body, these were adorned with rich jewellery and accompanied by objects including musical instruments. Most of the bodies in the pit were probably women, although gender could be determined only by the associated objects, especially jewellery. A number of men were apparently also present, dressed as soldiers with spears and helmets. Woolley's account of what he imagined had happened after the deaths of Ur's kings and queens is best left in his own words:

> Now down the sloping passage comes a procession of people, the members of the court, soldiers, men-servants, and women, the latter in all their finery of brightly colored garments and headdresses of lapis-lazuli and silver and gold, and with them musicians bearing harps or lyres, cymbals, and sistra; they take up their positions in the farther part of the pit and then there are driven or backed down the slope the chariots drawn by oxen or by asses, the drivers in the cars, the grooms holding the heads of the draught animals, and these too are marshaled in the pit. Each man and woman brought a little cup of clay or stone or metal, the only equipment required for the rite that was to follow. Some kind of service there must have been at the bottom of the shaft, at least it is evident that the musicians played up to the last, and that each drank from the cup; either they brought the potion with them or they found it prepared for them on the spot – in PG 1237 there was in the middle of the pit a great copper pot into which they could have dipped – and they composed themselves for death. Then someone came down and killed the animals and perhaps arranged the drugged bodies, and when that was done earth was flung from above on them, and the filling-in of the grave shaft was begun.[14]

The tomb designated PG1237 was among the most extraordinary, and Woolley dubbed it the 'Great Death Pit' since it seemed to lack a tomb chamber. The burial contained 74 bodies. Six men lay near the entrance, with weapons. Of 68 women, most were arranged neatly in four rows across the northwestern corner of the pit. Almost all of them wore headdresses of gold, silver and lapis lazuli and pairs of golden earrings, each in the shape of a hollow crescent or open boat with raised ends. Neck ornaments consisted of alternating triangular beads of lapis and gold. In addition, silver toggle pins were used to fasten clothes (small fragments of woven fabric suggested jackets in a bright red colour) and sometimes also to attach a cylinder seal or amulet. Many of the women also had cockleshells containing cosmetic pigments, and situated close to about half of them was a cup or jar that Woolley considered must

Jewellery from the 'Great Death Pit' in the Royal Tombs at Ur, Iraq, *c.* 2400 BC.

have been for the poison they consumed in order to accompany their king or queen into the next world.

Here was something to rival the excitement generated by the discovery of King Tutankhamun in Egypt, and another good reason for Woolley to label the graves as 'royal'. The press release was carefully managed, and the *New York Times* reported on 29 January 1928 that one of the richest of the tombs 'shows Mesopotamia was more civilized than Egypt'. As had been the case in the nineteenth century, and is to this day, in the popular reception of the past comparison with Egypt was the measure of an ancient culture. Other journalists – perhaps inevitably given the wild stories that were surrounding King Tut, not least the famous mummy's curse – looked for more sensational headlines. The focus was on the human victims. While Woolley preferred to see their deaths as more or less voluntary, perhaps even a privilege, the press preferred more gory speculation: 'Why the Beauties of Ur Were Killed with their Kings', 'Ur Tombs Yields Slain Family' and 'Evidence that the Queen of Ancient Ur Was Clubbed to Death'.[15] The final headline refers to the body in one of the best-preserved tombs, whose occupant has come to personify the Sumerians.

From Shub-ad to Pu-abi

Her headdress is formed from a complex layering of ornaments made from gold and semi-precious stones. Ribbons of gold are surmounted by two wreaths of oval gold willow leaves that are overlaid with a wreath of long gold poplar leaves, topped by a wreath of eight-petalled rosettes. These plant forms, native to the riverbanks of southern Iraq, must have held great symbolic value. They were further adorned with strings of lapis lazuli, rings of gold and carnelian beads, and a large gold comb, also with rosettes. Large lunate-shaped earrings complete the assembly.

This delicate construction had been crushed flat, along with the skull of a woman that it covered, when it was found by Woolley. The collapsed mud-brick vaulted roof of the tomb and the weight of the soil explain this feature that so intrigued some of the journalists reporting on the discovery of the so-called Queen's Tomb. The body lay on a wooden bier in the stone chamber, covered in jewellery. She wore chokers and necklaces, and her upper body was covered by beads made of precious metals and semi-precious stones that appear to have been arranged in strands or were perhaps sewn onto a cloak that reached from her shoulders to a belt formed of alternating rows of gold, carnelian and lapis lazuli beads. Her fingers were decorated with ten rings. Close to her body lay necklaces formed from small lapis lazuli beads with gold pendants depicting plants and animals. She was accompanied in the chamber by two attendants, one crouching near her head, the other at her feet.

Key to the woman's identity was the inscription on one of three lapis lazuli cylinder seals found with her. Divided into two registers, the seal is carved with scenes of banquets. In the top row, a seated female faces a seated male. They hold cups, probably containing wine, and each is attended by people of his or her respective gender. The bottom register appears to show only men, and can perhaps be understood as an extension of the banquet in the upper register. Placed alongside the figure of the seated woman are three cuneiform signs that provide us with her name. It was assumed that she was Sumerian, and so the excavation's epigrapher,

Father Eric Burrows, read the two cuneiform signs that compose her name with the values *shub* and *ad*, hence Shubad. The third sign can be read as *nin*, which means 'queen'. Since seals of this date were personal items, the principal body in the burial chamber could therefore be identified as Queen Shubad.

Because it was believed possible to identify Sumerians from both ancient sculpture and the shape of human skulls, it seemed very possible to reconstruct something of the features of Shubad. In 1928 the queen's headdress was put on temporary display at the British Museum before being sent to the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia as part of the division of the finds (a clear example of the 'generosity' being extended to the foreign excavators). For the purposes of the exhibition a plaster cast was made of a well-preserved female skull of approximately the same period as Shubad, and Woolley's wife, Katherine, modelled a face in wax, 'making this as thin as possible so as not to obliterate the bone structure' so that it would capture a 'true' Sumerian physiognomy.[16] To ensure greater accuracy, the face was shown to Sir Arthur Keith, one of Britain's leading physical anthropologists, who had made a special study of the skulls from Ur and al-'Ubaid and felt able to determine the races to which they belonged. A wig was added, its shape based on the hairstyle of a terracotta figurine from a slightly later period. The wreaths were restrung and tied on to the wig in the order that they had been uncovered. Woolley concluded that the results were very satisfactory: 'Though the face is not an actual portrait of the queen, it gives at least the type to which she must have conformed, and the whole reconstructed head presents us with the most accurate picture we are likely ever to possess of what she looked like in her lifetime.'[17]

The curator of the Pennsylvania Museum's Babylonian Section, Father Léon Legrain, was less convinced. He argued that a skull provided insufficient evidence, and that a better source for reconstructing a head on which the headdress might be mounted was the work of Sumerian sculptors themselves, given that it was assumed they had based their work on living models: 'Even if they had not the Greek ideal of a portrait and the subtle Greek power of expression, they were masters of their craft and could carve a

statue in hard diorite.'[18] Using as his model a statue in the Louvre dating from the time of Gudea, Legrain produced a modelled head with

> high cheek bones, large nose, and large eyes under powerful eyebrows of a true oriental beauty, and in spite of the sculptural effect of her staring eyes she possesses a charming queenly dignity. Her eyes are shown in blue, for the reason that in many statues they are made of lapis lazuli inlaid in shell. We may enjoy the lapis blue, as the Sumerian artists did. It gives depth to her beauty.[19]

Head modelled by Katherine Woolley in 1928 for Queen Shubad/Pu-abi's headdress.

Some reporters compared Shubad with the flappers of the 1920s, the first generation of independent American women. The *St Louis Post Dispatch*'s Sunday magazine, for example, illustrated the queen with bobbed hair, applying make-up at a mirror. Indeed, it is even possible that Katherine Woolley's model was inspired by the contemporary Hollywood actress Greta Garbo dressed for the role of Mata Hari.[20]

In excavating the queen's tomb chamber, Leonard Woolley discovered that it abutted another, which had been looted in antiquity. This, he conjectured, had belonged to the royal husband of Shubad, who had died before her. Woolley imagined that the grieving queen must have had her death pit with sacrificial victims dug so that it lay above that of her king, but her own tomb cut down so that it lay next to his. The relationship of the floors of death pits to specific stone tombs has been re-evaluated since, and Woolley's romantic reconstruction can almost certainly be abandoned. As can the name Shubad. A better understanding of the ancient languages reveals that the first two cuneiform signs on the queen's cylinder seal make more sense to be read as Pu-abi, or, more correctly, Pu-abum, which is Akkadian for 'word of the Father', with the third sign read as *eresh*, Akkadian for 'queen'.[21] So, if names define group identity, the most famous Sumerian queen turns out to be Akkadian!

The Standard of Ur

While Queen Pu-abi was found in a simple, single-roomed stone chamber, other royal graves had more elaborate structures. One of the largest (PG779) consisted of four rooms. Although no death pit was associated with the structure, it would have been able to accommodate several bodies. Unfortunately, Woolley found the tomb largely plundered and two of the rooms badly damaged by the collapse of the roof. In one room, however, he uncovered the remains of at least four bodies, and the skull of one was relatively well preserved. It lay in a corner of the room that had clearly provided a degree of shelter from the collapsing roof, and as a result some objects were also preserved here, including the remains of the so-called Standard of Ur.

This comprised two flat panels, originally formed from wood, which had decayed, covered in bitumen into which had been set a mosaic of carved shell, red limestone and lapis lazuli. One panel was found lying face down in the soil with the other on top of it, face up. Woolley records that 'except for a film of dirt the backs of the tesserae belonging to the two sides were in contact.'[22] Additional tesserae pieces lay on either side of the short ends and appeared to fill the shape of truncated triangles. Woolley thought the long panels had sloped together on these triangles to form a hollow, box-like object. It was very unclear to him what purpose the resulting object might have served, but given that it lay in the tomb against and above the right shoulder of a man, as if it had been carried by him on a pole, Woolley suggested that it was a sort of standard.[23] Its use remains a mystery, and a suggestion that it may have formed the sounding box of a musical instrument such as a harp or lyre has not been met with enthusiasm. The Standard has been restored on a number of occasions since it arrived at the British Museum as part of the generous division of finds, but little change has been made to the overall shape of the object and the arrangement of the two long sides. These inlaid scenes appear to encapsulate aspects of Sumerian kingship that have been termed 'War' and 'Peace'.

The War panel was found uppermost in the tomb. The scene, formed from three registers of inlay, can be thought to start at the bottom, where carts, each with a spearman and driver, drawn by donkeys, race from left to right, trampling naked enemies. In the middle register a formation of soldiers wearing cloaks and carrying spears walks to the right, while bound, naked enemies are executed and paraded to the top register, where more of them are killed. In the centre of the scene, overseeing the execution, is the ruler holding a long spear. He is shown larger than the other figures, presumably to indicate his status. Behind him are attendants and his royal cart. There is no reason to think this represents a particular historical event rather than an image of kingship.

The Standard's Peace panel can be understood as a symbolic representation of the abundance of the land as provided through the rule of a king. The lowest register shows men carrying produce on their shoulders and in backpacks, as well as leading donkeys.

'War' and 'Peace' panels of the Standard of Ur, from Ur, Iraq, *c.* 2400 BC.

In the central register men lead bulls, sheep and goats, and carry fish. They appear to move towards the top register, where a banquet is taking place. On the left, the largest figure is the seated ruler wearing a tufted skirt. He faces six seated men, who are dressed in less elaborate outfits, along with a lyre player and perhaps a singer on the far right of the scene.

Here were images comparable with those already known from cylinder seals, especially the banqueting scenes. Over the coming years excavations at other sites across Mesopotamia would produce comparable scenes of banquets and bound prisoners of war either in stone relief or as portable mosaic panels set in wood, both of which were intended to adorn the walls of palaces and temples. It is possible, therefore, that the Standard served a similar purpose. It may have consisted of two separate wooden panels stacked together, the ends of which were damaged when bricks fell from the roof, scattering some of the tesserae. It would have been

appropriate imagery for the palace of a king or queen and, when part of tomb furnishings, may have been intended to evoke the interior of such a building for eternity.

'After the Flood had swept over and kingship had descended from heaven, the kingship was in Kish'

Following the discovery of the Royal Tombs, Woolley continued to excavate hundreds of graves in the vast cemetery at Ur. Towards the end of 1928 he decided to dig below the level of the burials, and there he made an unexpected discovery: a layer of water-laid silt up to 4 m (13 ft) thick indicative of flooding. It seemed to him a real possibility that the Flood, familiar from the biblical story of Noah as well as accounts known from Mesopotamia – most famously in the so-called Flood Tablet recovered in the previous century at Nineveh – might have been a historical event. Below this clay layer was characteristic black-painted pottery of the prehistoric period known from al-'Ubaid and Eridu. The idea of 'primitive' time separated from 'civilization' by a flood appeared to find confirmation in the Sumerian King List, which starts with the mythological origins of kingship and then, as the translated line at the start of this section makes clear, reports the Flood, after which a seemingly more historical list of kings begins with the city of Kish.

The Sumerian King List (at least, the Oxford version of the text) and the site of Kish came together in the person of Herbert Weld-Blundell. A wealthy man, he had travelled extensively throughout the Middle East and Africa, and in the winter of 1921–2 he visited Baghdad, where he purchased a large collection of cuneiform documents. Many of these had been freshly looted from sites across southern Iraq. Indeed, David Hogarth, who was now keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, recorded that Weld-Blundell had happened to visit the site of Tell as-Senkereh 'just at the moment when native diggers had lighted on a chamber of cuneiform records. Part of their spoils he was able to buy on the spot: part were seized by the Government but handed over to us later on his account.'[24] The Weld-Blundell collection was presented to the Ashmolean in 1922 and 1923, and among the several hundred texts recorded in the

museum's register book were two versions of the Sumerian King List, one a small tablet (subsequently lost during the Second World War), and the famous prism, often referred to by the name of its donor. The Weld-Blundell Prism was published in 1923 by Stephen Langdon as an important source for reconstructing the chronology of Mesopotamia's most ancient past.[25]

By this date Langdon had already approached the Field Museum, Chicago, with the idea of a joint expedition to Uruk, but Weld-Blundell, fresh from his visit to Iraq and ready to provide much of the funding for the University of Oxford's contribution, recommended Kish, some 80 km (50 mi.) south of Baghdad, on a now dry branch of the Euphrates. Money talked then as it does now, and so it was agreed that Kish would be the perfect choice. Langdon was appointed expedition director, although Ernest Mackay, an archaeologist trained by Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (the so-called father of Egyptology), was chosen to lead it in the field (which he did until 1926, when he was succeeded by the less experienced French archaeologist Louis-Charles Watelin, who had excavated at Susa in Iran). Like the Ur excavations, the work at Kish was to be conducted on a very large scale, but unlike Woolley's detailed reports, the Oxford–Field Museum expedition was never fully published.

It was always going to be a challenging undertaking, since the site of Kish is enormous, comprising about forty tells, including two large groups called Tell Ingharra and Tell Uhaimir. Some of these ancient mounds were known to nineteenth-century European explorers, but the first significant excavations had been undertaken by a French team under Henri de Genouillac between 1912 and 1914; the new excavators chose to take no account of this work.[26] Langdon's aim was to find cuneiform tablets, while the Field Museum was interested in archaeological and ethnographic artefacts. As a result, the agreement of 1922 with the Antiquities Department of Iraq allowed that after the official division of objects, Oxford was to receive all the remaining inscribed items, while Chicago received archaeological, skeletal and scientific material; both institutions would also get representative collections of the categories not allocated to them for museum display.

Slate and limestone inlay from a palace at Kish, Iraq, *c.* 2600 BC.

Hundreds of local men and boys were soon digging vast holes in the tells in a search for objects. Mackay's careful recording was sent to Langdon, but the Oxford professor rarely visited the site and was focused on locating tablets such as had been discovered at Nippur. As a result, only a few detailed reports of the excavations were ever published. The most impressive building uncovered was the so-called Palace A of the middle of the third millennium BC. Two sections of the structure extended along the sides of an open space. An imposing staircase served as the entrance to the northern building, and a four-columned portico formed the facade of the second. Inlaid friezes were found in the palace that were formed from pieces of slate cut to fit together, with shallow depressions hollowed out and filled with pieces of shaped white limestone and mother-of-pearl. They depict a row of soldiers and bound prisoners, and so find a parallel with the imagery on the Standard of Ur. Indeed, the procession appears to have culminated in the figure of a seated ruler. Royal imagery from the earliest-known palace seemed to confirm the claim of the King List that Kish had been the first seat of kingship in Mesopotamia, whose prestige appeared to be confirmed by the title 'King of Kish' used in inscriptions by some powerful rulers from other cities.

The oldest known script

One of the early discoveries at Kish was a stone tablet inscribed with what appeared to be an archaic type of cuneiform. We can discover how this particular object came to remain in Iraq rather than find a home in Oxford or Chicago, as well as something of the personalities and practices involved in the excavation, by turning to a letter from Gertrude Bell to her father dated 24 March 1924. It records the initial division of finds at the site.

> First Kish. J. M. [Wilson] and I motored down, getting there about 1. We found an atmosphere of electric gloom and learnt afterwards that they had expected to find us such that in the first half hour Prof. Langdon would close down the excavations and Mr Mackay would find himself without a job. So I, unknowing, while eating a scrap of lunch, explained that my object was to leave, as far as possible, the tablets to them (they have found a library)[,] for they should be at the deposition of students. On the other hand, they would have to make up by parting with some other fine objects. 'Who decides' said the Professor, 'if we disagree.' I replied that I did but he needn't be afraid for he would find me eager to oblige. At this he puffed, was this the law? had it been shown to him? and so forth. And I said 'Come on, Professor, you'll see how it works out.' So we went to his tent where all the tablets were exposed. There was one unique object, a stone tablet inscribed with what is probably the oldest known human script. The Professor positively pressed it on me; he said he had copied it and read it (he hasn't, as I'll tell you later) and didn't mind what happened. So I took it. Then we went to a little room where all the other objects were and began on the beads and jewels . . . So we turned to the necklaces; we spun a coin for the first pick; he won it and we picked, turn and turn about. And thus with all the rest.[27]

The following year the excavation was joined for a few weeks by an Oxford undergraduate. This was Henry Field, a great-nephew of the founder of the Field Museum. He had been a student of the

university's anatomists Sir Arthur Keith and L. H. Dudley Buxton, who taught him the techniques of measuring skulls. Field now joined Buxton at Kish, where their skill was put to good use in a large cemetery in an area of Tell Ingharra called the 'Y' sounding. The majority of burials consisted of a body placed in half-crouched position at the bottom of a pit, surrounded by grave goods. There were, however, at least four distinct burials that were larger and contained between one and five bodies, along with four-wheeled carts apparently drawn by oxen and accompanied by donkeys. Unlike at Ur, no cylinder seals were recovered to help identify the occupants, nor, it seemed, were there any death pits; the people in the grave, which were no richer than the surrounding ones, were simply distinguished by the vehicle and animals, suggesting that they may have all belonged to a particular profession. Nonetheless, the excavators wishfully interpreted the graves as belonging to princes, and described the carts as chariots.

Cast of a stone tablet with proto-cuneiform signs. Original from Kish, Iraq, *c.* 3000 BC.

Field was also to participate in excavations at a site about 26 km (16 mi.) northeast of Kish. In 1925 some Arab tribesmen had visited the archaeologists to show them inscribed tablets and distinctive painted pottery from a series of mounds known as Jemdet Nasr. Langdon was especially intrigued by the tablets, since European museums had been purchasing similar examples for a number of years and it seemed possible that they had been plundered from the site. Following a preliminary visit, in 1926 he and Field conducted a season of excavation at Jemdet Nasr. Field would return to the site two years later, when a second brief season was conducted with Watelin. Several hundred proto-cuneiform tablets were found that were recognized as the ancestors to the cuneiform writing system and comparable with the stone tablet from Kish that Langdon had handed to Bell.

These were exciting years for reconstructing the world of early Mesopotamia, but, as a headline in the *Scientific American* magazine of 1928 made clear, the overriding question remained 'Who Were the Ancient Sumerians?'[28] An answer of sorts was provided by the article's subtitle, 'No One Knows. Excavations Now in Progress [at Kish] Give Promise of Solving this Perplexing Historical Mystery'. The question was described in the report as

> one of the most alluring [problems] ever studied by archaeologists . . . The Sumerians who founded [Kish] were a round-headed, non-Semitic people, who[,] from the evidence unearthed in the excavations, apparently had achieved a high state of civilization. Kish was the seat of the oldest dynasty known in history.

Sumerians abroad: India and Egypt

While Buxton and Field were busy measuring skulls at Kish and Jemdet Nasr, they took their lead from Sir Arthur Keith. Although his rather conservative views on race were not universally accepted, his status was such that his word carried considerable weight, and his analysis of the skulls from Ur and al-'Ubaid appeared to offer answers about the origin of the Sumerians. He considered that

they were 'large brained with strong facial features' that might be expected in 'a race of pioneers', and that it was possible to 'trace the ancient Sumerian race eastwards among the inhabitants of Afghanistan and Baluchistan, until the valley of the Indus is reached – some 1,500 miles distant from Mesopotamia.'[29]

This conclusion appeared to be supported by archaeological work in the northwest of British India (modern Pakistan). In 1920 Sir John Marshall had initiated excavations first at the site of Harappa and then at Mohenjo-daro that resulted in the discovery of the so-called Indus Valley or Harappan culture that flourished in approximately 2600–1900 BC. While the mud-brick houses of the Harappan cities seemed at first sight to offer parallels with those of Sumer, the most intriguing artefacts to offer direct evidence of a connection between the Indus and Mesopotamia were stone seals. In 1924 Marshall found cylinder seals, exactly like those known from Ur. This was all the more remarkable because the typical Indus Valley seal was a square stamp made of stone and engraved with symbols and animal motifs. Abstract or pictographic symbols engraved above the animals are a form of writing – perhaps the names of deities, people or materials – but because the inscriptions are very short, no decipherment has ever been possible. These stamp seals had been known since the later nineteenth century, but in 1931 an example and the clay impression of another were discovered at Kish, below levels dated to Sargon of Agade. It raised a question in Langdon's mind 'as to whether the Sumerian are not really the Indus Valley people themselves'.[30]

This eastern origin of the Sumerians chimed with ideas about the Sumerian language as a precursor to the Indo-European/Aryan languages of Europe. In other words, as Woolley summarized in 1928, Sumerian 'affinities were with the peoples of the Caucasian or European type, and we may regard south-western Asia as their cradleland'; he agreed with Keith that the 'Neolithic people of English long barrows were also related to them – perhaps distantly.'[31] In this reconstruction the Sumerians would have reached southern Mesopotamia by sea, driving the Akkadians north until there was a division of the land to form 'Sumer and Akkad'. They were, Woolley considered, 'the apostles of civilization', but, 'set

Indus Valley stamp seal from Kish, Iraq, *c.* 2000 BC.

down in the midst of peoples physically more powerful and addicted to war as a pastime, intellectual and artistic superiority would have made little headway, could not indeed have held its own against the covetousness it must have provoked, unless that genius had been applied to war not less than to peace.'[32] This could explain those images of warfare on the inlays from Ur and Kish, a civilization that engaged in conflict only to defeat more aggressive neighbours, much as the First World War was being viewed by its victors.

If the Sumerians had travelled from the Indus, it might also be possible that they had carried civilization even further west. It had long been suggested that the apparently rapid development of Egyptian civilization was thanks to foreign influence. The most famous proponent of this theory was Petrie. He had a strong belief in biological determinism and racial hierarchy that matched brain

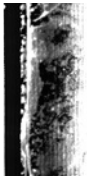
size and skull shape to assumptions about intelligence. In 1902 Petrie had positioned different racial groups against intelligence and climate, with 'aboriginal', 'eskimo' and 'negro' skulls plotted as least intelligent and 'English', 'Ancient Egyptian' and 'German' plotted as most (emphasizing the distinction in his article by the use of capital letters for the latter).[33] In the 1920s Petrie, who had overseen the recent excavations at a site called Badari, argued that the prehistoric Badarian civilization was 'Solutrean' (that is to say, Palaeolithic European) and had migrated into Egypt from an 'Asiatic centre' in the Caucasus.[34] It was, however, the measurement of a significant number of skulls from excavations led by the American Egyptologist George Reisner between 1900 and 1910 that resulted in the theory that the builders of the Giza pyramids, identified as having broad skulls, were a different race from the Nile Valley's predynastic inhabitants, who had narrow skulls.[35] This Dynastic Race was imagined as having invaded from the East. It wasn't too much of a step to imagine a Sumerian influence.

Among the most vociferous supporters of a widespread Sumerian influence, and a good example of how notions of race can lead to both misunderstandings and prejudice, was Professor Laurence Waddell. His was an extraordinary life – of the sort that perhaps was possible only for the wealthy intellectuals of an imperial power. He graduated in medicine from the University of Glasgow in 1878 and joined the British army as a medical officer stationed in India. By 1881 Waddell had been appointed Professor of Chemistry and Pathology at the Medical College of Kolkata, and was studying Sanskrit in his spare time. Between 1885 and 1887 he took part in British military expeditions across Burma and Tibet before taking up the position of Principal Medical Officer in Darjeeling. Waddell now began to study archaeology and ethnology, learning Tibetan and exploring monuments across India. By 1899 he was considered an authority on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, even acting as a consultant on Sir Francis Younghusband's infamous British expeditionary force into that country. In 1906 Waddell returned to England and briefly became professor of Tibetan at University College London. Over the following decades, as he entered retirement, he turned to the challenges of

deciphering cuneiform as well as vigorously promoting his ideas about the Sumerians.

Waddell's writings were shaped by a belief in the superiority of the Aryan race, which he situated at the origin of all the world's civilizations. In 1925 he published a book on the Indus Valley seals, which he claimed to be Sumerian, linking them with the Phoenicians and the Goths. This was followed by a Sumerian–Aryan dictionary. Waddell's arguments and conclusions were forcefully rejected by Stephen Langdon and others.[36] Such negative reaction failed to give him pause, however, and in 1929 he published a book with the pithy title *The Makers of Civilization in Race and History, Showing the Rise of the Aryans or Sumerians, their Origination and Propagation of Civilization, their Extension of it to Egypt, India and Crete, Personalities and Achievements of their Kings, Historical Originals of Mythic Gods and Heroes, with Dates from the Rise of Civilization about 3380 BC*. Although these ideas were also rejected by the scholarly community as biased and unscientific, not least Waddell's conclusion that the Sumerians were blonde Nordics with blue eyes, it received some praise in more popular reviews; the *Daily Mail*, for example, claimed it as a 'Startling book on our Sumerian ancestors – where the British came from'.[37] While the ideas may have appeared ludicrous to many of his contemporaries – as they will to most modern readers – there was certainly a wider readership ready to accept them; the publications offered accounts that fitted with the racial prejudices of the time, but without the complexities inherent in the work of decipherment and constructing chronologies. They find parallels in many modern attempts to challenge 'expert' opinion. Waddell's promotion of an Aryan race, including arguing for hyperdiffusionism, in which Sumerian colonists established many of the ancient civilizations, such as Dynastic Egypt, found an audience among British Fascists in the approach to the Second World War but has since faded to the fringes of white supremacists and conspiracy theorists.

'Stone building' at Uruk, Iraq, *c.* 3200 BC.



FOUR
The First Cities

Among the archaeological sites of southern Mesopotamia that held a long association with the Sumerians was Uruk (modern Warka), about 55 km (34 mi.) upriver from Ur. Known in the Old Testament by the name of Erech, the city appeared in the cuneiform records as one of the great early political centres of Sumer and the cult centre of the goddess Inana. Extensive remains of the settlement lie today in the desert, but before the Euphrates shifted its course away from the city some 1,500 years ago it was surrounded by fertile farm and marshland and date groves. German excavators began to work there in 1912, but this was ended by the outbreak of the First World War and revived only in 1928. Their focus was the area surrounding the remains of the large mud-brick ziggurat at the heart of the city, named in Sumerian texts as E-anna, 'House of Heaven'. There they revealed buildings on a truly monumental scale that date to the late prehistoric period (circa 3500–3100 BC). Although the plan of these changed over time as some buildings were demolished and new ones built, there were similarities in layout between many of them. This consisted of a long hall with flanking rooms and, at one short end, a smaller version of the plan at a ninety-degree angle. In some of the buildings, access was provided by several doorways, and so perhaps light and air had been an important feature of the architecture, especially since some of the structures could have accommodated hundreds of people. The walls of many of these buildings were adorned with coloured cone mosaics similar to those William Kennett Loftus had uncovered in the previous century. The astonishing number of

labourers and levels of organization needed to create these buildings is suggested by a mud-brick terrace built to support the so-called White Temple; the excavators estimated that it would have taken some 1,500 people working ten hours a day for five years to build just this 13-metre-high (43 ft) platform. At the foot of the terrace was the equally impressive 'Stone Building' that, as the name suggests, had walls and floor of stone and comprised three semi-subterranean rectangular nested rooms accessed by a ramp from the surface. Its purpose remains a mystery.

It was very soon after excavations at Uruk began that tablets written in an archaic form of cuneiform, in some respects comparable with those known from Jemdet Nasr, were found. The tablets were discovered in pits filled with broken and weathered bricks, ash, animal bones and shards of pottery that formed part of the foundation packing for the monumental buildings. In 1936 Adam Falkenstein, a professor of Assyriology at the University of Göttingen, documented and analysed 620 of these tablets that had been found in the first three seasons of excavation. He was able to recognize many of the signs in relation to the more wedge-shaped forms in texts from later periods, and realized that the contents are largely administrative in nature, with different categories of numerical signs. Although the tablets could not be 'read', Falkenstein identified among them a small handful of so-called lexical texts that paralleled word-for-word the better-known cuneiform 'school texts' dating from around 2500 BC, suggesting an unbroken line in scribal tradition that extended over some five hundred years or more. We will return to these tablets later in the story, at a point when their content had become even better understood.

Chronology

As these great discoveries at Ur, Uruk and Kish were being made, there remained the challenge of how to relate them to an absolute chronology. Most of the earlier excavations had lacked any systematic approach to both digging and recording, since the main aim was to recover objects for museum collections and their displays.

Although this remained the principal objective of excavation in the early twentieth century, much more attention was being paid to stratigraphy (the superimposed layers of occupation over time), as had been championed by Petrie at his excavations in Egypt and Palestine. A more reliable chronological sequence of cultural change was being established as a result. Leonard Woolley, for example, took great care in documenting the context of the objects he discovered. Nonetheless, broader historical relationships could be challenging, and he dated the Royal Tombs at Ur to before the unification of Egypt, giving them, and the Sumerians, an all-important precedence in terms of cultural development and the roots of Western civilization.

An important milestone in understanding the chronology of the Sumerians came in 1930, when an international conference of archaeologists held in Baghdad agreed a sequence of change for the earliest periods of Mesopotamia.[1] On the basis that similar forms of objects are contemporary wherever they are discovered, four cultural phases were identified, and, except for some revisions to the dates for each period, this chronology is still used today: Ubaid (sixth–fifth millennium BC), Uruk (fourth millennium BC), Jemdet Nasr (*c.* 3100–2900 BC) and Early Dynastic (*c.* 2900–2350 BC). The early Sumerian inscriptions and sculpture belonged in the Early Dynastic phase, followed by the rule of the kings of Agade and then the dynasties of Gudea and Ur-Namma.

Fundamental to refining this chronology were seven years of excavation undertaken by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. The question of where they should dig was answered by the appearance in the markets of Baghdad of looted objects that could be traced to the mounds of Khafajah some 11 km (7 mi.) to the east in the region of the Diyala River, a major tributary of the Tigris. Four neighbouring sites were selected for exploration (Tell Agrab, Tell Asmar, Ishchali and Khafajah), and excavations led by Henri Frankfort started the same year as the Baghdad conference. As at Ur and Kish, the work was undertaken on a large scale, with hundreds of local men and boys employed to clear vast areas. The Americans took great care to systematically record not just architecture but exactly where objects were found. The result

was that sequences of rebuilding could be traced over time; levels of the so-called Sin Temple at Khafajah, for example, represented every phase of the Early Dynastic period, down to its foundations in the Jemdet Nasr period. The same site revealed a vast rectangular temple platform and courtyard surrounded by a double line of outer walls in the form of an oval. By digging a section of the wall of this so-called Temple Oval, it became apparent that the foundations of the entire building had been excavated to a depth of 4.6 m (15 ft) and then filled with clean sand brought from outside the city, estimated at some 64,000 cu. m (2.3 million cu. ft), suggesting, as at Uruk, the ability to mobilize and manage large numbers of labourers.

The finds at all four sites were extensive and included a wide variety of pottery, metalwork, beads, small carved amulets and cylinder seals. The careful recording of their context allowed changes in their form to be traced over time. The designs on seals were of particular interest. Small cylinders of stone, ranging in height between approximately 1 and 5 cm (⅓–2 in.), and carved with abstract patterns or figural imagery, were among the most familiar objects from Mesopotamia. They had been favoured by collectors in the West since the Renaissance because of their portability and the fact that many were carved from semi-precious stones and their miniature designs could be considered as art. There had been very few excavated examples, and museums and private collectors tended to record their provenance as the place where the seals had been purchased. The work at Ur and the Diyala provided a sequence of seals against which the many hundreds of unprovenanced examples could be compared. This work was led by Frankfort, who also investigated the changing

Brown marble cylinder seal and modern impression, from Kish, Iraq, *c.* 2700 BC.

Votive figure from Tell Asmar, Iraq, *c.* 2900–2600 BC.

forms of Mesopotamian pottery over time as an important chronological tool.

It was, however, Frankfort's analysis of votive sculpture from the Diyala sites that would be fundamental in the changing perception of the Sumerians. Examples comparable to those known from Ashur, Bismaya, Kish and Ur were uncovered at Khafajah and Tell Agrab, but it would be those found in 1934 at the Early Dynastic site of Tell Asmar that would be transformative.[2] There the archaeologists revealed a small mud-brick building that they named the Abu Temple. Carefully buried beside the altar was a cache of 21 stone statues, stacked in rows of three or four each with the largest statues at the bottom. Carved in limestone, the statues are of various sizes and depict men wearing fringed or tufted fleece skirts, and women wearing fringed or tufted dresses draped over one shoulder. A long beard and side locks characterize some male figures, although others are shown bald and shaven, while the female figures have a variety of hairstyles or headdresses. The statues are typically carved with the hands clasped, right over left, at the chest or waist, and many have inlaid eyes. Some figures hold cups. Ever since the discovery of similar figures at Ashur, these sculptures have been imagined as being set up in the cult sanctuary of the temple, perhaps arranged on benches or pedestals, much like works of art in a modern museum, to be present before the image of the deity.[3] Quite how, or indeed if, the statues were presented to the god is unknown, however, since none has ever been discovered in situ; they have rather, as at Tell Asmar, been found buried in groups under the floors of the temple or built into cultic installations. These statues were probably thought to embody the very essence of the worshipper, so that the spirit would be present when the physical body was not, perhaps occasionally placed in temple courtyards to mediate between worshippers and the god (temples generally being small buildings and not congregational).[4]

Art and the Sumerians

As we have seen, such sculpture had been the focus of ethnographic enquiries, a means to identify the Sumerians through the

racial characteristics assumed to be embodied in the carved stone. This imagery, along with the evidence provided by human skulls and the language of texts, had established the Sumerians as ancestral versions of European Caucasians, helping to justify the colonial and mandated control of Iraq and Syria by the British and French. Placed at the root of Western civilization, the Sumerians now began to be considered in terms of their creativity, and some of the excavated objects, in addition to the Gudea sculptures, began to be described as 'art'. This reflected a significant shift in aesthetics following the social devastations wrought by the First World War, and in the new intellectual climates the belief that realistic imagery, as revealed in its finest form by ancient Greek sculpture, represented the ultimate artistic achievement began to be questioned. As the earliest civilization, the Sumerians were considered to have been at a 'primitive' stage in human development, and this could find parallels with people at other times and places, including in the contemporary world. 'Primitive' cultures produced 'primitive' art, and this began to resonate with modern artists. In 1935 the art historian Christian Zervos published *L'art de la Mesopotamie*, and it was reviewed that year by the sculptor Henry Moore. There can be no better way of demonstrating the changing attitudes to art and the place of Sumerian sculpture within it than by quoting Moore in his evaluation of the book:

> In the last thirty years or so many factors have worked together to call for a review and a revaluation of past periods of art. Easier means of communication and travel, more scientific and systematic conduction of excavations, the development in photographic reproduction, better arrangement and showing of collections in museums, the breakdown of the complete domination of later decadent Greek art as the only standard of excellence – the interplay of such factors as these . . . has enlarged the field of knowledge, interest and appreciation of the world's past art . . .
>
> Most scholars and critics writing about Mesopotamian art have either neglected the sculpture of the earlier and greater

> Sumerian period or else have lumped it together with the later Babylonian and Assyrian work, which (except perhaps for a few isolated pieces) is much inferior. The Sumerian period . . . cannot be interpreted through the decadent art of the Babylonians and Assyrians, with their materialist and militarist society, their love of the sumptuous and the colossal, their luxurious palaces and temples.
>
> The Sumerians were an agricultural and pastoral people, and they had their poets and perhaps scholars – astronomers and learned men. Their art dates from the birth of civilisation . . . But it is not necessary to know their history in order to appreciate and respond to these works of art. We need to look at them as sculpture, for once a good piece of sculpture has been produced, even if it was made like the palaeolithic 'Venuses' 20,000 years ago, it is real and a part of life, here and now, to those sensitive and open enough to feel and perceive it.
>
> For me, Sumerian sculpture ranks with Early Greek, Etruscan, Ancient Mexican, Fourth and Twelfth Dynasty Egyptian, and Romanesque and Early Gothic sculpture, as the great sculpture of the world. It shows a richness of feeling for life and its wonder and mystery, welded to direct plastic statement born of a real creative urge. It has a bigness and simplicity with no decorative trimmings (which are the sign of decadence, of flagging inspiration).
>
> And in Sumerian art (as perhaps in all the greatest sculpture and painting) along with the abstract value of form and design, inseparable from it, is a deep human element.[5]

Abstraction was considered a fundamental quality of 'primitive' art and consequently applied to the arts of various cultures across time and space, including that of the Sumerians.[6] As Jean M. Evans, chief curator at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute Museum, has shown, it was Frankfort who was fundamental in making this connection by approaching the sculptures found at sites in the Diyala, but especially those in the Asmar hoard, using art-historical methodologies.[7] He considered them to be the oldest monumental stone sculptures in the world, and thus to

represent the origin of art history. Frankfort identified a group of the figures as abstract in form, which of course fitted well with the preconceived ideas of 'primitive' art, while other sculptures were classified as more 'realistic'. Examples of realistic sculpture were also being found by French archaeologists at Tell Hariri, on the Euphrates in Syria. This included an inscribed statue of the ruler Ishqi-Mari (initially read as Lamgi-Mari) that identified the site as ancient Mari, one of the cities in the Sumerian King List and as a result considered the westernmost outpost of Sumerian civilization.

On the basis that primitive forms evolved into more realistic representations, Frankfort concluded that the abstract sculptures were earlier than the more naturalistically carved examples. Based on his analysis, the Early Dynastic period could be divided into three phases (Early Dynastic I–III). It is now recognized that there is no universal meaning for abstraction, and recent scholarship has challenged Frankfort's art-historical progression, arguing convincingly that the style of statues is site-specific, originating from different workshops and votive traditions.[8] Nonetheless, the Sumerians had been transformed from a subject of ethnographic study to being understood as the makers of art, and, through their promotion by modern artists, Sumerian objects took on new roles in museum displays.

Scandal and abandonment of Sumer by the West

While art historians were accepting the Sumerians into their canon of the 'primitive', the archaeologists who were recovering examples of these works for museums were facing challenges. In 1932 the Kingdom of Iraq had been granted its independence from Britain, although in reality the former mandate authority retained considerable influence in the country. One area where the Iraqis could enforce their sovereignty was in the division of finds from excavations. Gertrude Bell's law of 1924 required that the rarest finds go directly to the museum in Baghdad and that what remained be divided between Iraq and the foreign expedition. There was, however, no requirement for a 50-50 division, and expedition directors

had been interpreting this very loosely to their benefit. A change to these approaches began in 1933, when a strict enforcement of the law in Iraq's favour, as well as plans for the introduction of a revised legal framework, resulted in the so-called Arpachiyah Scandal.[9] It occurred when the Iraqi Minister of Education informed the Director of Antiquities, the German archaeologist Julius Jordan, that foreign excavators should receive only duplicates of objects that the Baghdad Museum already possessed. This effectively meant that the foreign expeditions could no longer receive any of the rarest finds, given that these were always going to be unique (a feature that arguably applied even to the most mundane objects). Thinking this must be a mistake, Jordan went ahead with the divisions in the traditional manner. One of the excavations where this took place was at Arpachiyah, a prehistoric site in northern Iraq being directed by Max Mallowan for the British Museum. When Mallowan was about to leave the country, he was told that the permit needed to export the artefacts to London had been denied. Mallowan, along with the other Western archaeologists, was outraged, not least that the planned changes to the law would mean they would have to host an Iraqi inspector at their excavation. He grandly decided that he would not return to Iraq and would carry out any future work in Syria, which was under French mandate control. Following Mallowan's lead, Woolley ended his work at Ur and relocated to Al Mina and Tell Atchana in Syria (both sites are now in present-day Turkey).

In October 1934 Jordan was replaced as Director of Antiquities by Sati' al-Husri, the first Iraqi to hold the position. As a young man al-Husri had adopted the political ideology of pan-Arabism, and he therefore emphasized the brotherhood of all Arabs, rather than focusing exclusively on a narrower Iraqi nationalism. This served the interests of the minority Sunni Arabs around Baghdad, who looked to strengthen ties with their brethren in the larger Arab world. He urged Arabs to visit the sites associated with the great Abbasid Empire, and Iraqi excavations began at Islamic period sites. This contrasted with foreign excavations, where the focus had been on more ancient periods as part of their search for the origins of Western civilization. Al-Husri now set about drafting a

new antiquities law, which was finally promulgated in April 1936. It declared that all antiquities discovered belonged to the state. As a reward for their work, excavation sponsors would be given half of the duplicate items and any objects the Baghdad Museum didn't want.

Race, autocracy and democracy

As Europe marched towards another horrifying conflict, and one that would again unfurl on a global scale, the early history of Mesopotamia remained essentially the story of a struggle between two inimical racial groups, Sumerians and Semites. The basic narrative will now seem familiar, but the level of detail had expanded. After many centuries of animosity between the two races, the Sumerians were eventually defeated by the Semites under Sargon of Agade (thought at this time to date around 2850 BC). Except for a brief 'renaissance' under the Third Dynasty of Ur (or the Ur III period, so-called by modern scholars because according to the Sumerian King List it was the third time that Ur had dominated Mesopotamia), the Semites became the rulers of Mesopotamia forever. The rise of Sargon could be reconstructed from a range of sources. It starts with the ruler of the Sumerian city-state of Umma, Lugalzagesi, who conquered the neighbouring city-states of Lagash, Uruk and Kish. His domination of the whole of southern Mesopotamia was recognized by inscribed objects dedicated in the Ekur temple of the supreme god Enlil at Nippur. Having established a new royal city at Agade, Sargon succeeded in defeating first Lugalzagesi and then other important city-state rulers, and was likewise recognized as overlord by inscribed dedications to Enlil.

Reconstructing the past as a clash of two races seemed perfectly reasonable in the 1930s. Nineteenth-century racial science and anti-Semitism were now shaping politics in an unprecedented manner, taking its most extreme form in Germany, where the Nazi regime was attempting to establish a system of rule based on race; the National Socialist goal was a reshaping of the existing society into a racially homogenous 'Aryan' national community. It would, of course, culminate in the horrors of the Holocaust. Although the

Sumerians do not figure extensively in the historical reconstructions and pseudoscience that underpinned Nazi ideology, Mesopotamian archaeologists, like so many other millions, were not immune to its pull. Perhaps the most significant of these was Julius Jordan, who had excavated at Ashur and Uruk and, as we have seen, was Director of Antiquities in Iraq until the appointment of al-Husri in 1934. Jordan remained an adviser to the Antiquities Department and used his time as a Nazi agent to coordinate propaganda in Iraq; it was only after being associated with the murder of the British Consul in Mosul that he was ordered to leave Baghdad in 1939.

Against this background it is all the more remarkable that the accepted wisdom of the previous half century should be challenged. In 1938, however, Thorkild Jacobsen, a brilliant philologist who had worked as epigrapher for the Oriental Institute's Iraq Expedition, questioned the validity of a conflict between Sumerians and Semites. Through a critique of the texts that describe the war between Lugalzagesi and Sargon, he was able to show that it was necessary to abandon the idea of a racial war:

> The Semitic population was very likely to a large extent formed through constant filtering in of single families from the desert. It is obvious that such single families, settling and adapting themselves to life in the city or on the farm, would very soon feel as citizens of the city-state to which they had happened to immigrate and where they had become established. They would not constitute a common group, united across existing political boundaries. Semites and Sumerians lived thus, according to all the texts teach us, peacefully side by side in Mesopotamia. The wars which shook that country and the aims for which its rulers fought had nothing to do with differences of race; the issues were purely political and were determined solely by social and economic forces.[10]

Jacobsen's article certainly wasn't the end of thinking about the Sumerians as a race, but it marked the beginning of a more nuanced approach to reconstructing the ways in which the

Mesopotamian world operated. His analysis of the texts also began to offer new understandings of the third millennium BC. At the very time when Adolf Hitler's armies were invading Poland, Jacobsen published his reconstruction of the Sumerian King List. He was of the opinion that, even though its arrangement and the succession of the various dynasties constituted 'a later construction of no significance', the actual materials from which the List was built up – the names of kings, reign lengths and so on – represented 'a historical source of high value, from which only some exaggerated reigns occurring with the earliest rulers should be segregated'.[11] The accepted 'reliability' of such texts meant that it might be possible to determine the origins of kingship itself, and to do this Jacobsen developed the idea of a 'Primitive Democracy'.[12] He suggested that the societies of Mesopotamia had, at the dawn of history, governed themselves through assemblies of citizens. His model was derived from that of classical Greece, where all free males (so no women) could express an opinion and participate in the political process. In times of crisis, especially of war, the assembly would select an individual to take control. In Mesopotamia, so the argument ran, some of the individuals had refused to relinquish power, and by the third millennium BC, as suggested by surviving royal inscriptions and monuments, kings had usurped much of the popular assembly's power; autocracy was replacing democracy.[13] In the Early Dynastic period, Jacobsen argued, the kings were still obliged to obtain permission from the assembly to go to war, and this body of citizens acted as a court of law into the second millennium BC.

Since the early historical records of Sumer were dominated by those of kings, with only a few references to assemblies, it was necessary to look further back in time in order to discover earlier forms of government. To do this, Jacobsen turned to mythological texts, and one of the most significant for his reconstruction was the Babylonian 'Epic of Creation', a poem that dates to the second millennium BC. The story describes a conflict between the primordial deity Tiamat (who embodied the saltwater ocean) and the younger generation of gods. The latter gather in an assembly and eventually select the young hero Marduk to be their champion. He

Cuneiform tablet with the 'Epic of Creation', from Kish, Iraq, *c.* 900–630 BC.

agrees to face Tiamat, but only if he is granted kingship. Marduk defeats Tiamat and her monstrous army, and after he claims his throne, humans are created as the servants of the gods.

Jacobsen's ideas were widely accepted, and the Sumerians came to be understood as the first people to experiment with democracy. His writings can be viewed as a contribution to the fight against Nazism, with its threat to liberal democracy, but with the passing of time his conclusions have become less popular among scholars.[14] Jacobsen's reliance on texts that were written much later than

the time he describes, and their mythological nature, presents considerable problems in using them to reconstruct history. Nonetheless politics has always been a balancing act, one of negotiation between ruler and subjects. While the surviving evidence from the cities of southern Mesopotamia of the third millennium BC is largely that of the palace and temple institutions, other forms of authority almost certainly existed, such as extended families, patron–client relationships or even 'popular' assemblies. It is probably wrong to discount Jacobsen's theory entirely, since the royal authority expressed in the monuments and inscriptions of Sumer, some of which will be described in more detail later in this book, may have been as much an aspiration as a reality.[15]

Temple-states and hydraulic states

How were these early Sumerian city-states managed? One influential idea placed the temple at the heart of the political and economic life of ancient Sumer. Throughout the 1920s, a German Sumerologist, Anton Deimel, studied some 1,700 cuneiform tablets from Tello. They appeared to represent at least part of an archive from a temple dedicated to the goddess Baba (or Ba'u), patron of the city-state of Lagash. The texts provided detailed information on the temple's management of its agricultural land and trade. Deimel concluded that all of the cultivable land in the state, as well as its workforce, had belonged to the temple. According to this rather extreme interpretation of the evidence, the king administered the temple of Ningirsu, the supreme god of Lagash, while his queen managed the temple of Baba, Ningirsu's wife. In this way all the people of Lagash were effectively slaves of the god, and by association also the king. Over the third millennium, so the theory went, such temple-states gave way to more secular forms of control, so that by about 2100 BC the management of the economy had become highly centralized in the hands of a bureaucracy controlled from the palace.[16]

By the late 1950s this reconstruction had begun to be criticized. The Russian Sumerologist Igor Diakonoff showed that Deimel's calculations were erroneous and that the data in the tablets could have a very different interpretation: while temples did

own agricultural estates, rather like medieval monasteries, much land was also held by the palace, as well as by private individuals and households. Slaves existed, but were only one part of the wider population and certainly not on the scale found in later Greek and Roman societies, where economies depended on them. Instead, the temples benefited from contributions in the form of corvée work from the wider population.[17] The temples were certainly important in the economies of the Mesopotamian city-states, but they were part of a complex intertwining of many different players.

Deimel's thesis had been very dependent on a link between political power, urbanism and the management of floodwaters. This was assumed to be the case for all the ancient civilizations, including Egypt, the Indus Valley and China. Because of inadequate annual rainfall in southern Mesopotamia, as well as the unpredictable flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, it was taken for granted that it had been necessary to construct and maintain an extensive irrigation system. To do this, the labour of the entire population was needed, and it was argued that the land could have been exploited efficiently only if it had been considered the property of the gods, rather than of individuals or families. The idea found a wide readership in 1957 with the publication of *Oriental Despotism* by Karl Wittfogel, and seemed to be confirmed by archaeological surveys of large areas of southern Mesopotamia undertaken during the 1950s and 1960s that revealed the remains of ancient canal systems. Like the idea of a 'temple-state', however, the 'hydraulic state' has also met with criticism, and more recent surveys have shown that large-scale irrigation works developed there long after autocratic forms of government and complex bureaucracy. In fact, the dense river network and raised levees of the alluvial plains meant that it was relatively easy to divert water into fields, and there was no requirement for major irrigation projects to support early urban centres.

Iraq and the Sumerians

While reconstructions of the politics and economies of Sumer were being developed and critiqued in Europe and America, the

withdrawal of foreign excavations from Iraq to neighbouring countries meant that Iraqi archaeologists began to take charge of uncovering the Sumerians for themselves. The first generation of Iraqi specialists was represented by Fuad Safar and Taha Baqir, who had both received five-year scholarships from the Iraqi government to study at the University of Chicago. Between 1940 and 1941 Safar, along with the locally trained Mohammed Ali Mustafa, worked with Seton Lloyd, a British adviser to the Antiquities Department, at Tell Uqair, 80 km (50 mi.) south of Baghdad.[18] There they uncovered an Ubaid period settlement and a very impressive Uruk period

Foundation figure, beads and inscribed tablet of Ur-Namma, from Nippur, Iraq, *c.* 2100 BC.

temple on a well-preserved mud-brick platform. The building was very similar to the White Temple at Uruk, with some parts of the walls still standing several metres high. Remarkably, the interior walls were faced with mural paintings in several colours, including a frieze of human and animal figures, of which only the lower half survived. A raised platform at one end of the central hall of the temple was approached by steps, and on the walls facing them were guardian figures of two spotted leopards represented in red and black paint.

These exciting discoveries were put on hold in 1941, when the country faced a second military invasion and occupation by the British Empire. That year an anti-British nationalist, Rashid Ali al-Gailani, had been reappointed as prime minister of Iraq, and he expressed support for Nazi Germany. This worried the British and so, with the aid of the Shi'ite tribes around Baghdad, they forced him to step down. Al-Gailani was reinstalled by the largely Arab-nationalist officer core of the Iraqi army, and in response the British landed troops at Basra, quickly overpowered the Iraqi forces and established a military presence in the country. With the defeat of the Arab nationalists, al-Husri was forced into exile. However, much of what he had achieved remained in place, and in 1945 the Directorate General of Antiquities initiated a journal called *Sumer*, which reported on the latest archaeological work in Arabic with only summaries in English.

After the end of the Second World War (which Iraq had joined on the Allied side in 1943) foreign archaeologists were invited back into the country. Although they could continue to expect a limited share of the finds, much now went to the Baghdad Antiquities Museum, which was rapidly running out of space to accommodate it. Among the first archaeologists to return to Iraq were those from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, who began digging at Nippur in 1948. The excavation of three temple areas and private houses resulted in the discovery of thousands of cuneiform tablets. It also became clear that King Ur-Namma, who had founded the Third Dynasty of Ur, was responsible for rebuilding and enlarging the Ekur temple of Enlil. In 1956 a bronze figurine was found in a foundation box buried beneath one of the temple

platforms. It represents Ur-Namma undertaking the ritual of carrying on his head a basket of clay from which the first brick of the temple would be formed. An inscribed stone tablet naming the king was found with the figurine, along with beads and four date stones. A report in the journal *Sumer* announced its discovery and added: 'it is a happy reflection to consider that such a powerful monarch . . . would consent to represent himself as a laborer, like the rest of the Sumerian citizens and in the spirit of democratic leadership.'[19]

This reference to democratic leadership may have drawn on the ideas of 'popular democracy', but it can also be understood as a thinly veiled criticism of contemporary Iraq, where an urban elite and rural tribal leaders monopolized power. Indeed, mounting social and economic inequality led in 1958 to the July Revolution, which overthrew the monarchy. The new leader, Brigadier General Abdul al-Karim Qasim, was an Iraqi nationalist rather than a pan-Arabist, and so an emphasis was placed on Iraq's own distinct history and the regime adopted ancient Mesopotamian symbols such as the eight-pointed star of Inana/Ishtar as emblems of post-revolutionary Iraq.[20] There was also a desire to commemorate this momentous event with a public monument, something of a novelty in the capital according to the Iraqi American academic Kanan Makiya:

> Until 1958, Baghdad boasted a total of three public sculptures all built by non-Iraqi artists after the collapse of Ottoman rule in 1918: General Maude, the British officer who took Iraq from the Ottomans in 1914, cast in bronze outside the British embassy; King Faisal, founder of the modern Iraqi state, near the radio and television broadcasting station; and the innocuous figure of Muhsin Saadoon, a former Iraqi prime minister.[21]

In 1959 the Iraqi artist Jawad Salim was commissioned by Qasim to create a monument that would be a celebration of Iraq's revolution of the previous year. Having studied art in Paris and Rome, Salim had returned to Baghdad at the end of the Second World War to teach at the newly opened Institute of Fine Arts, but

he also worked at the Antiquities Museum, helping to restore Sumerian sculptures, including those from Tell Asmar not sent to Chicago. It was this ancient heritage that helped to inform Salim's work, which he presented in the abstract visual language he had encountered in Europe; it established him as one of Iraq's greatest modern artists.[22] The result of the commission was his famous *Freedom Monument* (*Nasb al-Hurriyah*), a vast stone canvas 50 m (164 ft) long, across which the struggle for independence is narrated (from right to left) through fourteen bronze images. It recalls the roll-out of an ancient cylinder seal. Sadly, Salim died in 1961, just a few months before the monument was unveiled in Tahrir Square at the heart of Baghdad.

Heritage was increasingly an important component of Iraqi national identity, and the archaeological museum in Baghdad took on a new significance. The institution established by Gertrude Bell was overflowing with objects from many years of excavation, and the need for a larger place to house and display them had long been recognized. In 1938 the Directorate of Antiquities received funding from the government to acquire land in central Baghdad and the German architect Werner March was appointed to design a new museum. Construction was brought to a halt by the Second World War and would only resume in 1955; the

Jawad Salim, *Nasb al-Hurriyah* (Freedom Monument), Baghdad, Iraq, 1961.

Postage stamp commemorating the inauguration of the Iraq Museum, 1966.

building was finally completed in 1963. Although the government of Qasim was overthrown that year and pan-Arab nationalists assumed control – placing less emphasis on Iraq's ancient past – the new Iraq Museum was officially opened in 1966. It was arranged to take a visitor on a chronological journey from Iraq's prehistory to the Abbasid Caliphate, and at its heart lay a gallery devoted to the Sumerians. The opening was celebrated with a series of postage stamps, one of which depicted the head of an attendant of Queen Pu-abi adorned with elaborate jewellery. The new regime now emphasized its independence of Western powers by forbidding any further division of archaeological finds (an edict that was established by law in 1974); every discovery was to come to the Iraq Museum, and the country's heritage would be managed from Baghdad.

'A scribe who does not know the Sumerian language, what kind of scribe is he?' (Sumerian proverb)

The Iraq Museum housed an impressive collection of Sumerian cuneiform inscriptions, but many hundreds of thousands of tablets and fragments uncovered by excavators and looters during the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries lay in other collections around the world: Chicago, Berlin, Istanbul, London, Oxford, Paris and Philadelphia, as well as many private homes. A continuing challenge was to piece these together and provide translations. Work on what was essentially an enormous and scattered jigsaw puzzle began in earnest as the Second World War ended. While some scholars concentrated on economic texts, it was Samuel Noah Kramer of the University of Pennsylvania who came to be widely credited with recovering much of Sumerian literature, joining broken texts and presenting them in narrative form. In 1944 he published *Sumerian Mythology* for the general reader, and his introduction provides a summary of how the Sumerians were understood at that date:

> The Sumerians were a non-Semitic, non-Indo-European people who flourished in southern Babylonia from the beginning of the fourth to the end of the third millennium BC. During this long stretch of time the Sumerians, whose racial and linguistic affiliations are still unclassifiable, represented the dominant cultural group of the entire Near East.[23]

Kramer believed that poetry and myth, as much as historical and administrative records, could be mined for information about a Sumerian people. In numerous popular publications from the 1940s to the 1980s, he argued that civilization itself was a Sumerian creation. His books were enormously successful; translated into many languages, they were highly influential and many remain in print. What makes these works especially appealing for a wide audience is that Kramer portrayed the Sumerians as a distinct people who were not very different from those in modern societies. His ideas continue to shape the popular reception of early Mesopotamia.

The Sacred Marriage

Among the texts being pieced together by Kramer were some that appeared to him to reflect a 'Sacred Marriage'. This was a ritual act that he believed had been 'joyously and rapturously' celebrated

for thousands of years.[24] The idea was not a new one and had its origins in an account by the Greek historian Herodotus (*Histories*, Book I:181–2) of about 450 BC, that describes the ziggurat in Babylon as the place of a ritualized sexual act between the god (in the guise of the king) and a priestess, which was designed to ensure continuing prosperity for the land. The enactment of the marriage of two deities or a human and a deity was popularized as well as embedded in scholarly thinking with the publication in 1890 of Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Such was its appeal that Sidney Smith, the Director of Antiquities in Iraq, could suggest in 1928 that Pu-abi's burial at Ur might have been a fertility rite in which she as a high priestess was taking the part of the moon god's bride.[25] Indeed, it was widely accepted that

> The very ancient rite of the sacred marriage was of the utmost importance, if not the essential and pivotal element of Babylonian religion. The principal role was played by the god of the city-state and the sacred marriage was celebrated in order that, by a species of sympathetic magic, the resulting fruitfulness might be extended to the people and the whole land, that is to say, that fertility and abundance might be bestowed upon the head of every family, his flocks and herds, and the land he cultivated.[26]

Given its importance, it was naturally assumed that the ritual would appear in the art of Mesopotamia, and for the late prehistoric period the most significant example was considered to be the so-called Uruk Vase. A collection of alabaster fragments carved in shallow relief had been uncovered at Uruk by German excavators in the winter of 1933–4. They had been found in levels of the Jemdet Nasr period, but it is possible that they date to slightly earlier, about 3200–3100 BC. The broken pieces were restored to reveal a vase, just over 1 m (3 ft) tall and carved with a series of encircling registers. From the bottom to the top, a pair of wavy lines indicates a waterway, above which is a row of cultivated plants (flax and either date palms or barley) and then a line of sheep (alternating ewes and rams).[27] Next comes a procession of men, shown naked perhaps

The Uruk Vase, from Uruk, Iraq, *c.* 3100 BC.

to indicate their purity or subservience, carrying vessels loaded with produce. The scene culminates in the top register, where the figure of a man – broken away, apart from a fragment of his net-like skirt, which identifies him as a 'priest-king' known from other contemporary sculptures – makes a presentation through an intermediary to a female figure. Behind her are poles with a ring at the top and a streamer, the symbol of the goddess Inana, and what may be the interior of a temple, with depictions of vessels and small figures of a man and woman, perhaps cultic statues, standing on the back of bulls. The repetition of plants, animals and humans around the vase in all but the top register can be understood to represent the abundance provided by the deity.[28] The vase appears to encapsulate an ordered agricultural world being presented to the temple of Inana. However, only a few years after its discovery, the imagery on the Uruk Vase was being interpreted as a depiction of a 'Sacred Marriage', the participants usually understood as Inana and her husband, the shepherd Dumuzi (represented by the king and a priestess). It is an interpretation that retains its popularity to this day.

There seemed to be good textual evidence to support the idea of such a festival that was shared across the city-states of Sumer. The states of Lagash and Umma certainly appear to have celebrated divine weddings in which the gods were compared with the ruling king and queen. Most compelling of all, however, were a number of graphic descriptions of sexual encounters between Inana and kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the succeeding Isin Dynasty, which suggested to some scholars that intercourse actually took place between the rulers in the role of Dumuzi, with a woman representing the goddess.[29] More recently, however, such notions have been challenged on the basis that poetry, which is what these Sumerian literary texts are, should be read as poetry and there is no need to take them literally.[30] The imagery is more likely a metaphor of divine–royal relationships. Indeed, there is no good evidence for a common cultic calendar across Sumer, but rather diverse and often very separate rituals and festivals.

The Poems of Enheduana

Since the nineteenth century, the conquests of the kings of Agade had been viewed as the first stage in the decline of Sumerian civilization. The defeat of Lugalzagesi by Sargon resulted in the unification of much of Mesopotamia – albeit at the point of a spear – for nearly two centuries, and during this time there was considerable standardization in administration. Records were written in either Sumerian or Akkadian, suggesting a bilingualism that had probably long existed in the wider society (an important point to which we shall return). The individual city gods were brought together in texts and images as if in a large household, while Sargon's successors gave offerings in many of the great temples but especially the Ekur at Nippur. In addition, Sargon's daughter Enheduana (or Enheduanna) was installed in the position of priestess in the temple of the moon god Nanna at Ur.

That Enheduana was a real and powerful woman is evident from the archaeological record. In 1927 the fragments of a translucent alabaster disc, about 26 cm (10 in.) in diameter and 7 cm (3 in.) thick, was excavated at Ur. On the reverse is a Sumerian inscription that names Enheduana, describing her as the wife of Nanna and daughter of Sargon. On the obverse, a central band of figures – like the roll-out of a cylinder seal – is carved in high and modelled relief. On the left stands a nude male pouring a liquid offering into a plant before an enthroned god, heavily restored as a stepped tower.[31] Behind the priest is a woman wearing a turban and flounced robe, and she is followed by two bald, probably male, attendants or priests. Women appear rarely in the art of Mesopotamia, with the exception of female deities and individuals of high status, and so, given her central and commanding position in the scene, the woman has been identified as Enheduana. Her important role at Ur is also shown by the discovery there of the cylinder seals of her steward, her hairdresser and another servant.

By the 1960s there seemed additional evidence of Enheduana's significance when four Sumerian hymns were translated and credited to her as their author. One, *The Exaltation of Inana*, is a long celebration of the goddess in which Enheduana begs for her help.

A sense of the power and beauty of the poetry is captured in a recent translation, here just a few lines:

> Lady of all the divine powers, resplendent light, righteous woman clothed in radiance, beloved of An and Urash! Mistress of heaven, with the great pectoral jewels, who loves the good headdress befitting the office of *en* priestess, who has seized all seven of its divine powers! My lady, you are the guardian of the great divine powers! You have taken up the divine powers, you have hung the divine powers from your hand. You have gathered up the divine powers, you have clasped the divine powers to your breast.[32]

In another, more fragmentary hymn Enheduana again praises Inana but also appears to be seeking the compassion of the

Disk of Enheduana, from Ur, Iraq, *c.* 2300 BC.

powerful goddess. The priestess is also credited with compiling a collection of 42 short hymns addressed to the temples of Sumer. Finally, a damaged hymn to Nanna also mentions Enheduana several times.

This was remarkable, since not only were very few Mesopotamian male scribes ever named in this way, but Enheduana could be credited as the world's 'first' female poet. The timing of this finding meant that she was very quickly adopted as an icon of second-wave feminism. In 1978 the anthropologist Marta Weigle published an article in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* entitled 'Women as Verbal Artists: Reclaiming the Sisters of Enheduanna'.[33] Five years later the poet Diane Wolkstein wrote *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* with Samuel Noah Kramer. The book consists of stories and hymns about Inana translated from the Sumerian by Kramer, who also provided an introduction. Despite a contemporary review describing Wolkstein's contribution as 'problematic' and filled with 'misinterpretations and misunderstandings', not least because the focus is on Inana as girl, mother and queen, omitting any reference to her important role as a warrior, the book continues to be read widely.[34] It is a theme that remains popular, for example, in the feminist writings of the Jungian analyst Betty De Shong Meador, and demonstrates the power of the poetry, even in translation.[35]

Since the first translations of these texts it has become evident that the cuneiform tablets that contain Enheduana's poetry date not to the Agade Empire but to many centuries later; the spelling and grammar of Sumerian in the eighteenth century are very different from that used around 2300 BC. There are also problems posed by the content of some of the texts, especially the Temple Hymns, which offer praise to sanctuaries built for the kings of Ur who lived some two hundred years after Enheduana. It is, of course, very possible that earlier versions of the poems existed and that these, which haven't survived for us, were rewritten and 'modernized' by later scribes. If this was the case, the question of whether Enheduana would have created the poems herself is also moot. Other Sumerian poetry names kings and princes, but they have not been imagined as authors in their own right; royalty had

scribal poets to do it for them, and so Enheduana may have been a patron rather than an author. Alternatively, she was simply credited with creating the poems at a time in the second millennium BC when stories of the kings of Agade and their offspring had become a source of interest and inspiration.

The Kish Tradition

That the Sumerians culturally dominated Mesopotamia and the wider Middle East was taken as fact by Kramer. During the 1960s and 1970s, this 'Pan-Sumerianism' was, however, challenged by Ignace Gelb, an Assyriologist at the University of Chicago. He developed a concept dubbed 'The Kish Tradition' that stressed the important role of the city and state of Kish as well as of the Semitic people living in the northern half of the Mesopotamian alluvium.[36] A Sumerian south and a Semitic north seemed to be reflected in the royal title 'king of Sumer and Akkad', as well as by the fact that Sumerian texts had been found in greater numbers at sites such as Ur, Uruk and Girsu, whereas Akkadian texts were more numerous further north. Excavations at Abu Salabikh, some 20 km (12.5 miles) to the northwest of Nippur, by the Oriental Institute of Chicago between 1963 and 1965, for example, found about five hundred tablets and fragments, containing some of the earliest ancient literature, dating from about 2600 BC. About half the scribes who wrote the texts had names that were not Sumerian, as might have been expected, but Semitic, and at least two of the administrative texts are written in Akkadian.[37] Gelb also highlighted the title 'King of Kish', which was held by a number of city-state rulers and seemed to imply wider political control. Was this perhaps a legacy from a time when Kish had been the dominant regional centre? Indeed, Thorkild Jacobsen suggested that it was the kingship of Kish that brought about the breakdown of the older 'primitive democracy', leading to a 'primitive monarchy'.

The notion of a Kish Tradition was extended geographically further north following the discovery in 1964 of ancient Ebla (Tell Mardikh), some 60 km (37 mi.) south of Aleppo in Syria. Excavations led by Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome revealed an

urban centre that by 2400 BC was comparable in size to the cities of southern Mesopotamia. At its heart was a large palace and administrative quarter with elaborate decoration that included wooden panels inset with limestone figures of warriors, lion-headed birds and human-headed bulls, imagery already familiar from sites further south. The most sensational discovery, however, was made in the palace in 1975. More than 17,000 complete and fragmentary cuneiform documents from the state archives were found. About 5,000 tablets had been stored on wooden shelves, much as books are in a modern library. They included administrative documents, lists of offerings to the deities of Ebla by the king, queen and high officials, letters, diplomatic treaties and contracts, all written in Eblaite, a Semitic language similar to Akkadian. Among the tablets is a hymn to the sun god Shamash, the longest ancient extant literary text in a Semitic language – a duplicate had been found at Abu Salabikh. There are also Sumerian lexical lists, including words of professions, fish and birds against which the scribes of Ebla added the Eblaite translation. The extraordinary archive was preserved ironically through an act of destruction, when the palace was sacked and burnt, possibly during the expansion of the Agade Empire.

Remains of the royal palace at Ebla, Syria.

Gelb suggested that many of the features of the Ebla archive – such as the names of people and their gods, the month names they used in their calendar – derived to some extent from Kish (and scribes from Kish are indeed mentioned in some of the Ebla texts). He was at pains to stress that this

> does not claim the superiority of the North versus the South or of the Semites over the Sumerians. It simply asks for recognition of the fact that there was a full-blown Semitic cultural entity in the vast area between Kish and Ebla, which was different from that of the Sumerians in southern Babylonia, and which gave as much to the Sumerians as it borrowed.[38]

Gelb was also influential in promoting another theory that reformulated the idea of a pre-Sumerian population in southern Mesopotamia. Whereas nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinking had envisaged the original inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia as Semitic, pushed aside by the arrival of the Sumerians, it was now suggested that there had been other people speaking very different languages. Another Assyriologist at Chicago, Benno Landsberger, was of the opinion that many names of important Sumerian cities as well as a number of Sumerian technical terms, including designations for occupations and trades, had been borrowed from another language or languages.[39] These, he suggested, had been forgotten by the time writing had been developed by the Sumerians, but a few echoes survived. Landsberger tentatively identified two of these languages, which he called Proto-Euphratean and Proto-Tigridian. The theory reinforced the notion of the Sumerians arriving relatively late in southern Mesopotamia, perhaps in the last phase of the Ubaid period, around 4000 BC. Landsberger first published these ideas in 1944, but it would be another 55 years before a careful review of the words he, Gelb and others had identified as belonging to a pre-Sumerian language demonstrated that they were in fact loanwords from known languages, and others were actually Sumerian terms.[40] The earlier languages had been a mirage.

The Sumerians and alien invaders

Unlike the theories just discussed, which attracted support among scholars before they were critiqued and dismantled, there were some that never found academic approval but have, nevertheless, entered the popular reception of the Sumerians. These ideas are focused on Mesopotamian gods, who were associated with heavenly phenomena and celestial bodies, so that the Moon was personified by Nanna, for example, while Inana took the form of the planet Venus. There is no indication that the Moon and the five visible planets, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, were ever envisaged by the people of Mesopotamia as other worlds that might harbour life, or even that they might be places to visit. The earliest known written story about people travelling to the Moon is the *Vera Historia* (True Story) by the second-century Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata. It was not, however, until the nineteenth century that the idea was revived, by Jules Verne in his novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). He was followed by H. G. Wells, who in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) imagined people actually setting foot on its surface but also encountering an extraterrestrial civilization. Wells had already introduced the idea of alien life – and popularized a whole new genre of science fiction – in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), in which Martians launched an invasion of Earth. During the 1950s the idea found a mass audience at cinemas, where films portrayed aliens as superior to earthlings both in intelligence and in technology. They came either as friends or enemies, to warn earthlings or to destroy them, the latter scenario representing everything the Americans feared most about the Soviet Union as the Cold War took hold.

By the 1960s it seemed that science fiction might perhaps be science fact. Might not the Mesopotamian story of Oannes, wondered the astronomers Carl Sagan and Josif Shklovskii, 'deserve much more critical studies than have been performed heretofore, with the possibility of direct contact with an extraterrestrial civilization'?[41] Oannes is said to have emerged from the Persian Gulf and brought knowledge to humans, according to the *Babyloniaca* (History of Babylonia) written in Greek around 280 BC by

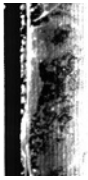
a priest called Berossus. This is a late version of a more ancient Mesopotamian tradition of sages (*apkallu*) who taught humankind social forms and crafts. If this story was actually a record of an alien encounter, the Sumerians as the founders of civilization would naturally have to play a part in these narratives.

Publications crediting the accomplishments of past societies to aliens began to attract large audiences, and Erich von Däniken achieved a best-seller in 1968 with *Chariots of the Gods?* Only alien technology, he argued, could have produced the Egyptian pyramids at Giza, as well as Stonehenge, among many other ancient structures, and records of these extraterrestrial visits were preserved in art contemporary with the monuments. The Sumerians rarely appear in von Däniken's accounts, perhaps because their surviving mud-brick buildings were considered insufficiently remarkable. It was another writer, the Russian-American Zecharia Sitchin, who established a relationship between aliens and Sumerians in the minds of millions who read his books and followed his ideas on television. Between 1974 and his death in 2010, Sitchin wrote more than ten books in which he developed an idea that an alien race called the Anunnaki, from an unidentified planet called Nibru, had been responsible for the creation of humanity in the form of the Sumerians, a hybrid of the Anunnaki and simian animals that already existed on Earth; the new race was intelligent but not as wise as its creators, who eventually left Earth but might return one day. The availability of translations of Sumerian texts by Kramer, Jacobsen and others offered access to Mesopotamian myths as never before; Sitchin drew particularly heavily on the (Akkadian) creation myth *Atra-hasis*, versions of which had appeared in print only a few years before his first book. He claimed, however, to be self-taught in cuneiform and the languages it recorded, retelling ancient myths in the format of a mystery novel. The gods were replaced with aliens and contextualized for modern audiences by having humans created through the genetic engineering of apes. The stories proved immensely attractive, and *The Twelfth Planet* – Sitchin's first book in the Earth Chronicles series – has gone through 45 printings and been translated into more than 25 languages. They have also been aired on the hugely popular

Ancient Aliens television programme, and spawned numerous offshoots.

A link between aliens and the Sumerians has even been made from discoveries on other planets. In December 2015 a rock formation photographed on Mars by NASA's rover *Curiosity* was interpreted as the head of a Sumerian statue. Although it is possible to imagine two eyes, a nose and a beard in the image, there is nothing specifically Mesopotamian about the 'head'. For believers, however, aliens had colonized both Mars and Earth, and so a sculpture comparable with votive figures from places such as Tell Asmar would confirm 'some sort of mysterious connection to the Ancient Anunnaki and Ancient Sumer'.[42] Although not supported by any evidence, these ideas continue to be popular, even at government level. Indeed, in 2016 Kadhim Finjan, then the Iraqi Minister of Transport, claimed at a press conference beside the ziggurat of Ur that Sumerians had built and used an airport there from which to launch spaceships 5,000 years ago.[43]

So how do the Anunnaki relate to the Sumerians? The term is actually Akkadian – the Sumerian equivalent is Anunna. Its earliest occurrences are in inscriptions of Gudea and the Third Dynasty of Ur. The word means something like 'Those of princely seed', and is used to describe the highest gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon.[44] There are no known depictions of Anunna/Anunnaki, only of individual deities, who appear as the main characters in the ancient myths. In many respects, the theory of ancient aliens is a case of modern myth-making, a means to explain the past in a form that is understandable to a modern audience by describing them in a familiar technological language. More disturbing, however, is that such retellings deny the agency of the ancient people and mirror the racial narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: colonial beliefs that indigenous peoples are inferior to people from outside, whether these be Sumerians, the British or aliens from Nibru.[45]



FIVE
The First Writing

By the mid-1970s some 5,000 proto-cuneiform tablets and fragments had been recovered from Uruk, and a long-term project by Hans Nissen of the Free University of Berlin to catalogue and copy them was underway. This developed into a long-term research project in collaboration with Peter Damerow at the Max Planck Institute aimed at understanding their contents. The Sumerians had long been credited with the invention of writing, but would this be evident from the archaic texts?

Excavations had refined the chronology of the E-anna area of Uruk, where the tablets had been recovered. This had revealed that during the Jemdet Nasr period (around 3100 BC) this part of the city was completely rebuilt. The earlier monumental buildings were demolished leaving only a few courses of bricks, and the spaces between packed with the resulting rubble to form a single huge platform for new buildings. As described earlier, pits and depressions in the packing material were filled with rubbish, including clay tablets, tablet fragments and broken clay seal impressions that had originally secured containers and doors. The reasons for discarding these could begin to be reconstructed. Institutions in Uruk were placing large quantities of goods, mostly agricultural produce, in storerooms and containers that were sealed with clay. Some of the cylinder seals used to impress the clay were carved with designs that may have indicated particular 'departments' in the administration or the type of goods being managed. One very fine example, unfortunately without any archaeological provenance, depicts a row of cattle, shown overlapping to suggest a closely packed herd.

Limestone cylinder seal with silver ram handle, unprovenanced, *c.* 3100 BC.

Below is a line of reed huts containing calves and vessels, perhaps for milk. The seal may have belonged to a senior official responsible for cattle and dairy products. The poles with three pairs of rings that emerge from the huts may represent divine standards, and that may connect it to a temple organization. The top of the cylinder is dowelled to hold a recumbent silver ram as a handle; the use of expensive silver, almost certainly imported from Iran, emphasizes the high status of the seal user.

The administrative system was designed to facilitate the distribution of goods handled by large institutions, perhaps associated with the monumental buildings at the heart of the city. When the

sealed rooms and containers were opened, the broken seals may have been kept as a record for some time and then discarded. The written tablets were probably treated in the same way. The administrators used them to calculate the contents of the stores by deducting what was being removed from the total intake. As a result, there is rarely any indication about the origin and final destination of produce; little can be learned about the world beyond the city where much of the produce originated, and certainly nothing about longer-distance trade. Many tablets record the disbursements of textiles, grain or dairy products to individuals; barley (perhaps as loaves of bread), vegetable oil and beer were distributed as rations by administrators to named labourers who may have been fully or partially dependent workers under their command. There is evidence for hundreds of captives, and the number of female slaves of foreign origin is quite high. These people are treated in the records in much the same way as herds of domestic animals. This reflects, of course, only a partial picture, since the texts relate to a potentially limited number of institutions – probably high-status landed estates – and may not therefore represent a significant component of the labour force as a whole. Nevertheless, it suggests that life for many of the inhabitants of places such as Uruk was tough, if not brutal.

The tablets make it apparent that there was a clear hierarchy, and those of higher status naturally faired very differently from those at the bottom. A good example is found in a tablet that contains calculations for the areas of five large fields (shown in columns on one side). On the reverse of the tablet, the scribe has added the figures together and divided the grand total into thirds. Two thirds are allocated to a person designated by a sign *en* (in later Sumerian texts, the sign has the meaning of 'lord'), clearly a leading figure, while the remaining third is divided unevenly among five other individuals. One of them is the *en-sal*, whom some have interpreted as the 'wife of the *en*'.

After a certain time had elapsed, the information recorded on the tablets would no longer have been useful, and so they were probably thrown away at regular intervals, landing on the refuse heaps and later used to pack the foundations of buildings. This

Proto-cuneiform tablet accounting for the distribution of fields, from Jemdet Nasr, Iraq, *c.* 3100 BC.

makes it difficult to establish a precise chronology for the tablets. One has, however, been developed based on a clear evolution of the script itself; an early form of script (called phase IV) and a later form (phase III). Phase IV tablets are known only from Uruk, but examples of phase III tablets are also known from other sites, indicating the spread of the administrative technology across southern Mesopotamia. The archaic tablets from Jemdet Nasr belong to this phase, and a few are also known from Khafajah, Tell Uqair and also Umma, Adab and Kish.

But what was the language of the individuals who wrote these tablets? Proto-cuneiform is almost certainly the creation of the people who were managing the resources and labour of some of the most significant institutions in the city of Uruk, although it's hard to identify these in a neat fashion as either temples or palaces. Much of the detail recorded in these tablets that can be understood constitutes notational systems for administration and not a means for rendering a spoken language. In other words, the signs could be understood in any language. One of the strongest arguments in favour of the scribal language being predominantly Sumerian is presented by the 'lexical texts' first identified by Adam Falkenstein. Since his time many more have been discovered at Uruk, and they

confirm an unbroken scribal tradition between these archaic lists and those of half a millennium later, when Sumerian was being written. The broad scholarly consensus is, therefore, that the archaic texts do represent the Sumerian language. But this cannot be demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, and it remains a significant problem to explain why there are no recognizable Sumerian names in the archaic tablets.[1]

New approaches and challenges

The Ba'athist rule in Iraq, especially after Saddam Hussein took power in 1979, had an enormous impact on the promotion of archaeology and museum collections because the regime was keen to manipulate historical memory and impose its own view of Iraqi identity using both Islamic and pre-Islamic sites.[2] The Department of Antiquities was renamed the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, with an increased budget. New provincial museums were established across the country and supplied with a 'package' of objects from Baghdad intended to tell a national story, regardless of local history. This mirrored the narrative told in the Iraq Museum, where a visitor could journey from prehistory to the Abbasids and in which the Sumerians of the third millennium BC were represented as an important chapter in a dedicated room on the upper floor of the building. Postage stamps once again highlighted ancient heritage, including Sumerian buildings and objects; the ziggurat at Ur was featured regularly following a major programme of restoration in the 1980s. One development that made this connection with the ancient past more meaningful for the country's modern populations was the revival of a discredited belief that all Semites, and therefore most of the Mesopotamians, originated from the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula.[3] The Sumerians existed alongside this narrative as the founders of civilization and therefore Iraq's fundamental contribution to the world.

This well-organized and professional approach to the nation's heritage was put in place against one of the longest and bloodiest armed conflicts of the twentieth century, the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88). One region of intense conflict was the border along the Shatt

al-Arab waterway, where many archaeological tells – the highest areas on what were otherwise apparently featureless plains – were used as gun and tank emplacements. Only two years after the end of that war, Saddam ordered his armies to invade Kuwait. In response, a 35-nation coalition led by the United States drove his forces out in what is often termed the Gulf War (January–February 1991). Damage to heritage sites in this conflict included bullet, shell and shrapnel holes in the facade of the ziggurat at Ur and several coalition bomb craters nearby, possibly connected with Saddam positioning some of his MiG-21 fighter planes in front of the monument.[4]

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Iraq descended into chaos as Kurds in the north of the country and the Shi'a population of the south rose in rebellion against Saddam's regime. During the uprisings, which were brutally crushed with the death of tens of thousands, and in the years that followed eleven of the provincial museums were broken into and some 3,000 objects stolen; many of the museums stayed permanently shut. By the mid-1990s, following the imposition of United Nations sanctions, the country faced massive inflation, reducing much of the population to destitution. In such desperate times an opportunity to make money included plundering objects, especially cuneiform tablets, from archaeological sites and smuggling them abroad for sale on the antiquities market (much of it apparently orchestrated by Saddam's brother-in-law Arshad Yashin).[5] Although such trade was deemed illegal by the UN, the looting received very little attention in the Western media. Indeed, at the end of the 1990s Saddam's regime remained strong and wealthy (at the expense of the wider population) and was again promoting Iraq's past as part of its identity.

These same decades brought the development of new theoretical models for understanding the world and the interaction between regions. These included Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, an approach for understanding social change, as well as critiques of the West's historic representation of the societies and peoples of the Middle East, most famously and influentially Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978). The majority of this work took place outside Iraq, in the museums and universities of the

United States, Europe, Japan and Australia, as Iraq endured the start of half a century of war, isolation and ultimately yet another invasion. In addition, excavations beyond the Sumerian 'heartland' as well as in Iraq's neighbours (which became increasingly common as sanctions limited the possibilities of foreign expeditions working in the country) provided greater context for understanding the developments in southern Mesopotamia during the fifth to second millennia BC. At the same time art historians began to investigate Sumerian monuments and philologists gained a better understanding of the region's ancient languages, especially Sumerian. This has resulted in a clearer picture of the cultures and histories of Sumer across millennia (7500–1600 BC), as described in the following pages.

Where it began (7500–3500 BC)

Until the second half of the twentieth century one of the most significant aspects of southern Iraq had been largely ignored or considered unimportant: the vast marshlands. These were viewed as the very opposite of civilization, a wasteland home of long-headed 'swamp Arabs' who were inferior to the short-headed Sumerians who ruled them from cities.[6] In this racially determined reconstruction, the birth of civilization was tied to a natural drying of the land, which was accompanied by the emergence of urban centres and the development of irrigation systems and plough agriculture. Good government was thought to be about transforming wetlands into cultivated agricultural land, much in the same way as the artificial draining of the Fens in eastern England at the start of the nineteenth century. It would be a concept that under Saddam Hussein would have disastrous results when nearly 20,000 sq. km (7,750 sq. miles) of marshes were drained, obliterating communities and wildlife, and ironically transforming them into agricultural wastelands.[7]

Among the first to recognize the importance of the marshes for sustaining lifestyles and economies was Robert McCormick Adams, the director of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute in 1962–8 and 1981–3 and later Secretary of the Smithsonian

Institution. He argued that life in southern Mesopotamia had been a complex mix of grain agriculture, livestock husbandry and an exploitation of marshes and backswamps that created economic specialization and trade.[8] More recent work has indeed revealed the significance of the waterlogged, delta world of reeds and palm trees in shaping life in Sumer.[9] The evidence of cereal grain cultivation in the region of Uruk around 7500 BC (much earlier than previously thought) suggests the beginnings of settled life in what was a freshwater, marsh-like environment.[10] It now seems that the domestication and cultivation of date palms, one of the most important crops in southern Mesopotamia's economy for millennia, may have taken place around the same time.

The formation of the marshes was tied to the rise and fall of the waters of the Persian Gulf. During the Ubaid period the sea level rose to some 2.5 m (8 ft) above that of today, so that by the middle of the fifth millennium BC the sea had reached as far inland as Ur.[11] Settlements were built on so-called turtlebacks – low hills protruding above the surface of the delta – and river levees that were surrounded by marshes and swamps as well as by land subject to seasonal flooding. A network of towns and villages therefore emerged, connected by waterways. Throughout the fourth millennium BC sea levels remained relatively stable and, as soil carried in the rivers was deposited, the area of the delta expanded, providing new lands for settlement and exploitation. Life was dependent on

Reed houses in the marshlands of Iraq, 1978.

'Eye idols' from Tell Brak, Syria, *c.* 3600 BC.

fishing alongside the cultivation of date palms and levee gardens.[12] Judging by scenes carved on cylinder seals of the Late Uruk period, livestock was housed in reed byres and wild animals, such as pigs, were hunted in the marshes.

How do the Sumerians fit into this picture? Envisaged as invaders to southern Mesopotamia, they could have arrived at the start of the Ubaid, Uruk or Early Dynastic periods, depending on people's preferences. Alternatively, they had been present from the earliest settlements. That the latter was the most likely scenario was argued as early as 1960 by the American archaeologist Joan Oates, who laid out a powerful case for cultural continuity in Mesopotamia from prehistory.[13] In addition, her work at Tell Brak in Syria began dramatically to reshape the familiar picture of Sumer as being the place where the world's first cities emerged. To challenge this concept seemed almost unthinkable, since cities, civilization and the Sumerians were a combination that had been taken for granted; southern Mesopotamia was understood as 'the heartland of cities', where 'the world's first cities are the most noteworthy feature of the landscape.'[14]

Excavation at Tell Brak over some decades, however, has suggested that northern Mesopotamia was far along the road to urbanism by about 4200 BC. It is now evident that the 'world's earliest cities' (as ever, depending on how one defines this) were emerging in northeastern Syria in parallel, or perhaps (shockingly) before those in southern Iraq.[15] As on the alluvial plains of the south, towns containing several thousand people were an attempt to confront the problem of periodic, unpredictable shortages and were concentration points for storage and distribution. Between 4000 and 3800 BC Tell Brak grew rapidly from some 55 ha (6 million sq. ft) to about 130 ha (14 million sq. ft), significantly larger than sites such as Eridu at the head of the Persian Gulf. It came to dominate the neighbouring villages, which were eventually abandoned, their populations perhaps emigrating to Brak, where monumental mud-brick architecture was constructed. Alongside this extraordinary urbanization came changes in the local economy, including specialization, with mass production concentrated at the edges of the site.[16] The people who managed these centralized activities, including through the use of stamp seals, appear to have had wide-ranging authority over workers and storage, and the distribution and exchange of products. That there was tension between or even within communities as a result of such rapid urbanization may be reflected in the discovery at Tell Brak of a series of mass graves of young adults dating to about 3700 BC. These seem to be the outcome of conflict, possibly a civil war.[17] A sense of identity (group or individual) may have been expressed through the small limestone plaques that were excavated in their hundreds at Tell Brak. Each plaque appears to represent an abstracted human body and neck with a pair of large eyes for the head. These 'eye idols' belonged to a cultural tradition of northern Mesopotamia, and were perhaps votives deposited in a temple, and therefore comparable with the later tradition of dedicating sculptures.

The Uruk expansion and contraction (3500–2900 BC)

When Max Mallowan left Iraq because of changes to the country's antiquities laws, he transferred his attention to Syria (then under

French mandate). There, in 1937–8, he directed excavations at Tell Brak, and in archaeological levels dating to about 3300–3200 BC his workers uncovered the remains of a large mud-brick building with a layout comparable to those known from Uruk, even to the extent that its walls were decorated with cone mosaic. This appeared to be a temple, since at one end of the long central hall was a clay pedestal, perhaps an altar, that was decorated around the top edge with inlays of coloured stone between bands of gold (Mallowan named the building the Eye Temple after finding 'eye idols' in earlier levels beneath it). Why should Uruk-style architecture be constructed so far north of the heartland of the Uruk culture?

Answers began to emerge many decades later, when excavations undertaken between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s revealed a surprising pattern of occupation and connection. The discoveries were made as a result of salvage operations to record sites that were to be lost to flooding with the construction of dams in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates and their major tributaries in Turkey, Syria and northern Iraq. Numerous projects revealed small and large sites dating to the second half of the fourth millennium BC that showed evidence of close contact between southern Mesopotamia and the different societies and cultural traditions of the wider region. At some places this took the form of Uruk-style architecture and objects in a limited area of a site, and clearly distinguishable from the local buildings and artefacts around it. Some of the most remarkable evidence was discovered in advance of the construction of the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates in Syria. To encourage foreign participation, the Syrian antiquities law was modified so that archaeologists had the right to a division of the finds. Teams from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands discovered sites of pure southern character apparently built in areas overlooking the river that had seen little or no previous occupation. Habuba Kabira was a large town that had been built from scratch, with standardized houses (using Uruk-style bricks) divided by small alleys leading to main streets that were paved and provided with drains. The settlement was enclosed behind an impressive wall and the highest part of the site (Tell Qannas) crowned with monumental buildings very similar to those at Uruk. The level of planning

Cone mosaic wall decoration from Tell Brak, Syria, *c.* 3200 BC.

and organization that would have been needed to create the settlement is astonishing. Further along the river, Jebel Aruda was a smaller site with two monumental 'temple' buildings along with a few houses, larger than those known from Habuba. Both sites contained pottery and even cylinder seals typically found in southern Mesopotamia.

The resulting pattern of settlements has been interpreted by the anthropologist Guillermo Algaze as a 'colonial' expansion.[18]

Stressing the absence of metals, hard stones and strong wood in southern Mesopotamia, he has argued that trading outposts were established within northern settlements in order to supply cities such as Uruk with the materials necessary for large-scale building projects, as well as prestigious stones and metals not available in the alluvium. Many colonies were at strategic points at the intersection of the north–south-flowing rivers and the principal east–west overland routes. It now became clear that Mallowan's temple at Tell Brak fitted into this wider phenomenon. Not all the colonies were contemporaneous; the earliest dated from the middle of the fourth millennium BC, the latest was many centuries later. There is, therefore, no need to envisage this as a single planned, coordinated enterprise, but rather as much more piecemeal interaction with neighbouring regions that changed over time, a process that has been described as colonies without colonialism.[19] Nevertheless, the creation of Habuba Kabira, which dates from the latest phases of contact between north and south, might reflect a level of state control and sponsorship; the town may have served to coordinate the activities of enclaves of southerners elsewhere in the region, including the processing of local products such as wool and flint, as well as the exchange of finished goods, including perhaps textiles imported from the south. There is also some evidence that violence may have been involved at some sites. Was the Uruk-style temple at Tell Brak imposed on the inhabitants, or did it result from some form of religious conversion? What is certain is that by about 3100 BC the 'colonies' were being abandoned. Perhaps as a result of changes in the climate and the movement of groups in the surrounding highlands, the previously integrated economies began to falter. Places such as Habuba were apparently simply abandoned, the inhabitants packing up and perhaps returning south along the rivers to the growing cities of the alluvium.

Changes in the climate may also have played a part in substantial shifts in settlement patterns across southern Mesopotamia that can be traced during the Jemdet Nasr period (3100–2900 BC). There were also changes in the city of Uruk at this time. The monumental buildings in the E-anna district were demolished and replaced with a massive mud-brick terrace. Frustratingly, only

partial plans of the buildings on top of the terrace could be recovered, but they were certainly very different in layout than in early levels. Nonetheless, there was continuity in administrative practices with, as we have seen, the spread of proto-cuneiform to cities across the alluvial plain at this time. The political, economic or social connections that encouraged the sharing of ideas are also suggested by impressions of cylinder seals on some of the administrative documents. Examples of these 'city seals' are known from the site of Jemdet Nasr as well as, slightly later, from Ur. The impressed designs show combinations of pictographs standing for the names of significant cities, including Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Uruk, Adab and Nippur. These groupings may represent networks of cities linked by the river branches, and the seals may authenticate the receipt of high-status food offerings made to the cults of some of the most important gods.[20]

There are, however, also signs of continuity with earlier times in the form of representations on cylinder seals and stone reliefs (including the Uruk Vase) of a bearded male dressed in a skirt and rolled headdress. He leads rituals, undertakes hunts in the marshes and oversees scenes of punishment. Often described by modern scholars as the 'priest-king', the figure is depicted in a very generic manner, and it is possible that he stands for any number of the most senior positions in the city, rather than a single ruler. He appears on the so-called Blau Monuments, two small, unprovenanced pieces of stone carved with imagery and proto-cuneiform that appear to form a pair and are now in the British Museum. On one stone the text, as far as it can be understood, refers to a field, a location and a person; on the other, to a group of commodities. This has been interpreted as a record of a legal transaction involving the transfer of ownership of land.[21] The figures carved in low relief could represent the individuals involved in the transaction, perhaps taking part in a ceremonial feast that was part of the agreement process. Maybe we should understand the Blau Monuments as stone copies of clay documents impressed with a cylinder seal? They demonstrate how writing was moving from a bookkeeping tool to one that recorded legal agreements.

The Early Dynastic period (2900–2350 BC)

With the Early Dynastic period the 'priest-king' disappears from imagery, although elite individuals continue to be depicted in stone reliefs, and they are now sometimes named in cuneiform labels. A good example is a small stone stele acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1958. It is carved in relief on all four sides. Across two sides are images of the priest Ushumgal and his daughter, shown equal in size, meeting at the door of a building. The text on the stele records a transaction involving three fields, three houses and some livestock. Smaller figures, also identified by captions, appear along the sides of the stele and may represent participants in and witnesses to the transaction. Set into the building near the doorway may be the cone or peg (Sumerian *kag*) that later texts make clear was driven into a wall as a ritual act that signified the transfer of property. Because of the difficulty in reading the text – owing to the archaic form of the script – it is unclear if Ushumgal is buying, selling or donating the listed items.

The administration of the large institutions in cities therefore continued to rely on scribes trained in the systems of accounting that had their origins in the fourth millennium BC. Although based partially on ideograms, the earlier script did not reflect its users' language. Judging from the content of some clay tablets from Ur dating to around 2800 BC, however, there was a development in linguistic content.[22] These, for the first time, unquestionably demonstrate that the underlying language is Sumerian, especially in the use of personal names.

Throughout the first half of the third millennium BC settlements across Sumer grew in size as their numbers fell; populations were increasingly concentrated in large cities. More than twenty city-states emerged, dividing southern Mesopotamia between them and competing for access to resources and influence. By about 2500 BC inscriptions name individual men ruling over them and establishing dynasties by passing on their authority to a son. People had been drawn to the cities as a result of the drying of some of the wetlands, but nevertheless this remained a very watery world. Stone

Ushumgal Stele, unprovenanced, *c.* 2800 BC.

plaques, inlays and cylinder seals depict people travelling in boats with high prows along reed-lined watercourses, while offerings of fish and waterfowl are carried to the temples. Land above the seasonal flooding was crowded with palm groves, gardens and buildings, and alongside animal-herding and grain cultivation, reeds and other marsh products were intensively harvested.

By the mid-third millennium BC, scribes had developed cuneiform into a flexible tool that could capture the Sumerian language much more effectively than before, and they now moved beyond administrative accounts, legal statements and word lists to compose written poetry. Examples of such texts, which are almost exclusively mythological in content, have been excavated at Fara (ancient Shuruppak) and Abu Salabikh, dating from about 2600 BC. Some of the compositions are unique and unintelligible, but two of the texts are well known from later copies: the Instructions of Shuruppak and the Kesh Temple Hymn. These early versions are not easy to read; they were written simply as memory aids for people who must have known the texts by heart, and as a result they contain very few grammatical elements. To add to the challenge of understanding these texts, the cuneiform signs are arranged aesthetically rather than in an order that reflects the spoken language.

While it seems very likely that there were more Sumerian speakers in the southern half of the alluvium, where writing was developed, than in the north, it is apparent that this was not the only language spoken in southern Mesopotamia. As we have seen, some of the administrative texts from Abu Salabikh were written in a Semitic language, and half the scribes had Semitic names. Contemporary documents from Fara also have personal names that suggest Semitic speakers. It is possible, therefore, that we are dealing with a bilingual world, at least to the north of Sumer, in which some scribes would have had to learn to write Sumerian even when it was not the language they spoke daily. Sumerian had become the language of administration and literature that was taught to succeeding generations of scribes.

Building for the gods

The earliest surviving mythological tales help to illuminate the relationships that were thought to exist between the people of Sumer and their gods. It seems that humans were obliged to provide deities with places to live (the Sumerian word *e*, 'house', could also refer to a temple), and food for their table came from both dedications and the agricultural produce of the land controlled by the temple. In return, the gods were believed to provide security and abundance. According to the Kesh Temple Hymn, before the priests undertook rituals and played music, it was the king who played a central role:

> House, great enclosure, reaching to the heavens, great, true house, reaching to the heavens! . . . House whose platform extends into the midst of the heavens, whose foundations are fixed in the *abzu*, whose shade covers all lands! House founded by An, praised by Enlil, given an oracle by mother Nintud! House Kesh, green in its fruit! Will anyone else bring forth something as great as Kesh?
>
> In the house the king places stone bowls in position; the good *en* priest . . . holds the lead-rope dangling. The *a-tu* priest holds the staff; the . . . brings the . . . waters. The . . . takes his seat in the holy place; the *enkum* priests bow down . . . The *pashesh* priests beat the drumskins; they recite powerfully, powerfully. The bull's horn is made to growl; the drumsticks are made to thud. The singer cries out to the *ala* drum; the grand sweet *tigi* is played for him. The house is built; its nobility is good![23]

The ruler's obligation to provide his god with a temple was increasingly recorded in inscriptions and images carved in stone. An early example is a limestone plaque found at Tello showing king Ur-Nanshe (about 2500 BC) of Lagash. He appears in two registers, facing in opposite directions, and his status is indicated by the fact that he is shown larger than the other figures in the scene. In the top row, Ur-Nanshe wears the traditional tufted ritual

skirt and carries on his head a basket of soil, from which the first brick of the temple will be fashioned. The accompanying Sumerian cuneiform inscription states that 'Ur-Nanshe, king of Lagash, son of Gunidu, son of Gursar, built the temple of Ningirsu; built the temple of Nanshe; built the temple of Abzubanda.'[24] Facing the king is his family – his sons and perhaps his wife – who are identified by means of names carved on their skirts. In the lower register, the seated king celebrates the completion of his work with a banquet. The central perforation of the plaque was probably intended to peg it to the wall of the temple. Very few people may have seen the finished plaque once it had been installed inside the temple, since these were relatively small spaces and certainly not congregational as are modern churches, mosques and temples. The intended audience was therefore almost certainly the gods, and perhaps future kings, who might find the plaque when restoring the mud-brick building.

The most informative texts for understanding the rituals of temple-building are the famous Cylinders of Gudea from Tello, and therefore relatively late in date (around 2150 BC). In these we

Stone plaque of Ur-Nanshe, from Tello, Iraq, *c.* 2500 BC.

learn that the ruler was commissioned to build Ningirsu's temple by the deity himself, who gives instructions to Gudea in a dream. Gudea presents himself as the actual builder; although assisted by the gods, he uses a mason's line and pegs to mark out the plan of the building, and 'placed on his head the carrying-basket [containing clay for bricks] for the house, as if it were a holy crown. He laid the foundation, set the walls on the ground. He marked out a square, aligned the bricks with a string.'[25] Into the foundations he fixed pegs in a variety of forms:

> The ruler built the house, he made it high, high as a great mountain. Its *abzu* foundation pegs, big mooring stakes, he drove into the ground so deep they could take counsel with Enki in the E-engura [House of the subterranean waters]. He had heavenly foundation pegs surround the house like warriors, so that each one was drinking water at the libation place of the gods. He fixed the E-ninnu, the mooring stake, he drove in its pegs shaped like praying wizards.[26]

Here the foundation pegs are clearly associated with the god Enki and his subterranean freshwater ocean, the *abzu*. In this way the building is linked directly with the god of wisdom and a source of creation; the pegs are metaphorical mooring stakes that will firmly secure the temple that floats on the *abzu* – a very clear mental image of the waterlogged world of Sumer. Actual examples of these pegs are known from excavations at Tello. The figurines, all of copper alloy, take the form of a horned, kneeling deity holding a peg; a reclining bull on a peg; and, recalling the earlier carved stone image of Ur-Nanshe, a kilted male standing with one foot forward on a short peg and balancing a basket on his head. They were placed individually beneath temple walls in brick boxes set into pits, along with an inscribed tablet, usually naming the god who resided in the building as well as the king who had been responsible for ordering its construction.

Fighting for the gods

Building temples was, of course, only one of the duties of a ruler. Another was to ensure that the kingdom remained secure. A very important source for illuminating the role of the king as warrior are the fragmentary remains of a stone monument found at Tello and erected during the reign of King Eannatum (about 2400 BC), one of Ur-Nanshe's successors. The so-called Stele of the Vultures, a freestanding stele, was probably set up in the temple precinct of Ningirsu at Girsu, and was therefore much more of a 'public' monument than Ur-Nanshe's plaque. It is the earliest Mesopotamian record of a historical event.[27] The Sumerian text inscribed on the stele records a conflict over territory lying between Lagash and the neighbouring state of Umma. It begins with the historical background to the dispute, referring to earlier agreements, mediated by the 'King of Kish'. The ruler of Umma failed to pay Lagash rent for exploiting some of its farmland, and was thus in breach of the agreements. Eannatum is appointed by the gods to the throne of Lagash and, having received a message from the god Ningirsu in a dream that describes his victory, he takes up arms against Umma and re-establishes authority over the disputed territory. Twenty burial mounds are heaped up over the corpses of enemies and, in the text's longest section, the defeated ruler of Umma swears on divine battle-nets to respect the borders of the state and all the responsibilities that come with it.

Remarkably, the scenes carved in relief in four registers on one side of the stele appear to relate to elements of the written narrative. Eannatum is shown at the top leading his soldiers into battle. He wears a wide fleecy garment over his left shoulder that falls in an angle across his body and a helmet with his hair rolled up at the back into a bun that is held in place by a band. At his rear march spearmen who thrust their weapons forwards between large rectangular shields while trampling over the bodies of men. In the register below, the spearmen have raised their weapons – the battle is over – and Eannatum, now in a chariot, raises in his left hand the end of what is probably an enormous spear. Further down the stele, the carved fragments depict the aftermath of battle

Fragment of a stele of Eannatum, 'The Vulture Stele', from Tello, Iraq, *c.* 2400 BC.

when the dead are buried in a great mound of earth while a ritual libation takes place, possibly as part of celebratory feasting. In many ways the images are similar to themes of banquet and war on the near contemporary Standard of Ur.

The Stele was carved on both faces, and on the side opposite the scenes of Eannatum's triumph is an image of the god Ningirsu. Shown as an enormous bearded man, he crushes with a mace the head of a captive trapped with others in a net. This is almost certainly 'the great battle-net that ensnares the enemy', according to the oaths sworn by Umma's defeated ruler, and shows what has happened and will happen in the future when the legal agreement that the stele records is broken: Ningirsu will punish the enemy through his appointed king.

Building for the workers

The homes of gods and kings, that is, temples and palaces, had been the principal focus of archaeologists from the nineteenth century until the early decades of the twentieth. They had been seeking the archives of tablets from which the political and economic history of the city-states could be reconstructed, as well as the spectacular monuments of the elite that could find a home in museum displays. The evidence they uncovered suggested that a large number of people would probably have relied on either the temple or the palace for their livelihood, either directly or indirectly. These institutions were organized much like large households, with dependents who provided labour. If they represented the largest social unit, domestic life was centred on the smallest one: a nuclear family of a patriarch and his sons and grandsons with their wives and children, or an extended family group consisting of several generations. While some of these people may have been effectively tied to their lifestyles, others may have moved in and out of their settlements depending on circumstance; in times of war and uncertainty rural populations may have sought security behind city walls, while periods of peace and plenty may have encouraged settlement in the suburbs or even the countryside. Only occasionally, however, is it possible to glimpse something of the lives of these people who were engaged in the all-important agricultural, industrial and domestic activities.

Archaeologically, the best-known settlements of the third millennium BC are the towns uncovered by the University of Chicago excavations in the Diyala Valley during the 1930s. Homes at these sites were tightly packed, since space in the settlements would have been restricted by the height of the tell, the extent of any fortification wall and the need to preserve surrounding land for agriculture. This compact arrangement of houses had its benefits, such as protection from heat, provided by the shade of walls. The organization of houses within settlements, however, varied between sites, perhaps determined by the relationship of the inhabitants to each other and to the institutions that employed them. Most houses were small, from about 50 to 250 sq. m (540–2,700 sq. ft).

The internal arrangement of space changed over time, as, for example, when homes were divided among brothers at the father's death. In this way a large building might ultimately house a greater number of inhabitants, rather than reflecting a family's wealth.

What might we have found while visiting one of the homes at, say, Eshnunna (Tell Asmar) during the Early Dynastic period? The building is approached along a narrow lane, perhaps no more than 1 m (3 ft) wide, lined with blank facades formed by the thick mud-brick walls of adjoining houses; public space is clearly unimportant (or too valuable). The house has only one small doorway (somewhere between 45 and 150 cm/18 and 60 in. wide).[28] Wooden doors, swung from an upright pole on a pivot stone or baked brick, are used at both the entrance and internal doorways. At the heart of the building is a central room or courtyard flanked by rooms and entered through a vestibule and not directly from the street; the house therefore looks inwards and is entirely private. The courtyard acts as a communal space, open to the sky. It is very small – the largest courtyard was only some 7 m (23 ft) square – but was the principal source of light and air to the rooms around it. The open courtyard was designed to protect the inhabitants from the daytime heat and night-time cold. At night the courtyard, and the rooms leading off it, were filled with warm air, which during the day had been heated by the sun. The rising hot air provided cooling breezes. At the hottest time of the day, shadow helped to produce similar breezes. The internal doors are also small, presumably designed to exclude sun and dust in summer and conserve heat in winter, and they are near one corner of a room rather than in the middle of a wall. The scale of the rooms means that many activities, such as weaving, took place in the courtyard.

The house has a small, clay-lined open hearth for cooking and, since winters can be cold in southern Iraq, as a source of heat. More elaborate cooking devices are bread ovens, very similar in form to the *tannurs* still in use in the Middle East, where the oven is heated by a fire of dung patties and reeds. It is sometimes used to cook meat and fish, but primarily for baking flat wheat bread. Rather oddly, in the neighbouring town of Khafajah the houses

had no cooking or heating facilities, perhaps because they belonged to temple personnel and their food was produced and supplied by the institution.[29] There may also have been communal ovens serving neighbourhoods. By the end of the Early Dynastic period, however, many houses at Khafajah were fitted with fire installations, suggesting that the inhabitants had become responsible for preparing their own food.

The central courtyard is surrounded by rooms for different members of the family, but there is little to suggest a separation of space by gender. The width of each room is determined by the length of the timber available (palm or willow trees), and so they are small, measuring about 1 by 2–5 m (3 × 7–17 ft). A larger house might have a long oblong chamber adjoining the courtyard, possibly as the main reception room. Beneath the floors of rooms and the courtyard are the family graves (although members of a palace or temple institution may have been buried in a communal cemetery).[30] They are simple burials of both sexes. Some of the bodies are wrapped in reed mats or placed in coffins and accompanied by ceramics that may have been part of funerary meals or possibly for libation ceremonies or part of a funeral offering.[31]

Our house is provided with a toilet, although not all homes have one. It is in a room that seems to have combined the function of toilets and bathrooms, since the floor is made watertight with bitumen and baked bricks; the toilet itself is a simple hole, although others are brick-built with a drain formed from columns of interlocking perforated ceramic rings leading into a pit. Houses without toilets must have relied on buckets or the spaces between buildings, no doubt a major factor in spreading disease and in infant mortality.[32]

In such an ordinary home there is little furniture, which was probably the reserve of the wealthy or those with high enough status. Ethnographic studies suggest that in place of wooden furniture, rugs, carpets and carpet-encased pillows on reed mats covered the floor.[33] Indeed, evidence for reed mats has been recovered from a number of sites. Some of the rooms may have been used for sleeping in winter, but in the extreme heat of summer people may have moved outside their houses. In modern villages,

sleeping platforms are constructed in courtyards to raise bedding above animals. It is possible that similar structures were used in the past, perhaps on the roof, which provided additional living and storage space and was perhaps accessed by stair or ladder from the courtyard; ethnographic evidence from southern Iraq suggests that it would have been flat. Even today, the roof is the regular place for sleeping during the summer months.

Such ethno-archaeological studies offer a means to help reconstruct ancient ways of living by studying the material and non-material traditions of modern societies. From the 1970s onwards, there was a growing interest in understanding something of the lives of the 'ordinary' people of Sumer. This was made possible by improved archaeological techniques, which allowed the recovery of evidence of widespread but more ephemeral architecture and objects, such as reed structures, basketry and matting. One of the most extensive ethno-archaeological studies took place during the excavations undertaken at al-Hiba (ancient Lagash) between 1968 and 1990 in a joint expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University. Since al-Hiba is one of the largest mounds, if not the largest, in southern Iraq, the excavations covered only a small part of the site but revealed occupation of the Early Dynastic period, when Lagash was the capital of a state that included the towns of Girsu (Tello) and Nina (Surghul). Two temples were investigated, one of which included a brewery where beer was prepared for the ritual feeding of the god Ningirsu. Also uncovered was a complex of buildings that may have been a craft workshop devoted to metalworking, wool-processing, reed-working and possibly scribal education. But what of the lives of the people who worked there and in the surrounding fields and marshlands? Edward Ochsenschlager was struck by the fact that people living in the area that he came to know while digging at al-Hiba depended on many of the same resources as the people who lived there in the third millennium BC. This raised questions about whether the resources were used and transformed in the same way as in antiquity. Ochsenschlager focused his work on the use of clay, reeds, wood, bitumen, cattle and sheep, and concluded that 'there was abundant

evidence that many of the details of village life had parallels in the archaeological record.'[34] This, of course, does not mean that these findings can be simply transferred to life in towns and cities as if the two modes of living were identical. Nevertheless, the divide between rural and urban worlds would have been blurred in antiquity, much as was the case in cities around the world before the advent of modern industrialization, and so Ochsenschlager's findings are very instructive.

Lugalzagesi and the kings of Agade (2340–2150 BC)

Conflicts between city-states may have been a recurring aspect of life in Sumer, although it is difficult to know how much this affected wider society since our knowledge is based on royal imagery and texts that emphasize this particular aspect of kingship. Temporary alliances as well as acts of aggression could result in larger kingdoms. One of the most successful rulers in this regard was Lugalzagesi, king of Umma, who some time around 2340 BC defeated Lagash (ending more than a century of conflict between the two states). By also dominating Ur and Uruk he was able to present himself in Sumerian inscriptions – found on nearly a hundred vase fragments at Nippur – as the one chosen by the god Enlil to be ruler of 'the homeland' (*kalam*).[35] He claims that 'all the suzerains of Sumer [*ki-en-gi*] and rulers of foreign lands' paid homage to him at Uruk. The geographical extent of Sumer is unclear, although Lugalzagesi's inscriptions mention the cities of Ur, Larsa, Umma, Zabalam and Nippur. The term *ki-en-gi* had been used in some royal texts since the time of Eannatum of Lagash, about a century earlier, and it seems to refer in a general sense to the marshes and plains of lower Mesopotamia, sometimes in parallel with 'homeland'.

The authority of Lugalzagesi was challenged by Sargon of Agade (*c.* 2334–2284 BC). This of course had been viewed as a crucial moment in the racial conflict between Sumerians and Semites (Akkadians), but, as we have seen, such a construct must now be rejected. In reality, the defeat of Lugalzagesi may have been viewed by his contemporaries as simply a shift of political power to another

strong leader. Yet Sargon managed to establish a dynasty that would unify the whole of southern Mesopotamia and extend its control beyond the alluvial plain. He consolidated his hold by building on the existing political, administrative and religious structures, and many of the defeated city leaders were retained as local governors. His capital of Agade has not been located, but the city almost certainly lay on the Tigris close to where it is joined by the Diyala River, providing him with access to the rich metal and stone resources of Iran. To the south, control of Ur brought with it the lucrative Persian Gulf trade as well as links to the Indian Ocean beyond. Indeed, in one of his inscriptions Sargon claims that the ships of Dilmun (present-day Bahrain), Magan (Oman and the coast of Iran on the opposite side of the Persian Gulf) and Meluhha (Indus Valley) moored at the harbour of Agade. They brought to Mesopotamia not only the resources of these distant regions but their people, languages and traditions. Among the easily portable exotic objects were distinctive stamp seals, engraved with images of animals at home in South Asia including the tiger, elephant and bull, the most popular animal on Indus Valley seals. Ur's political and economic significance was recognized by Sargon in the appointment of his daughter to the position of high priestess at the temple of Nanna in the city. It was probably at this time that she was given the Sumerian name Enheduana ('priestess, ornament of heaven'), so as to associate her with the venerable scholarly language and rituals of the city. Although royal inscriptions continued to be composed in Sumerian, there was an increasing use of Akkadian. In a unique text dating to the time of the Agade Empire, a small cuneiform tablet makes a distinction between the 'men of Akkadian seed' and those speaking 'Sumerian' (*emegir*).[36] It is the earliest known reference to the Sumerian language.

The empire reached its peak with Naram-Sin (*c.* 2254–2218 BC), in whose reign administration was regularized and spelling reformed to make Akkadian easier to read. The king claimed to rule over the 'Four Quarters', that is, lands in all directions. Indeed, he campaigned as far north as the Taurus and Amanus mountains in southern Turkey, in the plains of Syria, where he had built a fortified 'palace' at Tell Brak, and through the Persian Gulf to the

Oman Peninsula. Such was Naram-Sin's success that the people of Agade built a temple for him and he was named god of the city.

Warfare lay at the heart of the authority of the kings of Agade, and they had to crush a number of internal rebellions as well as defeat external threats. This is demonstrated dramatically by one of the most magnificent works of art from antiquity, the Stele of Naram-Sin. The limestone monument (surviving to a height of around 2 m/6 ft) was originally erected in the city of Sippar, cult centre of the sun god, and depicts a campaign in the central Zagros Mountains, to the east of Mesopotamia. Dominating the scene is Naram-Sin himself, shown taller than the other figures, and wearing a horned helmet to express his status as a god. The traditional Mesopotamian approach of dividing imagery into a number of clearly defined registers dissolves here to create a unified composition. The soldiers of Agade and their enemies all gaze upwards to Naram-Sin, who strides across the steep, wooded terrain with apparent ease. His right foot presses upon two naked enemies, below whom a third man falls. They and their companions are presented as being defeated simply by the presence of Naram-Sin, rather than through his actions – it is the king who holds power over life and death as he reaches the highest mountain peak, above which stars indicate the great gods.

Future rulers would consider these achievements as an ideal to be emulated, and their scribes composed literary works that wove the Agade rulers into myths, legends and folk tales, where they were either glorified or vilified. The dynasty of Agade was never forgotten in Mesopotamia, and tales about it were read widely across the Near East.[37] However, it is very uncertain whether these accounts contain even a kernel of actual history; looking back in time was important but not as an exercise to discover what had happened, and actual events can rarely if ever be seen as inspiration for literary creations in Mesopotamia: 'The legends are not sources on the kings they describe but on the people who thought those tales to be of sufficient interest to read them.'[38] Understandably, caution must be exercised when using such compositions to reconstruct history, in much the same way as with the poems of Enheduana.

The Stele of Naram-Sin, from Susa, Iran, *c.* 2200 BC.

Later Mesopotamian legend credits the collapse of the Agade Empire to an invasion by the Guti, inhabitants of the eastern Zagros Mountains sent by Enlil as punishment for Naram-Sin's wrongdoing, which included the looting of the god's temple at Nippur. The reality was likely to have been much more complex, with leaders of the eastern highland regions pressing their advantage as insurrection arose among the city-states of the southern alluvium. Gutians had been settling the alluvium perhaps for generations, and had become part of the broader multilingual population. As Agade's power faltered, a dynasty of Gutian rulers emerged to control several city-states across the centre of the plain (Adab and Umma), and presented themselves as the heirs of the Agade state that had been reduced to controlling only the region around the Tigris and Diyala river confluence. Indeed, the situation was so confused that the Sumerian King List exclaims for this period: 'Then who was king? Who was the king?'

East of Sumer

The idea that the Sumerians were the source of all cultural developments across the Middle East had a long life in scholarly and popular thinking. As we have seen, the last several decades of excavation and interpretation have challenged this view significantly. It is now apparent that the cultures of Mesopotamia cannot be understood without placing them in the context of a much longer history of development and change, as well as one of connections with wider geographical regions. This is certainly the case with relationships between the inhabitants of the Tigris and Euphrates alluvial plains and populations to the east in Iran and Afghanistan and, especially during the second half of the third millennium BC, southwards through the Persian Gulf to the Indus Valley in modern Pakistan.

The essential differences between Iran and Mesopotamia are that the former was rich in a wide variety of resources such as stones, metals and wood, but the rugged nature of the landscape meant that only a limited number of areas were suitable for extensive settlement and these were irregularly distributed.

In contrast, Mesopotamia was rich in limited, but fundamental, resources with fertile soils, wide plains and easy communication. The story of Sumer and its inhabitants is partly the result of the complex interplay between the populations of the highlands of Iran and the lowlands of Mesopotamia and their use of the different resources. The most obvious distinction between the two regions is indeed in their physical geography: the flat alluvium of southern Mesopotamia and the plateau of Iran, marked dramatically by the great Zagros Mountain chain. This was less of a barrier than might be supposed, and there were numerous routes that allowed the movement of materials, animals and people in both directions. Nonetheless, there were major cultural differences between Sumer and Iran in the form of language, religion, forms of production and lifestyle, as well as social and political organization.

Of all the resources available in the mountains of Iran, the one that would play arguably the most fundamental role within the societies of both the highlands and the lowlands was metal, especially copper. Unlike Mesopotamia, which is totally lacking in metal, Iran has extensive deposits, especially copper and copper-bearing ores, but also lead, silver and gold. It was in the mountains that the technology of extraction and processing was developed, and it gave the highland societies that developed around these activities economic and political influence. Metal-smelting technology can be identified at Iranian sites during the fifth millennium BC, including the earliest alloying of arsenical copper and the eventual adoption of tin-bronze. During the fourth millennium BC there was a dramatic expansion in metal extraction, with the widespread use of copper alloys alongside other metals. Communities in the central and southern Zagros were involved in its local use and distribution, but ingots and finished items – simple tools and weapons, and grave goods – travelled along trade routes into southern Mesopotamia.

Around 3100 BC, and the decline of the Uruk-style colonies in north Mesopotamia, there were wider changes. The region of Susiana, the alluvial plain of Khuzestan to the east of Sumer, began to develop closer cultural and perhaps economic and political

links with the highlands. Cylinder seals used at the site of Susa itself started to lose some of their Uruk-style characteristics in favour of designs more in common with the stamp seal imagery used in the Zagros Mountains, including horned animals, felines and snakes. A distinct material culture spread across Iran, no doubt following exchange and communication routes that had long been in existence but now became more closely integrated. Thus in the period approximately 3100–2900 BC some of the small settlements of the plateau shared the use of specific types of pottery, including styles of seals and written tablets. This is known today as the Proto-Elamite culture.

The idea of writing on clay tablets has long been associated with Mesopotamia, especially Uruk, but in Iran a parallel system was developed (although sharing the same numerical signs). This was the highlands' first indigenous writing system, and may have been developed in Susa – where some 1,550 tablets have been found – and then extended across a network of sites.[39] The Proto-Elamite texts relate to very local bookkeeping operations, and don't suggest any centralized economic or political control. It was once thought that this writing might be connected with later inscriptions that recorded the Elamite language, but Proto-Elamite remains undeciphered and a relationship between the two cannot be established. Proto-Elamite writing may have been in use for as little as a century before it ceased to have a practical use and was abandoned. The end of writing in Iran may have been connected with the decline of the Proto-Elamite culture around 2900 BC.

From the middle of the third millennium BC Sumerian royal inscriptions include references to attacks by Mesopotamian city-state rulers on a land called Elam. While Sumerian texts refer to a land termed *nim* ('high' or 'elevated'), in later texts the sign is equated with the Akkadian term *elamtu*, perhaps related to the word *elûm* ('high', 'upper').[40] The region of Elam – although not always politically unified – combined the Susiana plains and the mountains of the southern Zagros. The raids into Elam were focused on acquiring the metals, stones and timber of the region, and, perhaps especially, male and female slaves. Some of the earliest references in royal inscriptions to Elam come from the monuments of Eannatum of

Necklace of carnelian, lapis lazuli, gold, silver and rock crystal beads from Kish, Iraq, *c.* 2400 BC.

Lagash. He claims that 'Elam, the high mountain, was smitten with weapons; mounds of corpses were piled high.'[41]

Although overland routes from Iran would have supplied Sumer with exotic stones, much would have been transported by sea. Such wide-ranging connections are illustrated by beads found in graves at sites such as Kish and Ur. Long red-orange carnelian beads were a type made by craftsmen in the Harappan Civilization of the Indus Valley, although some were probably made in Mesopotamia by migrant craftsmen from the Indus, using their own style of drills and raw materials. Some carnelian beads were decorated with white designs. This tradition also originated in the Indus Valley, where beads were painted with soda and heated to bleach the stone (they are described erroneously as 'etched'); the technique was adopted and developed in other places, including southern Mesopotamia. Carnelian beads are frequently found with blue lapis lazuli mined in Afghanistan. There is no indication that individuals from Sumer acquired any of this

material directly, but rather through a long-distance network of connections and exchange.

Given that entrances to the netherworld were thought to be in the eastern mountains, it may be that the beads in the graves were intended to accompany the dead on that journey or be presented as gifts when they got there – the dead would thus be returning the stones and metals to the place where they originated in reality, but now in a supernatural realm.[42] This mysterious mountainous world to the east could be represented by human-faced bison, such as the pair that is represented on an inlaid plaque that decorated the front of an enormous lyre in one of the Royal Tombs at Ur. In the top register a nude belted hero holds two human-faced bison. The hero stands over the lower panels, where the scenes depict a banquet. This, however, is an 'other'-worldly version of festivities, perhaps in the netherworld itself. In the lowest register appears a scorpion-man, a creature associated in later Mesopotamian literature with distant lands and mountains and the passageways through them.

These eastern relationships are also evident in Sumer with vessels carved in elaborate relief decoration made of soft stones

Chlorite vessel carved with mythological scenes, unprovenanced, *c.* 2500 BC.

such as chlorite and steatite. Examples have also been excavated from temples and palaces, while the patterns and figures carved on the containers are known from objects over a wide area from the Persian Gulf to western Central Asia and the Indus Valley. Many of the designs on the vessels, as well as the stones from which they are made, originated in Iran. Some are carved with very complex designs that include humans and animals incorporating Mesopotamian, Iranian and Harappan imagery, showing the extensive interconnections that existed in the second half of the third millennium BC. One very fine example – possibly looted from Khafajah – includes a central male figure, repeated twice, with long plaited hair, wearing a skirt decorated with incised cross-hatching. One man stands on the rumps of two addorsed lions and clutches a pair of large serpents with gaping mouths and spotted bodies. The other man, grasping streams of water rather than snakes, sits on the rumps of two humped bulls or zebu (animals found in the imagery of the Indus Valley civilization). A third section of the vessel design shows a lion and eagle attacking a fallen cow while two little bears pluck fruit from a date palm. The meaning of the imagery is unknown; it may well have been interpreted very differently between the vessel's place of manufacture and its final destination.

The Third Dynasty of Ur (2110–2000 BC) and the death of Sumerian

Our understanding of what is meant by Sumer and the Sumerians has been shaped to a large extent by one period in Mesopotamian history more than any other: the century and a half following the collapse of the Agade Empire around 2150 BC. The underlying independent city-state structure re-emerged across southern Mesopotamia, including Lagash under the rule of Ur-Bau and his son Gudea, as well as Uruk and Ur. Sumerian, as the ancient language of the 'homeland', came with both antiquity and royal or religious prestige, and now acquired official status in these states. It is possible that it had always been a language of the elite, written by scribes of the ruling classes; *emegir* could mean 'native tongue'

or 'noble tongue'.[43] The result is that this period has traditionally been viewed as a 'Sumerian Renaissance', a return to the pious temple-building activity of Sumerian kings as a contrast with the militaristic Semitic dynasty of Agade. If we reject, as we must, the racial overtones and stereotyping inherent in such a formulation, it is possible to recognize that there was no revival of a specific people or re-emergence of a culture that had been forced into the shadows, but rather a refashioning of tradition to forge a new era. The resulting monuments and texts would help to shape, in different ways, later Mesopotamian royal and scholarly identity, as well as our own understanding of Sumer and the Sumerians.

The emergence of the Third Dynasty of Ur begins in fact at Uruk with King Utu-hegal. It is he who is credited with defeating the last of the Gutian rulers to claim authority over the cities of Sumer. When Utu-hegal was killed in battle, however, Ur-Namma took the lead from Ur, defeating an Elamite army and extending his control across southern Mesopotamia. His status as a powerful ruler was underscored by the creation of monumental architecture in the cities he controlled. The most spectacular buildings are certainly the great ziggurats, which would remain a feature of the

The Ziggurat of Ur, built about 2100 BC, restored in the 6th century BC and 1980s.

religious architecture in many Mesopotamian cities for 2,000 years. These massive solid mud-brick stepped platforms with shrines at the summit were erected at Nippur, Uruk, Eridu and, of course, Ur. They develop the tradition of raising temples on platforms, and possibly evoke the eastern mountains with which gods were often associated. The enormous scale and formal planning of the ziggurats are characteristic of Ur-Namma's buildings, and they reveal the huge labour force available to the king, as well as the organizational ability to manage it, foreshadowing an emerging centralized and bureaucratic kingdom.

The only surviving statues of Ur-Namma are figures intended for burial in the foundation of temple buildings – reinforcing the modern perception of a pious king. They show him carrying the basket of first bricks. We have already seen one example from Nippur where the king's entire body is represented, but other examples have the lower body tapering to a peg, a form that originated in the Early Dynastic period and would be the standard royal foundation-figure for the next several hundred years.

It was during Ur-Namma's reign that the royal title *ki-en-gi ki-uri* 'King of Sumer and Akkad' was introduced. This was perhaps a tightening of the definition of these terms to reflect distinct geographical areas now under royal authority, a division of the alluvial plain with Akkad to the north of Nippur and Sumer to the south. It may have had its origins in the linguistic geography of earlier times, when Sumerian was strongest in the south and Semitic languages were spoken further north. By the time of Ur-Namma, however, this distinction would have been less apparent, since Sumerian was almost certainly dying as a living language.[44] The last native speakers passed away as Akkadian came to replace it. The death of languages, often by cultural assimilation, is not an unusual phenomenon, and in the modern world it has accelerated dramatically in the face of globalization. Although Sumerian was no longer spoken in the street, it was however preserved by scribes, who across two millennia would continue to learn to write it as a literary, scholarly and liturgical language (much as Latin would be used in European royal courts and universities from the medieval period as a language of authority and learning).

The fact that few if any people had Sumerian as their spoken language in the late third millennium BC is underscored by Ur-Namma's son and successor Shulgi (*c.* 2094–2047 BC), whose native tongue was Akkadian.[45] He claims in his inscriptions, however, that 'By origin I am a son of Sumer; I am a warrior, a warrior of Sumer.'[46] That is, he was a native of the far south of Mesopotamia and therefore in some sense a Sumerian. In spite of this, Shulgi stresses his control of a world much larger than Sumer: 'I am the king of the four regions; I am the herdsman and shepherd of the black-headed people.'[47] The term 'black-headed people' (*sag-gig-ga*) appears in Sumerian literary texts from this period onwards and refers to humankind, imagined in this case as a vast number of cattle and sheep; it did not, as stated in some modern accounts, define a distinct Sumerian population.

The region's ancient Sumerian language was now used by scribes of the royal court in the composition of inscriptions and hymns that honoured their royal masters. The kings of Ur are presented in these texts as superior versions of earlier rulers: immensely strong, paragons of just rule, exceedingly wise and very, very virile (hence the 'Sacred Marriage' texts). The largest number of hymns were devoted to Shulgi, who boasts about how educated he was, even mastering Sumerian like the best of scribes:

> I am a king, offspring begotten by a king and borne by a queen. I, Shulgi the noble, have been blessed with a favourable destiny right from the womb. When I was small, I was at the academy, where I learned the scribal art from the tablets of Sumer and Akkad.[48]

In this way, writing was associated with kingship, and it was through literature that the rulers of Ur sought to connect themselves with a glorious, heroic past while at the same time affirming their legitimacy. They achieved this by claiming descent from the rulers of Uruk; there had been a long history of political connections between the two cities, and there were probably also close personal relations between its leading families. At least nine

Sumerian narrative poems were written by the royal scribes that focused on earlier heroic kings of Uruk – Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Bilgames (known in the later Akkadian stories as Gilgamesh) – as well as their patron deity, the great goddess Inana.[49] Some of these tales may have been commissioned to entertain the court at Ur; others were perhaps part of an existing well-developed mythology.

Lugalbanda in the mountain cave

King Enmerkar of Uruk decides to conquer the land of Aratta, imagined as somewhere to the east of Mesopotamia in the Iranian highlands. Gathering his forces, he sets off towards Aratta, but the hero Lugalbanda, who is among the soldiers, becomes very ill and is left behind in a cave with some provisions. Lugalbanda remains ill for two days, during which time he prays to the gods Utu, Inana and Nanna to be healed. He eventually recovers and is sufficiently fit to capture a wild bull and two wild goats. Lying down to sleep, he is sent a dream by the gods, instructing him to sacrifice the animals he has captured. On waking, he does as he is told. Unfortunately, the tablets recording the story are fragmentary at this point, and the ending is unclear.

Lugalbanda and the Anzu bird

This story begins with Lugalbanda alone in the highlands of Lullubi (the mountains of western Iran). There he discovers the chick of the giant Anzu bird, which is described as a lion-headed eagle. He decides to feed the chick. When the Anzu bird returns, it is alarmed that its chick does not reply to its call, but on learning what Lugalbanda has done, it is very pleased. In gratitude the bird grants Lugalbanda the ability to travel at great speed. With his superhero power Lugalbanda catches up with his comrades, who are laying siege to the city of Aratta. All does not go well for King Enmerkar, however, and a year passes without success. He therefore decides to seek the advice and assistance of the goddess Inana back home in Uruk. Lugalbanda volunteers to make the trip and, with his special power, is able to cross seven mountain ranges (a traditional phrase meaning an incredible distance) in just a day.

Inana instructs Enmerkar on how to defeat Aratta and claim its rich resources.

Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta
Enmerkar sends a messenger to the ruler of Aratta. In it he demands that Aratta send skilled workers to Uruk – together with the region's precious metals and stones – in order to build temples. The messenger travels over 'seven mountains' to reach Aratta. However, when he delivers his message, the lord of Aratta refuses the request. Instead, the two kings challenge each other to a competition of riddles to see who is the cleverest. After several challenges back and forth, Enmerkar prepares to send a messenger again to demand that Aratta give up. Since the message is too long for the messenger to learn, Enmerkar writes it on a clay tablet – and so writing is invented. The lord of Aratta, unable to read the signs in the clay, realizes that he has been defeated by a cleverer king.

Enmerkar and Ensuhkeshdana
The rivalry between Enmerkar of Uruk and Ensuhkeshdana of Aratta is taken up by two experts in magic. After a beginning that is difficult to understand, the story comes to the final conflict. The magician from Aratta uses his magic to stop the cattle of the city of Eresh, somewhere in Sumer, from producing milk. A pair of twin shepherds pray to Utu for help, and a contest then takes place between the Aratta magician and an old woman from Sumer. The former catches some creatures in a river, but these are immediately eaten by even larger creatures caught by the old woman. The losing magician is thrown into the river and Uruk is once again victorious.

Bilgames and Aka
Uruk is besieged by the army of Aka, king of Kish. Bilgames appeals for help to the elders of his city, who gather in assembly but refuse to fight. The king then turns to the young men, who are keen to follow him into battle. The men of Kish make fun of Bilgames, but he climbs up on to the city walls and his heroic appearance alone

is sufficient to defeat the entire army of Kish. Aka is captured, but Bilgames lets him go.

Bilgames and Huwawa

Bilgames, with his servant Enkidu and fifty young men, sets out from Uruk to find the finest cedar trees to cut down. After crossing seven mountains, the king discovers some magnificent trees and begins to chop at them with his axe. The guardian of the forest, the divine Huwawa, now appears, surrounded by seven terrifying supernatural forces. Bilgames cleverly offers Huwawa gifts, including marriage to his two sisters, in exchange for which the guardian hands over his protective forces. When the seventh force has been given up, Bilgames leans towards Huwawa as if to give him a kiss of friendship – but instead he punches him in the face. The opportunity is taken to tie up Huwawa, but the demon is now in tears and Bilgames takes pity on him. However, Enkidu then warns Bilgames that the only way he will be remembered as a hero is through the death of Huwawa, whose head is therefore cut off.

Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven

Bilgames and Inana quarrel, and she forbids him from making royal judgements in the courtyard of her temple Eanna in Uruk. Bilgames ignores her and, in a fury, Inana requests that her father, the sky god An, send to earth the Bull of Heaven. An is reluctant but eventually gives in to her threats, and the Bull is released:

> At Uruk, the Bull devoured the pasture, and drank the water of the river in great slurps. With each slurp it used up one mile of the river, but its thirst was not satisfied. It devoured the pasture and stripped the land bare. It broke up the palm trees of Uruk, as it bent them to fit them into its mouth. When it was standing, the Bull submerged Uruk.[50]

Bilgames and Enkidu finally manage to kill the Bull, and in an act of hubris they throw its body parts in the faces of the gods.

Bilgames, Enkidu and the Netherworld

After the universe is created at the beginning of time, a storm uproots a sacred tree. Inana finds the tree and plants it in her garden at Uruk. She waits for it to grow so that its wood can be used to make furniture. After many years three creatures take up residence in the tree: a snake in the roots, the Anzu bird in the top branches, and the demon Kiskillila in the trunk. Inana turns unsuccessfully to her brother the sun god Utu for help in removing them. Bilgames, however, agrees to help Inana. He kills the snake and drives away the other two creatures. Bilgames then cuts down the tree and makes furniture for Inana. He also makes two other objects, usually translated as 'hoop' and 'driving stick', that may have been used in a game, but which also allude in some way to battle and sex. The objects fall into the netherworld and Enkidu offers to retrieve them. Bilgames advises Enkidu on how to avoid the dangers of the netherworld, but his servant disregards this and is captured. Bilgames is distraught, and although Enlil refuses to help him, Enki, the god of magic, has the sun god make a hole in the netherworld through which the spirit of Enkidu can pass. He provides Bilgames with a very gloomy description of the underworld.

The Death of Bilgames

The hero Bilgames is at the end of his life and lying sick on his bed. As he dreams, the gods remind him of his heroic deeds, including his search for the survivor of the flood, Ziusudra, who had been granted eternal life. Death, however, is inevitable, they tell him, but he will go to the netherworld, the 'Great City', where he will live with high priests and priestesses, his family and friends, and his officers and soldiers. A great storm then parts the waters of the Euphrates and a tomb is built for Bilgames on the bed of the river.

* * *

Several, if not all of these compositions may have been products of a reorganization under Shulgi of the school curriculum for the training of scribes that established a uniformity of writing in official documents. This in turn was part of a far-reaching restructuring

of the state. Southern Mesopotamia was divided into a number of provinces (largely formed from the earlier independent city-states), each administered by a governor. Every province contributed products, agricultural resources and human labour as part of a centralized taxation system that was given the Sumerian label *bala*, 'exchange'. The results of these complex new systems are recorded in tens of thousands of surviving Sumerian cuneiform documents, more than from any other period of Mesopotamian history. They document a wide range of economic activity ranging from simple receipts to complex calculations of harvests, and reflect state-sponsored activity on an enormous scale in which many thousands of men and women were employed. The tablets derive from many sites; most were looted from them in the nineteenth century, and they are now scattered in museums and private collections around the world. It is, however, sometimes possible to provide an original context from the information in the text. Close to 100,000 texts have been published to date, and many thousands are awaiting translation.

Like the kings of Agade, the rulers of Ur placed their children in positions of influence, such as high priests and priestesses of the major temples, including the En-priestess at Ur. As under his father, Shulgi invested in restoring and adorning temples, presenting himself in imagery as a pious builder and connecting himself with a distant heroic past. On the fragmentary remains of a large stele found at Ur, attributed to Ur-Namma but possibly dating to Shulgi's reign, the work of building a temple, in which the ruler himself participates, is shown in the lower registers.[51] The culmination of the process depicted in the upper registers is a ritual performance by the king inside the completed sanctuary. The relationship between the gods and their appointed king becomes even more explicit under Shulgi, and at some point before his twentieth year on the throne he starts to be described in inscriptions as a god, a practice followed by all his successors. Temples with statues of the divine kings were established in various cities. Their officials used cylinder seals with a Sumerian inscription naming them and giving their title as the servant of the king. Illustrated here is the seal used by Ilum-bani, an official of Shulgi's successor, Ibbi-Sin

Cylinder seal (and modern impression) of Ilum-bani, official of King Ibbi-Sin, unprovenanced, *c.* 2020 BC.

(*c.* 2028–2004 BC). It shows him being led into the presence of the king, who is shown as a god, seated beneath a crescent moon and a flaming sun.

The Old Babylonian period (2004–1600 BC)

The literary compositions of the Third Dynasty of Ur are known only from copies made by schoolboys during the early second millennium BC. These were among the texts used by scholars of the mid-twentieth century to reconstruct such a compelling picture of the Sumerians as a distinct people. Yet they had been written at a time when mothers were no longer talking to their children in Sumerian. The disappearance of the spoken language may have been completed or at least speeded up by the political upheaval that brought the collapse of the empire of Ur.

In the reign of Ibbi-Sin, centralized control was weakened by a number of factors that, according to correspondence between the king and his officials, included shortages of grain and disruption to the routes of communication and supplies by mobile groups of pastoralists. This was a significant threat to the centralized tax and tribute system. Some high officials began to take the initiative and extend their authority, and the best known and ultimately most successful was Ishbi-Erra, governor of Isin. Around 2004 BC a coalition of forces from kingdoms in western Iran, including the Elamites, attacked Ur and occupied the city while

Eridu, Kesh, Uruk and Nippur were plundered; it would be some ten years before Ishbi-Erra (*c.* 2017–1985 BC) drove out the Elamite garrison. He and his successors now presented themselves as the legitimate heirs of Ur. During their reign, a number of literary texts were composed in Sumerian describing the appalling catastrophe that had befallen Ur, as well as the restoration of the city. The 'Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur' highlights the fate of Ibbi-Sin after the gods had abandoned the capital so that

> they should be given over to live in an inimical place; that Shimashki and Elam, the enemy, should dwell in their place; that its shepherd, in his own palace, should be captured by the enemy, that Ibbi-Sin should be taken to the land of Elam in fetters.[52]

Some of the greatest poetry was commissioned by King Ishme-Dagan (*c.* 1953–1935 BC), who modelled himself on Shulgi in a large number of hymns, nearly as many as under the Third Dynasty ruler himself.[53] Lamentations over the destruction of Nippur, Uruk and Eridu are graphic accounts of the destruction of these holy places, and the poet goes out of his way to place the blame clearly on the foreign invaders. Perhaps composed on the occasion of the rebuilding of the cities and the rededication of their temples, the purpose of the hymns may have been to ensure that the gods, as well as future rulers reading the accounts, would not attribute the disasters to the rulers of Ur and Isin. How much history lies behind these descriptions is therefore debatable.

These magnificent compositions have contributed to the modern understanding of the Old Babylonian period as the 'classical' age of Sumerian literature. They were a product of an institution known as the *edubba* ('school'), where apprentice scribes learned their skill. These were usually boys, but some girls did learn to read and write.[54] Excavated houses at Nippur, Sippar-Amnanum and Ur have been identified as *edubba*.[55] There the trainee scribes started to progress through a curriculum that began with copying lexical texts. Next came mathematical texts, mostly multiplication tables and tables of reciprocals, followed by the

copying of model contracts, business documents and proverbs. Finally came the copying of royal inscriptions of the kings of Agade and the literary texts of the Third Dynasty of Ur, as well as compositions of the Old Babylonian period itself. In some of these Sumerian texts, the grammar of certain sections is different from what might be expected. This is a form of Sumerian known as *emesal* (which might mean 'fine language'), used for some cultic songs, the speech of goddesses, some proverbs and a couple of women's work songs.[56] It had perhaps been a regional dialect of Sumerian that became associated in scholarly writing with certain types of text, especially those involving the voices of females.

Since Sumerian was the mark of an educated man, scribes would often take Sumerian names. Nonetheless, scribal education was necessarily bilingual (and in some cases multilingual, given the number of languages now recorded in cuneiform), and the boys learned to write both Sumerian and Akkadian. This is apparent in one school text that portrays an oral examination in which a teacher challenges his student to translate from one language to the other and vice versa.[57] Indeed, some of the Sumerian literary works served as source material in the creation of Akkadian masterpieces that entered the curriculum – including the Epic of Gilgamesh and Atra-hasis, the story of the Flood.

King Ashurbanipal carries a ritual basket of soil, from Babylon, Iraq, *c.* 668–650 BC.

SIX
Back to the Beginning

Among the Sumerian compositions of the early second millennium BC is one with the modern title 'Enki and the World Order'. It describes how the supreme god Enlil gave to Enki the gift of the divine *me*, that is, the fundamental components of life and culture, such as kingship and war, and *nam-tar*, the power to determine destinies. This took place in a mythological time when the gods created humans and established order; through his mythical sages (*apkallu*) Enki passed his wisdom on to humanity. The possibility of connecting with this deep past was of increasing interest to the rulers of Mesopotamian kingdoms and their scholars. They were well aware of the great antiquity of their urban world, both through historical tradition and because the physical remains of the past were evident; the rebuilding of mud-brick palaces and temples would have revealed earlier levels that included foundation deposits often with Sumerian inscriptions. Indeed, when southern Mesopotamia was unified politically under the Agade Empire and the Third Dynasty of Ur, the past came to be understood, like the rebuilding of temples on divinely approved foundations, as a succession of cities and their rulers that had received divine sanction, a concept articulated most famously in the Sumerian King List.

The past became more significant as divination grew into an established practice that accompanied every important royal action during the second millennium BC. The will of the gods was believed to be expressed through events and, through the knowledge of past events, the science of divination allowed people to understand

signs sent by the gods in the present as a way of determining the future. The requirement to know the past in order to understand the future meant that texts describing it became much more detailed, looking back further in time. This may have encouraged an interest in the physical remains of the past. When Kassite kings unified southern Mesopotamia to form a single country (Babylonia) from around 1450 BC, they engaged in major programmes of temple-building and restoration. The temples at Nippur that had been abandoned for several centuries were probably 'excavated' in order to place the new buildings precisely over their ancient predecessors.[1] This attempt to connect with the past is reflected in some Kassite cylinder seals, the designs of which hark back to the presentation scene in which a worshipper appears before a king or deity. They are distinguished from this earlier style by lengthy Sumerian inscriptions. The cylinder illustrated here, carved from a milky stone called chalcedony, depicts a man standing before an eight-line hymn to the goddess Inana 'of Agade', written using archaic cuneiform signs. The hymn beseeches the goddess to bless Nur-Shamash, in all aspects of the *me* for which she is responsible.

Ancient monuments were now seized from conquered cities, such as those carried by the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte I in about 1158 BC from southern and eastern Mesopotamia to Susa, where they were uncovered by French archaeologists in the early twentieth century. Most of the stone monuments relate to the powerful rulers of Agade – the collection included the Stele of Naram-Sin – but there are also examples that may date from the Third Dynasty of Ur. These images were believed to retain their power and relevance, binding the past to the future and preserving evidence of divine sanction and authority. By the first millennium BC, when much of the Middle East was unified under the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, such ancient sculptures and inscriptions were being deliberately excavated on the orders of kings, and then curated and new ones created.[2] In his inscriptions the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) describes how he 'carried the basket' of soil for the first brick when undertaking the restoration of temples in Babylon and Ashur, while under his sons Ashurbanipal (668–*c.* 631 BC) and Shamash-shum-ukin (667–648 BC) this ritual was

Cylinder seal (and modern impression) inscribed with a Sumerian hymn to the goddess Inana, unprovenanced, *c.* 1400–1200 BC.

translated into stone sculptures modelled on late third-millennium BC foundation figures.[3] Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria ruling from Nineveh, even modelled himself on Shulgi of the Third Dynasty of Ur, presenting himself, as the earlier monarch had done, as the perfect ruler and scribe.[4] He bragged:

> Marduk, the sage of gods, gave me wide understanding and broad perception as a gift. Nabu, the scribe of the universe, bestowed on me the acquisition of all his wisdom as a present. Ninurta and Nergal gave me physical fitness, manhood and unparalleled strength. I learnt the lore of wise sage Adapa, the hidden secret, the whole of scribal art. I can discern celestial and terrestrial portents and deliberate in the assembly of the experts. I am able to discuss the series 'If the liver is a mirror image of the sky' with capable scholars. I can solve convoluted reciprocals and calculations that do not come out evenly. I have read cunningly written text in Sumerian, dark Akkadian, the interpretation of which is difficult. I have examined stone inscriptions from before the flood, which are sealed, stopped up, mixed up.[5]

Although Ashurbanipal was exaggerating his abilities, his scribes were certainly masters of reading and copying the ancient texts

recovered from the foundations of buildings and preserved in temple and palace libraries, as well as through the scribal curriculum. As a result, there was a revival of writing in Sumerian, with bricks from southern Mesopotamia once again stamped or handwritten with texts commemorating the renovation of temples. The learned scribes continued to learn and write Sumerian in ever-decreasing numbers as cuneiform came to be replaced with alphabetic scripts that recorded the living languages of the wider Middle East, especially Aramaic. The last dated cuneiform text corresponds to AD 75, although the script probably continued in use over the next two centuries.

Whose Sumer?

After Saddam Hussein was driven from power in 2003 following the invasion and occupation of Iraq by a U.S.-led coalition of states, the country collapsed into insurgency and sectarian conflict that resulted in the death and destitution of millions of ordinary people. Iraq's cultural heritage and education sectors inevitably suffered as the occupying forces and succeeding Iraqi governments attempted to maintain a semblance of security and rebuild the country's shattered infrastructure. As had happened in the 1990s, antiquities were viewed as a potential source of income for impoverished people – as well as others keen to take advantage of the situation – and many archaeological sites were looted, mostly by local Iraqis, but sometimes by coalition troops.[6] Countless objects, including cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals, were illegally smuggled out of the country to antiquities dealers and their clients, or hidden until they had become less 'hot'; at the time of writing, large collections of antiquities are still being intercepted by border agents around the world, with New York and London being key centres for this trade in stolen goods.[7]

One event in particular came to symbolize the impact of the invasion on Iraq's heritage: the looting of the Iraq Museum in April 2003. Among the approximately 15,000 stolen artefacts were iconic Sumerian objects – the Uruk Vase, the Mask of Warka, the statue of Enmetena; these and some 7,000 other pieces were subsequently

recovered. The West reacted in horror at what was viewed as the desecration of global heritage. The Sumerians, after all, had been incorporated into its own history and identity, so the loss could be easily understood as an assault on Western culture and by association all 'civilized' nations of the world. It was partly this sense of foreign ownership that came under attack with the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS) or Da'esh. Espousing an extreme version of Sunni Wahhabist ideology, in 2014 IS proclaimed a Caliphate across northern Iraq and Syria that resulted in the mass killing of Shi'ites and attempts to eliminate Iraq's Christian and Yazidi minorities. The cultural heritage of Syria and Iraq was attacked and destroyed on the basis that it encouraged idolatry, and archaeological sites were plundered for antiquities in order to be sold abroad to help finance their war. Sites in the south of Iraq that were directly associated with the Sumerian civilization escaped damage, but further north places such as Ashur, Nimrud and Nineveh were damaged and destroyed. Meanwhile, Tell Brak, Ebla and Mari in Syria suffered extensive loss in the violent conflict between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and a multitude of 'armies' formed from local peoples and external fighters, each supported in a variety of ways by foreign states.

An assumption that heritage has a universal value is embodied most clearly in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This international body acts as an arbiter and advocate of heritage, and its member nations decide what to include in its World Heritage List (WHL). Being in a position to decide what should or should not be preserved as heritage means ultimately determining what should be valued. The WHL signals the perceived importance of specific forms of heritage (tangible and intangible), but ultimately it is its home country that is charged with its care. The WHL does, however, offer a global platform for highlighting fragile landscapes and heritage that might otherwise be threatened or lost. One such place is the marshlands of southern Iraq, ancient Sumer. In 2016 the three archaeological sites of Uruk, Ur and Eridu and four wetland marsh areas – a mixed natural and cultural environment – were accepted on to the WHL.[8] The central argument of the Iraqi request for inclusion on the List

was that the cultural continuity represented by the life of the Maʿdan, the group of tribes settled in the marshes today, and the everyday life of the most ancient inhabitants of the very same area find parallels in the archaeological record. This aspect was fundamental in order to show that it was there, and only there, that a distinct relationship between humans and the landscape took place and developed. That does not mean that the Maʿdan are the heirs of the Sumerians, but it does show that the marshlands have sustained populations in particular ways across millennia. The award has provided further encouragement for a programme of reflooding the marshes. This inundation has brought a remarkable recovery of plant and animal life and, as important, the return of people, both to livelihoods within the marshes and to farms along their borders.

Some aspects of this landscape's living heritage are also being revived. A good example is Safina Projects, led by the artist Rashad Salim, whose mission is to revive, protect and study the traditional boats and craft heritage of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Many of the types of watercraft appear in scenes carved on cylinder seals and stone plaques or modelled in clay from as early as the late fourth millennium BC, but by the later twentieth century they were on the verge of extinction. Through a series of reconstruction workshops and oral history recordings, Safina Projects has documented these boats in detail, including the materials used, the techniques

Two traditional Taradas and Chilaika boats on the Euphrates at Babylon, 2019.

of construction, the terminology associated with each boat type and the communities involved in their making. It is a means for local people to reclaim their heritage; as Hannah Lewis, project manager for Sefina Projects, points out, the boats

> may no longer serve a central role in the economy, but in sectors like tourism, sports and leisure, culture and education, they bring a unique ingredient – perhaps a glimpse of how heritage can be engaged, not just as an effort to preserve the past, but as the foundation of a future that honours traditional knowledge, local ecology, and the vernacular heritage that has outlasted successive civilisations in Mesopotamia.[9]

Other artists have been exploring the disputed social, political and cultural histories of Iraq. Michael Rakowitz's project *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007–present), for example, attempts to recover the thousands of artefacts looted from the Iraq Museum by recreating them using the packaging of Middle Eastern food products and newspapers. In using such ephemeral, disposable materials he highlights how the past is being thrown away and how many of these artefacts have been removed from their place of origin for display in Western museums and private homes. As such, Rakowitz's work has not only become emblematic of the continued threat to Iraqi cultural heritage, but explores the excavation, reconstruction and curation of our own understanding of Sumerian sculpture.

Sumerians lost and found – and lost again

In a series of books devoted to lost civilizations, this contribution has explored how the Sumerian civilization has been discovered over the last two centuries. In doing so, however, it has become apparent that the Sumerians were never actually lost, and in fact could never be lost, since they may never have existed, at least not as a distinct ethno-linguistic population. What was lost and rediscovered was the Sumerian language as preserved in the cuneiform script of Mesopotamia. Indeed, it may be that, as Jerrold Cooper

has suggested, 'the Sumerians in some sense are an invention of modern Assyriologists, too quick to use language difference to essentialize and classify population groups'.[10] The Sumerians were created by linking language to ethnicity to create a people, either a race or a nation. The idea of the Sumerians as a separate people has an obvious appeal, whether as a contrast with perceived inferior people, as our ancestors or even as the inventors of the modern world. The result is that third-millennium BC Mesopotamia has been defined by the speakers of Sumerian despite the ample evidence that it was a multilingual world. A clear example of this bias is the document with which we began our story, the Sumerian King List. While the Oxford prism starts with the city of Eridu, most of the other manuscripts, including the earliest surviving example from the time of Shulgi, begins with Kish, nearly half of whose kings have Semitic names. Yet it has been called the 'Sumerian' King List for nearly a century because it begins in the deep past, at the point of origin so closely associated in the modern mind with Sumerians. In fact, the List is probably closer to reality in that it presents southern Mesopotamia 'as a region where Sumerian and Semitic speakers together forged a remarkably unified culture'.[11]

A Sumerian speaker – perhaps just one man – probably invented writing in the Late Uruk period, although the inability to detect recognizable Sumerian personal names in the archaic texts means this remains unproven. Archaeological evidence, however, offers no indication of major ruptures at the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, and the continued copying by scribes of lexical texts suggests much continuity. By the time Sumerian becomes visible in writing around 2800 BC, it may have become the language of an elite and, by association, their administrators and scribes. It is also possible that it was spoken by much of the population living in the far south of Mesopotamia. By the middle of the third millennium BC this region, or a wider area of the alluvial plain, is sometimes referred to as *ki-en-gi* (Akkadian 'Sumer'), although whether it was a place that was defined by its language is unknown.

The earliest Sumerian texts indicate the presence of Semitic languages, as do the names of scribes mentioned in them. It cannot be assumed, however, that these names reflect the languages spoken

by their owners rather than social and religious connections. After all, the most famous 'Sumerian' queen, Pu-abi, turns out to be Akkadian, but we have no idea of the language she spoke at court. In all probability she was bilingual, moving between Sumerian and Akkadian as the situation demanded (much as multilingualism was the norm at royal courts throughout Europe in the Renaissance and later).

This is therefore a 'civilization' of Sumer rather than of the Sumerians. It developed in the marshlands of southern Mesopotamia, where networks of people coalesced in places to form cities. These would have offered protection from the extremes of the environment (from famine to floods), and were maintained through social and political relationships, allegiances and obligations. For many inhabitants it may have been a brutal existence, with the threat of illness, wild animals and warfare never far from people's minds. Indeed, modern reconstructions of idyllic times in Sumer have been challenged by the examination of a few skeletons from the Royal Graves at Ur. Rather than, as imagined, dying willingly by taking poison, these 'attendants' had been killed with a blow to the back of the head with an axe. The bodies had then been heated, embalmed with mercury and dressed.[12] Were they executed prisoners of war, as depicted on the Standard of Ur, condemned criminals, or perhaps members of the court killed as part of an elaborate death ritual?

By the end of the third millennium BC Sumerian had ceased to be anyone's mother tongue. Rather it was adopted as a language of administration and learning, creating a Sumero-Akkadian culture mastered by a small royal and scribal elite who were sufficiently privileged to receive a formal education. They copied texts purporting to be composed by King Shulgi of Ur, in which he boasts of being of Sumerian 'seed', that is, a Sumerian – but perhaps only in the sense that he originated from southern Mesopotamia and had mastered the dead language. It was an intellectual construct, in much the same way that the Sumerians have been constructed in our own age: a people we would like to believe existed – but probably never did.

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