Chapter 2: The Ancient Near East
Sites of the Ancient Near East
Sumer
Background

Ancient Sumer
• Roughly corresponds to southern Iraq of today
• Made up of independent city-states, each of which was believed to be under the protection of a Mesopotamian deity and was ruled by a single person

Rulers and priests
• Rulers were representatives of the gods on earth
• Rulers and priests together directed communal activities – including construction, crop collection, and distribution of food

Specialization of labor
• Development of agriculture allowed for some community members to specialize in other activities, including manufacturing, trade, and administration
• Operation of these activities moved from the family level to the community level
• Allowed for the development of complex urban societies

Writing
• The oldest known written documents come from Sumer.
• The use of pictographs began ca. 3400-3200 BCE.
• Pictographs were simplified into cuneiform ca. 3000-2900 BCE.
• We know trade was important for Sumerian city-states because cuneiform tablets have been found from various regions of the ancient Near East.
• Fictional literature from Sumer includes the famous Epic of Gilgamesh.
At the center of each Sumerian city-state was the main temple dedicated to the city’s chief god.

Within the temple...
• A staff of priests and scribes worked
• Official administration and commercial business took place
• Overseeing of all religious functions happened

Building material
• Sumerian builders did not have access to stone quarries, so they formed and used **mud bricks**.

The goal of Sumerian temple architects was to create a monumental setting for worship of their deities.

White Temple of Uruk
• Gets its name from its white-washed walls.
• Stands on top of a high platform called a **ziggurat**.
• Probably dedicated to Anu, the sky god and chief deity of the Sumerians

Fig. 2-2. White Temple and ziggurat, Uruk (modern Warka), Iraq, ca. 3200-3000 BCE.
Design
- **Bent-axis plan** → a plan that incorporates 2 or more angular changes of direction; a standard for Sumerian temples
- The 4 corners of the temple are oriented to the cardinal points of a compass; also a standard for Sumerian temples
- Several chambers
- **Cella**, or central hall → housed a stepped altar
- Unknown if the temple had a roof

Function
- Sumerian temples were referred to as “waiting rooms” → reflects their belief that the deity would descend from above and appear to the priest in the cella
- The Sumerians believed their gods existed above the world of humans → this belief is reflected in the high placement of their temples on giant ziggurats
- The size of the ziggurat, the elevation of the temple, and the glowing white walls of the temple would have been awe-inspiring for the citizens of Uruk.

Fig. 2-3. Reconstruction drawing of the White Temple and ziggurat, Uruk (modern Warka), Iraq, ca. 3200-3000 BCE.
Sumer
“Warka Vase”

- Subject → a religious festival in honor of Innana
- Provenance → a temple complex in Uruk dedicated to Innana

Compositional conventions
- The narrative is represented in a series of horizontal registers/friezes.
- In each register, the figures stand on a ground line.

The bottom two registers
- Crops grow above a wave line that represents water.
- Ewes and rams appear in strict profile.
- These crops and animals played a big role in the Sumerian economy.
- They were also associated with fertility.
- Their representation shows that Innanna had blessed the community.

Fig. 2-5. Presentation of offerings to Innanna (Warka Vase), from Uruk (modern Warka), Iraq, ca. 3200-3000 BCE. Alabaster, 3’ 0.25” high.
Central register
- Naked men walk in a procession carrying baskets and jars, which represent the abundance provided by Inanna.
- They will present the bounty to Inanna as a **votive offering**, or a gift of gratitude to a deity usually made in fulfillment of a vow.
- The figures
  - Do not overlap
  - **Composite view** → combination of frontal and profile views, with large frontal eyes and profile heads; characterizing parts shown; it is a **conceptual** representation rather than an optical one

Top register
- The female figure wears a horned headdress and has two large poles, which are symbols of Inanna. This may be Inanna herself or a priestess of the goddess.
- A nude male figure, like those in the central register, brings her an offering.
- The clothed man to the right is distinguished as a priest-king by a pictograph.
- The artist used **hierarchy of scale** to represent the importance of the female figure and the priest-king; they are larger than all other figures represented.

The vase is a very early example of symbols being used as visual petitions to the gods on behalf of the population.

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Fig. 2-5. Presentation of offerings to Inanna (**Warka Vase**), from Uruk (modern Warka), Iraq, ca. 3200-3000 BCE. Alabaster, 3’ 0.25” high.
Sumer
Eshnunna Statuettes

Statues varying in size have been found buried beneath the floor of a temple at Eshnunna.

Material → gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone

Subject
• Mortal figures, some with their hands folded in prayer and some holding small beakers
• Male figures wear belts and fringed skirts; most have beards and shoulder-length hair.
• Female figures wear long robes that leave one shoulder bare.

The appearance of the figures
• The forms are simple and are made of cones and cylinders.
• The features are not specific enough to be portraits.
• They have huge eyes and tiny hands.

Function
• The statuettes were probably votive figures – they offer constant prayers to the gods on behalf of the donors.
• Their open-eyed stares likely represent the donors’ eternal wakefulness and dedication to the deity.

Fig. 2-6. Statuettes of two worshippers, from the Square Temple and Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar), Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE. Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone. Male figure 2’ 6” high.
Sumerian city-states were frequently at war with one another, which is the theme of the so-called “Stele of the Vultures.”

**Stele** ➔ a cared stone slab set up to commemorate a historical event or mark a grave

**Subject**
- Historical narrative labeled with cuneiform inscriptions
- Commemorates the victory of Eannatum, the ensi (or ruler) of Lagash, over the city-state of Umma
- Its nickname, “Stele of the Vultures,” comes from another fragment, which depicts a scene of vultures carrying the severed heads and arms of the defeated enemy.
- In the fragment here, Eannatum is shown leading his soldiers into battle at the top and attacking the enemy from a war chariot at the bottom.
- Foot soldiers are protected by a wall of shields.
- They trample their enemy, who appears naked.
- Eannatum appears as a fearless leader who paves the way for his army.

The inscriptions tell of Eannatum’s divine birth and state that he was divinely chosen to be ruler over all aspects of his city-state during war time and peace.

Fig. 2-7. Fragment of the victory stele of Eannatum (“Stele of the Vultures”), from Girsh (modern Telloh), Iraq, ca. 2600-2500 BCE. Limestone, full size stele 5’ 11” high.
Some Sumerian city-states gained considerable wealth from agriculture and trade.

Royal Cemetery at Ur, 3rd millennium BCE
- Leading families buried their dead in underground chambers
- Various luxury objects have been found in the cemetery
- Multiple bodies were buried in the richest tombs → musicians, servants, charioteers, and soldiers were sacrificed to accompany the wealthiest into the afterlife

The so-called “Standard of Ur” is actually a rectangular box of uncertain function.

Materials → shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone

The two longest sides of the box are distinguished as the “war side” and the “peace side.” They may represent the first and second parts of a single narrative.

Composition convention → three horizontal registers that are to be read from left to right and bottom to top

Top: Fig. 2-8. War side of the Standard of Ur
Bottom: Fig. 2-9. Peace side of the Standard of Ur
from tomb 779, Royal Cemetery, Ur (modern Tell Muqayyar), Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone, 8” X 1’ 7”.

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Composition convention → three horizontal registers that are to be read from left to right and bottom to top
“War side” (Fig. 2-8, top)
- Bottom register → ass-drawn chariots mow down enemies
- Middle register → foot soldiers gather and lead away the captured
- Top register → the bound captives are presented to a kinglike figure; the captives have been stripped naked to degrade them; **hierarchy of scale** was used to distinguish the kinglike figure from the others

“Peace side” (Fig. 2-9, bottom)
- Bottom register → men carry what are possibly spoils of war on their backs
- Middle register → attendants bring animals, fish, and maybe spoils of war for a banquet
- Top register → seated dignitaries and a kinglike figure (again depicted using hierarchy of scale) feast at a banquet; a lyre player and singer entertain at the banquet

The scenes probably depict a historical event/narrative, but it cannot be identified without an inscription.
Akkad Background

The city of Akkad was in the vicinity of Babylon.

The Akkadian language was entirely different from the language of the Sumerians, but they used Sumerian cuneiform characters for writing.

2332 BCE → Sumerian city-states fell to Sargon of Akkad (r. 2332-2279 BCE)
• Sargon means “true king.”
• Sargon and his followers practiced the idea of royal power based on total loyalty to the king rather than to the city-state.

Naram-Sin (r. 2254-2218 BCE)
• Grandson of Sargon
• Governors came to be considered more as servants of the king.
• Naram-Sin called himself “King of the Four Quarters,” meaning he was ruler of the earth; he likened himself to a god.
Akkad
Naram-Sin Stele

Subject
• Commemorates Naram-Sin’s defeat of the Lullubi (from the Iranian mountains to the east)
• An inscription indicates the the stele was created in honor of Naram-Sin
• Naram-Sin is depicted leading his army up a wooden mountain.
• Their enemies fall, flee, die, or beg for mercy, indicating victory of Naram-Sin and his army.
• The king stands alone (represented with hierarchy of scale).
• The army treads on the enemies.
• Naram-Sin’s horned helmet indicates his divinity; this is the earliest known depiction of a king as a god in Mesopotamian art.
• Stars shine on the king’s triumph in favor.
• The troops march in orderly lines, which indicates their discipline and organization. In contrast, the enemy appears in disarray and in a variety of poses.

Fig. 2-13. Victory stele of Naram-Sin, from Susa, Iran, 2254-2218 BCE. Pink Sandstone, 6’ 7” high.
Akkad
Naram-Sin Stele

Traditional conventions
• The figures are represented in composite views.
• The king’s helmet is also depicted in composite view: the horns are frontal, while the helmet sits in profile on his head.

Innovation in composition
• The artist created an orderly, tiered landscape in which the figures are represented.
• The artist rejected the traditional use of horizontal registers.

Fig. 2-13. Victory stele of Naram-Sin, from Susa, Iran, 2254-2218 BCE. Pink Sandstone, 6’ 7” high.
Third Dynasty of Ur – background
• ca. 2150 BCE → the Gutians conquered the Akkadians
• Sumerian city-states united and drove Gutians out of Mesopotamia.
• A Neo-Sumerian state was established, which was ruled by kings of Ur. This began the Third Dynasty of Ur.

The Ziggurat of Ur
• The Ziggurat of Ur was much grander than that supporting the White Temple of Uruk (Figs. 2-2 and 2-3).
• The base was a 50-feet-high, solid mass of mud-brick.
• It was faced with baked brick laid in bitumen (an asphalt-like substance).
• Three ramp-like stairways converge at a tower-flanked gateway. From there, another flight of stairs probably led to a temple.

Fig. 2-15. Ziggurat (northeastern façade with restored stairs), Ur (modern Tell Muqayyar), Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE.
Second Millennium BCE – background
• The Elamites defeated the last king of the Third Dynasty of Ur.
• During the next two centuries, the traditional Mesopotamian political pattern returned – independent city-states existed side-by-side

Hammurabi
• A Babylonian king
• Ruled from 1792-1750 BCE
• Reestablished a centralized government in southern Mesopotamia
• He was famous for his conquests and today is known for his code of law, which appears on a giant stele (Figs. 2-17 and 2-1).
• Hammurabi’s code of law
  • Formulated in the early 18th-century BCE
  • The earliest code of law about which we know today in great detail
  • Written in Akkadian  3,500 lines of cuneiform characters
  • Governed all aspects of Babylonian life

Fig. 2-17. Stele with law code of Hammurabi, from Susa, Iran, ca. 1780 BCE. Basalt, 7' 4” high.
Second Millennium BCE
Hammurabi

Subject
• Hammurabi (standing) in the presence of Shamash (seated), the flame-shouldered sun god
• Hammurabi raises his hand in respect
• Shamash hands the king a rod and ring, which are the symbols of authority → Hammurabi has the right and capacity to render judgments and enforce the laws written on the stele.

Compositional conventions
• Shamash is represented in the traditional composite view; however, his four-horned headdress is in true profile.
• The artists seems to have experimented with foreshortening → a means of suggesting depth by representing a figure or object at an angle, instead of frontally or in profile. Specifically, the sides of Shamash’s throne are depicted at an angle.

Fig. 2-1. Hammurabi and Shamash, detail of the stele of Hammurabi (Fig. 2-17), from Susa, Iran, ca. 1780 BCE.
Assyria – background
- The Assyrians came to power during the first half of the 1st millennium BCE.
- They took the name from the city of Assur, which was named for the god Ashur.
- The Assyrian empire encompassed a vast area at the height of its power.

Lamassu
- **Lamassu** → winged, man-headed bull
- Guarded the gate to Sargon II’s palace
- The composite creature was conceived as high reliefs on adjacent sides of a corner.
- From the front, it is represented standing still at guard. From the side, however, it appears to be in motion. This is possible by the representation of 5 legs total: 2 seen from the front and 4 seen from the side.
- Together the front and side views depict a complete picture of the lamassu.
- It is another case of early artists creating a conceptual picture of an animal or person and all of its important/definitive parts.

Fig. 2-21. Lamassu (winged, human-headed bull), from the citadel of Sargon II, Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad), Iraq, ca. 720-705 BCE. Limestone, 13’ 10” high.
Painted narrative reliefs from the walls of the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II

- Exalted royal power
- Depict large amounts of documentary detail
- Appeared on the lower parts of the mud-brick walls
- Celebrated the king
- Accompanied with inscriptions that described Ashurnasirpal II’s accomplishments
- Scenes of war and hunting represented the king’s power

Fig. 2-22. Assyrian archers pursuing enemies, relief from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Kalhu (modern Nimrud), Iraq, ca. 875-860 BCE.
Relief of Assyrian archers pursuing enemies

Subject
- Probably depicts an event from 878 BCE when Ashurnasirpal II drove his enemy into the Euphrates River
- 3 enemy soldiers in water: one has an arrow in his back; the other two attempt to float to safety by inflating animal skins
- These two figures are headed toward a fort where others wait for them

Composition
- The fort appears to be in the middle of the river.
- The defenders of the fort are too tall to fit in the archways.
- Different viewpoints are combined in one frame. (The river is seen from above; the men, trees, and fort are seen from the side.)
- The goal of the artist was to represent the story clearly and economically (few details)
Assyria
Palace of Ashurbanipal

Palace of Ashurbanipal
• Reliefs of hunting scenes
• Images of hunting represented manly virtue and power the same way images of war did.

Relief of Ashurbanipal hunting lions

Subject
• Lions have been released from cages into a large arena.
• The king battles the lions from his chariot with his attendants.
• Behind the chariot is a trail of dead and dying animals that have been stabbed with more arrows than are needed to kill them. Blood streams from some of the lions.
• The goal of the artist was to glorify the king. The king’s accomplishments were especially grand since he fought and conquered the courageous, noble, and powerful lion.

Fig. 2-23. Ashurbanipal hunting lions, relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, (modern Kuyunjik), Iraw, ca. 645-640 BCE. Gypsum, 5’ 4” high.
Neo-Babylonia
Ishtar Gate, Babylon

Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 604-562 BCE)
• Restored Babylon to a powerful city
• Constructed a city of mud-brick, the most important monuments of which were faced with blue-glazed bricks.

The Ishtar Gate
• One of two such gates
• Consists of a large arcuated (arch-shaped) opening flanked by towers
• The surface is decorated with glazed bricks and molded reliefs of animals (real and imaginary).
• Bricks were molded and glazed separately then set into place.

Fig. 2-24. Ishtar Gate (restored), Babylon, Iraq, ca. 575 BCE. Glazed brick.
The Persian Empire
• 6th century BCE → Cyrus of Persia (r. 559-529 BCE) captured Babylon
• 525 BCE → Egypt was captured
• By 480 BCE → the Persian Empire was the largest empire in the world
• 5th century BCE → the Greek stopped Persia from taking southeastern Europe
• 330 BCE → the Achaemenid dynasty ended with the death of Darius III, who was defeated by Alexander the Great
The complex of Persepolis is the most important source of knowledge Persian art and architecture.

It was built by Darius I (r. 522-486 BCE) and Xerxes (r. 486-465 BCE) between ca. 521-465 BCE.

It was a heavily fortified complex of royal buildings.

A monumental gateway led to the citadel called the Gate of All Lands, referencing the harmony among the peoples of the vast Persian Empire.

The apadana, or royal audience hall, was accessed via a broad stairway.

Fig. 2-25. Aerial view (looking west) of Persepolis (apadana in the background), Iran, ca. 521-465 BCE.
The staircases leading to the apadana were decorated with reliefs representing a procession of royal guards, Persian nobles and dignitaries, and representatives from 23 subject nations bringing tribute to the king.

The representatives are identified by their national costumes and the regional gifts they carry. Also, they all connect in some way.

Material and Technique
- The forms are subtly modeled and have crisp details.
- Traces of color reveal the reliefs were once painted.

Stylistic differences with Assyrian reliefs
- The forms are more rounded and project more from the background.
- The Persian artist used the traditional composite view to represent the figures.
- The treatment of the drapery folds show Greek influence.

Persian art influenced all of the Mediterranean and Near East. The empire was vast and encompassed many cultures and communities. Ideas were exchanged widely.

Fig. 2-26. Processional frieze (detail) on the terrace of the apadana, Persepolis, Iran, ca. 521-465 BCE. Limestone, 8’ 4” high.