Ancient Mesopotamia

The Eden that Never Was

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1 Introduction

Mesopotamia is known to scholars and laypeople alike as the cradle of civilization. Home to some of the earliest cities in the world, famous for the law codes of its kings and for the invention of writing, the first home of the biblical Abraham, it has achieved a reputation as the birthplace of many of the hallmarks of Western civilization.

Its name comes from a Greek word meaning the "land between the rivers" – the alluvial plains of the Tigris and the Euphrates, including large portions of the modern countries of Iraq and Syria (fig. 1.1). The ancient inhabitants of this region maintained contacts with people living beyond it, including those of the lowlands of southwestern Iran, the valleys of the Zagros Mountains, and the foothills of the Taurus Range.

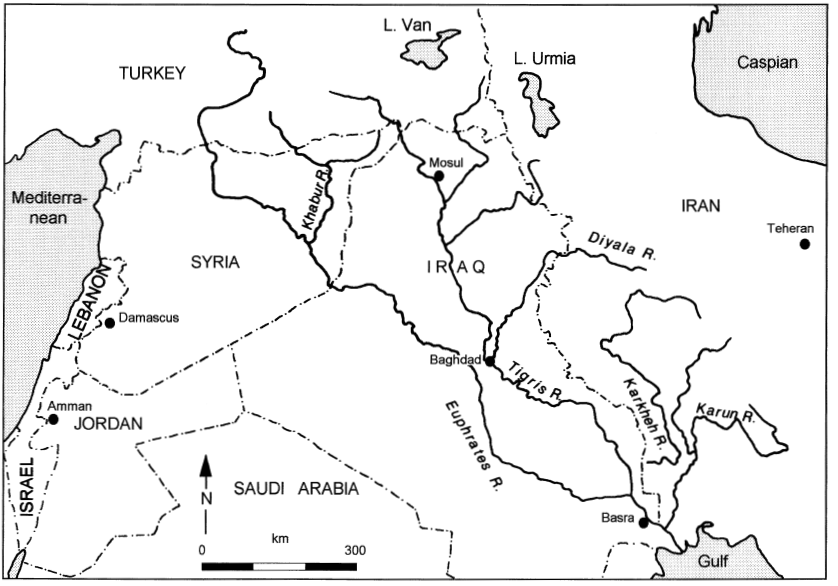
Rome was not built in a day, nor were the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia. We will consider developments that occurred over the course of almost three millennia, from ca. 5000 to 2100 B.C. – in archaeological terminology the Ubaid, Uruk, Jemdet Nasr, Early Dynastic, and Akkadian periods (table 1.1). During these 3,000 years, Mesopotamia developed from a sparsely populated region in which the majority of settlements were small agricultural villages to a land of several hundred thousand people, most of them living in large cities and many engaged in specialized occupations. Architecture became increasingly grandiose and elaborate. An ever-wider array of raw materials was imported to manufacture utilitarian items and luxury goods and to adorn the temples of the gods and the homes of the rich and powerful.

Despite this increasing material prosperity, the emergence of civilization was not a uniformly positive development. Along with the construction of impressive city walls and elaborate temples adorned with sculptures and inlaid with semiprecious stones and metals and the elaboration of artistic expression of all kinds came the exploitation of the "common" people. It was the labor of the majority that funded the trading expeditions, military conquests, and artisanal expertise responsible for the great works of art and architecture that we still admire today. The proud kings who boasted of their military exploits and the great buildings and canals they had constructed were able to accomplish these deeds because they could

Table 1.1 *Chronological chart*

	Ur III	
2100 B.C.		
	Akkadian	
2350 B.C.		
		III
	Early Dynastic	II
		I
2900 B.C.		
	Jemdet Nasr	
3100 B.C.		
		Late
	Uruk	Middle
		Early
4000 B.C.		
	Ubaid	
5000 B.C.		

Note:
Dates, based principally on radiocarbon determinations, are approximate.



1.1 Mesopotamia

command the labor of others. The title I chose for this book – *Mesopotamia, the Eden that Never Was* – draws attention to the mixed blessings of civilization. A goal of this book is to trace the steps by which Mesopotamian civilization, in all its brilliance and exploitativeness, emerged. This chapter begins with an overview of the most salient features of the 3,000 years of history that we will examine. It goes on to outline the history of archaeological research in Mesopotamia, the current status of research on ancient Mesopotamia, and the theoretical underpinnings of this book.

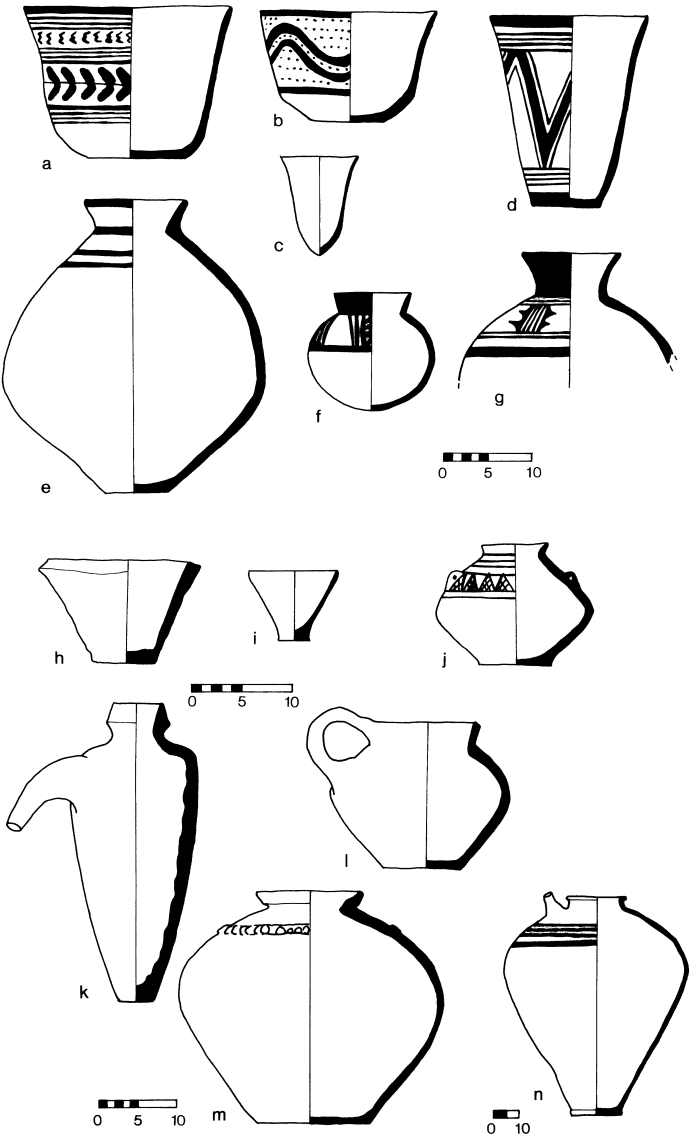
An overview

Archaeological periods are identified by distinctive styles of artifacts. For Mesopotamia as for many other places, pottery is the principal class of artifacts used to characterize different time periods. It is especially suitable for this purpose because it is abundant at virtually all Mesopotamian sites and because styles of pottery were continually changing, making them sensitive chronological indicators.

The Ubaid period

A characteristic style of painted pottery that is the hallmark of the Ubaid period (fig. 1.2a–g) is known from southern Mesopotamia and the neighboring lowlands of southwestern Iran as well as northern Mesopotamia, eastern Turkey, the valleys of the Zagros Mountains, and the western shores of the Gulf. Although both vessel forms and painted decoration exhibit recognizable similarities over this large area, there is also much regional variability, and almost everywhere – with the exception of sites along the Gulf coast – vessels were locally manufactured (Oates et al. 1977; Berman 1994). In comparison with earlier styles of painted pottery, Late Ubaid painted decorations tend toward simplicity, probably the result of new techniques for making and finishing vessels (Nissen 1989:248–49).

Agriculture and animal husbandry were widely practiced in sedentary communities. By the Late Ubaid there is also evidence of nomadic communities that made seasonal use of the high Zagros valleys for pasturing their flocks (vanden Berghe 1973; 1975). People supplemented a diet based on domesticates through hunting, fishing, and collecting wild plants. Most people lived in small village communities, but towns were beginning to grow as well. Towns typically contained temples, recognizable by their architectural elaboration, internal features, and ground plans. Houses in both towns and villages were freestanding structures



1.2 Pottery from the Ubaid and Uruk periods. Ubaid pottery (a–g) is often decorated, usually in black or dark brown paint on buff-colored surfaces, with horizontal painted bands or more elaborate motifs including animals and geometric designs. Uruk pottery (h–n) shows a dramatic increase in number of vessel shapes. Decoration is virtually absent, and when it does occur it is more commonly in the form of incision (j) or plastic decoration (m) than painting (n). (after Neely and Wright 1994:fig. III.5c,f, III.4a,h, III.7d,f, III.8b,c; Safar et al. 1981:74/8, 80/1,9; author's originals)

designed according to a plan that seems to have varied little within regions. Most were large enough to have accommodated extended families (Bernbeck 1995a:45). In contrast to northern Mesopotamia, where durable items of wealth, such as jewelry fashioned from lapis lazuli, carnelian, and other imported materials, made an appearance in the Late Ubaid, southern Mesopotamia and neighboring regions have few signs of material wealth.

Scholars disagree on what the societies of the Ubaid period were like. Some argue that they were essentially egalitarian, with each household producing most of the goods it needed and few people, if any, exempted from the task of subsistence production. In this view, temples and their associated officials had little authority outside the realm of religious rituals and few or no economic privileges (Oates 1977; Hole 1989). Others contend that Ubaid societies at least in some regions had economic and social hierarchies. According to these scholars, religion served as a form of ideology for legitimating emerging differentiation among people based upon the ability of some to commandeer the labor and products of others (Pollock 1989; Wright 1994; Bernbeck 1995a). Temples collected and stored surplus grain, acting as a safety net against the ever-present danger of crop failure and famine (Stein 1994).

The Uruk period

Scholars have identified the Uruk period as the time when the first states and urban societies emerged in Mesopotamia (Wright and Johnson 1975; Adams 1981; Nissen 1988; Pollock 1992). The Uruk period witnessed a massive increase in the number of settlements. Although many of them were small villages, others grew rapidly into towns and cities. By the end of the Uruk period, some larger settlements were walled. Temples and other public buildings became larger and more elaborate, and their construction must have employed large workforces for lengthy periods. Artifact styles exhibit pronounced differences from their Ubaid predecessors: painted decoration disappears virtually entirely from ceramics, whereas the variety of vessel shapes increases sharply (fig. 1.2h–n). Mass production was introduced for manufacturing some kinds of pottery, using technological innovations such as mold manufacture and wheel-throwing. Systems of accounting that had their roots in the Ubaid period if not earlier were elaborated and diversified, and writing – the premier accounting and recording technology – was invented toward the end of the period. Representations of men with weapons and bound individuals, presumably prisoners, attest to the use of armed force. The repeated depiction of a bearded individual with long hair, distinctive style of headdress, and skirt engaging in a variety of activities suggestive of authority is

among the indications that the public exercise of power may have been – or was at least represented as – male-dominated (fig. 1.3).

In the later part of the Uruk period, Uruk styles of artifacts and architecture are found in areas as distant as eastern Turkey and southern Iran. In contrast to the situation in the Ubaid period, there is little regional variation in later Uruk-type artifacts. Also distinct from the Ubaid situation is the pattern of Uruk "enclaves" within regions and even within communities whose material culture otherwise adheres to local traditions. The wide distribution of Uruk-style material culture has prompted some scholars to suggest that southern Mesopotamian cities sought to control trade routes by sending traders to colonize these far-flung regions (Algaze 1993). Others, however, have contested this interpretation, considering it improbable that these cities were able to exert direct control across such great distances and that indigenous communities would have succumbed to them without resistance (Johnson 1988–89; Stein and Mısır 1994:157–58).

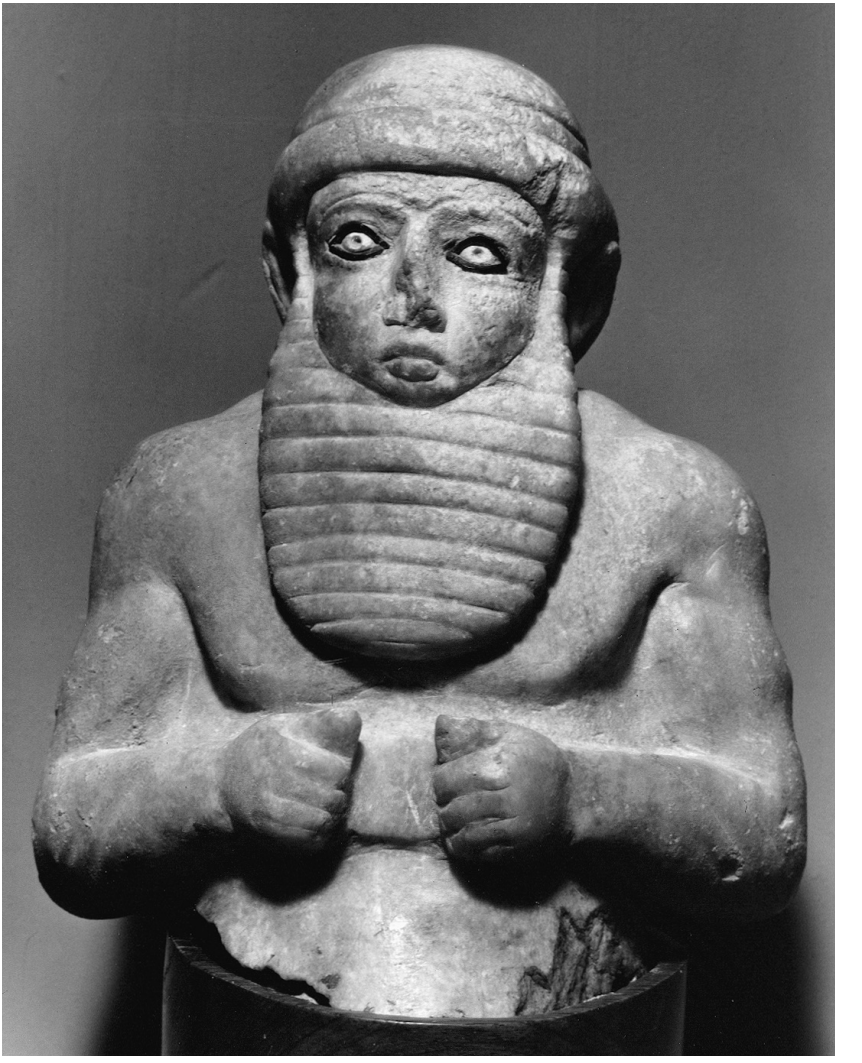
The Jemdet Nasr period

The Jemdet Nasr period remains poorly known because of its brief duration – two centuries at most – and, until recently, the scarcity of diagnostic "index fossils" for identifying occupations of this time period. Polychrome pottery, although only a small percentage of the predominantly undecorated wares that make up most Jemdet Nasr pottery assemblages, is a hallmark of the period (fig. 1.4a–e).

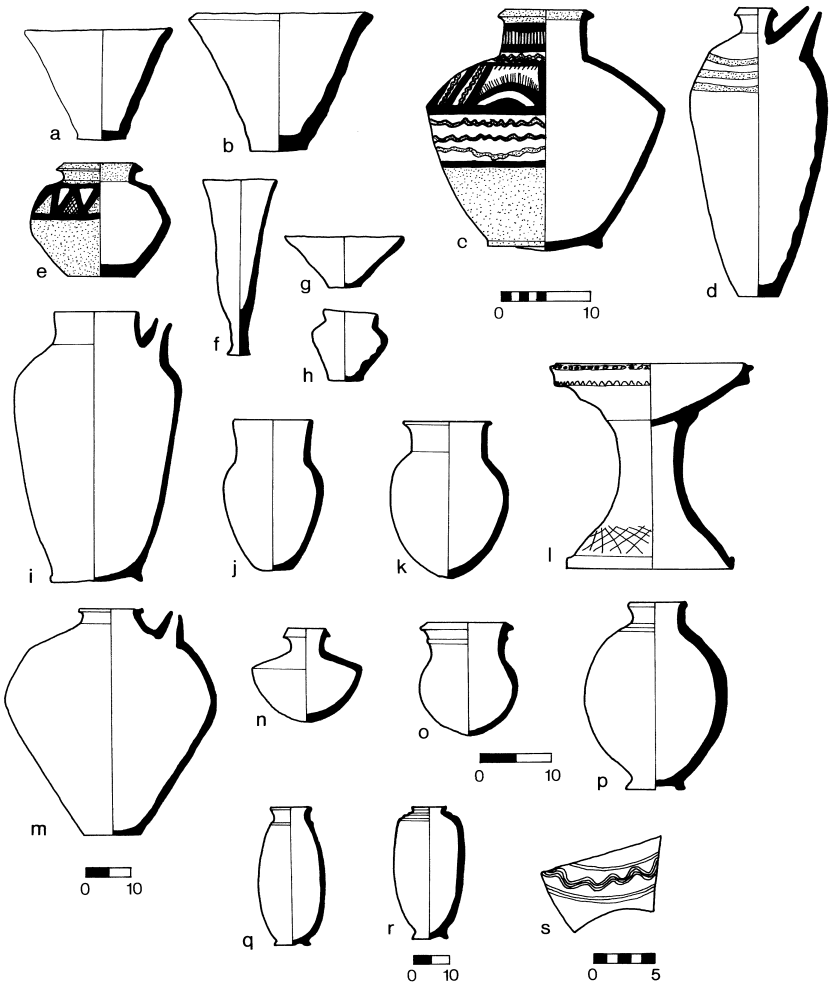
The poor state of knowledge of the Jemdet Nasr period is particularly unfortunate, since it was a time of considerable change and reorganization. Within southern Mesopotamia, the use of urban space underwent significant modification (Postgate 1986). Elsewhere, many of the Uruk "enclaves" were abandoned, and artifact and architectural styles once again became differentiated regionally. Lowland southwestern Iran, which throughout the fourth millennium used material culture closely paralleling that of southern Mesopotamia, began to move into the orbit of societies to its east (Carter and Stolper 1984:110–17; Amiet 1986:91–92). Despite increased regionalization, there are indications that widespread contacts with areas as distant as Egypt, Iran, and Afghanistan were maintained.

The Early Dynastic period

By the Early Dynastic period, most of the settled population had abandoned village life and moved into walled urban communities. Out of this



1.3 “Man in net skirt” with his characteristic beard and distinctive headdress – a fragment of an alabaster statuette, 18 centimeters high, found at Uruk (reprinted by permission of Hirmer Fotoarchiv)



1.4 Pottery from the Jemdet Nasr, Early Dynastic, and Akkadian periods. Jemdet Nasr pottery (a–e) is best known for including polychrome painted jars, although most vessels are undecorated and continue to be made in shapes similar to those of the later Uruk period; the ubiquitous Uruk beveled-rim bowls are replaced by wheel-made conical bowls (a,b). Early Dynastic pottery (f–n) is dominated by plain, undecorated vessels; abundant wheel-made conical bowls (g) become smaller and shallower over time. Akkadian-period pottery (o–s) is difficult to distinguish from that of the later Early Dynastic period except for its wavy-line incised decoration and several distinctive jar forms. (after Emberling 1995:fig. B13; Matthews 1992:3/9, 6/2, 6/6; Moon 1987:17, 103, 232, 319, 381, 420, 482, 683; Postgate 1977:pl. 33d; Woolley 1934:pl. 253/44b, 255/76, 263/195,197; author's originals)

milieu arose a pattern of city-states each composed of one or a few large urban centers surrounded by a hinterland. City-states were ruled by hereditary dynasties. Despite similarities of culture, religion, and language and some degree of economic interdependence, the city-states of southern Mesopotamia remained in a chronic state of conflict that sometime broke out into war. Relations with other regions, especially with neighboring Elam, were often no more peaceful.

Each city-state had a patron deity with whom its well-being was closely connected. The principal temple of the city was dedicated to this deity, but other gods and goddesses were worshiped in numerous smaller temples. Temples were not just places of worship, however: some were also landowners and major players in the economic life of the city-state. "Great households," including temples, employed a large workforce whose task it was to supply the household's material needs. This personnel ranged from the household head, who did no manual labor, to individuals who farmed, raised animals, prepared food, wove cloth, fashioned tools, and crafted luxury goods (Gelb 1979).

Early Dynastic city-states maintained wide-ranging exchange relations, evident from the wide variety of nonlocal raw materials used to fashion everything from tools to the adornment of temples to the items buried in the graves of the wealthy. Imported raw materials included metals (copper, tin, silver, and gold), stones (semiprecious varieties such as lapis lazuli and carnelian, used in jewelry and inlaid items, and chert and igneous rocks, used to fashion tools), and wood. In return, manufactured goods, textiles being the most important, were exported. Early Dynastic pottery consists mostly of drab, wheel-made vessels in a wide variety of shapes and sizes (fig. 1.4f–n). With some exceptions in the early part of the period, painted decoration is nearly absent.

The Akkadian period

The end of the Early Dynastic period was marked by the conquest of the Mesopotamian city-states by Sargon, the first king of the Sargonic dynasty, and the unification of the city-states into an empire. The legend of Sargon's rise to power bears a striking resemblance to the biblical story of Moses: in both, a child was abandoned alongside a river in a basket, to be retrieved and reared at court and ultimately to become leader of his people. Sargon and the dynasty he founded remained celebrated throughout Mesopotamian history: Sargon was a model of a proper ruler, whereas Naram-Sin, his grandson and the fourth ruler of the dynasty, was famed for his arrogance and inappropriate behavior (Cooper 1993).

The Sargonic dynasty's control over Mesopotamia lasted barely a century and represents just one in a series of repeated but short-lived