Chapter 2
Ancient Mesopotamia and Persia
3500 BCE – 636 CE
Mesopotamia: a Greek word meaning 'between the rivers'. An ancient region of southwest Asia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in modern-day Iraq.
The delta could only be made habitable by large-scale irrigation and flood control, which was managed first by a priestly class and then by godlike kings. Consequently the plentiful supply of food permitted the growth of large urban population.

Advances in the design of the plough boosted the productivity of the Sumerian peasant. By 3000 BC, the original wooden ploughshare, had given way in Sumer to a much sturdier bronze blade.
Ancient Sumer was not a unified nation but made up of independent city-states. Rulers and priests directed the communal activities including canal construction, crop collection, and food distribution. Development of agriculture made it possible for some members to specialize in other activities such as manufacturing, trade and administration.
Sumerian Clay Tokens
4th millennium BCE
Comparison of tokens and Sumerian characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Sumerian Pictographs</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
<th>Sumerian Pictographs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread</td>
<td>![Diagram of bread]</td>
<td>Seat</td>
<td>![Diagram of seat]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wool</td>
<td>![Diagram of wool]</td>
<td>Place</td>
<td>![Diagram of place]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep</td>
<td>![Diagram of sheep]</td>
<td>Legal Decision</td>
<td>![Diagram of legal decision]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>![Diagram of metal]</td>
<td>Cloth</td>
<td>![Diagram of cloth]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sumerian pictographic tablet.
c. 3100 BCE
Cuneiform (Latin - “Wedge Shaped”) Writing
Used by the Sumerians, Akkadians Assyrians Babylonians and Persians.
Tablet & Envelope with Cuneiform
**Cella:** (Also called “Holy of Holies”) the inner room of the temple, in which the statue of the god was situated.

*Plan of the White Temple*, Uruk, Iraq, ca. 3200–3000 BCE. 40’ high.

*White Temple and Ziggurat*, Uruk, Iraq, ca. 3200–3000 BCE. 40’ high.
Inanna: The chief Sumerian goddess, associated with fertility, the natural world, and war. Later equated with the Babylonian Ishtar.
Female head (Inanna?), from Uruk, Iraq, ca. 3200–3000 BCE. Marble, approx. 8” high.
Iraq Museum, Baghdad
Warka Vase
Presentation of offerings to Inanna from Uruk, Iraq, ca. 3200–3000 BCE. Alabaster, 3’ 1/4” high. Iraq Museum, Baghdad

Register: One of a series of superimposed bands in a pictorial narrative, or the particular levels on which motifs are placed.
**Warka Vase.** Detail. Innana and the “Priest-King”
Warka Vase Detail.
**Warka Vase** Detail.

**Comparison:** Hunter. Çatal Höyük, Turkey. c.5750 BCE
Detail
Warka Vase
Warka Vase

Detail. Presentation of offerings to Inanna
Warka Vase

Stolen in April 2003, returned to Iraq Museum: June 2003.
“The Epic of Gilgamesh” is among the earliest known literary writings in the world. It originated as a series of Sumerian legends and poems in cuneiform script dating back to the early 3rd or late 2nd millennium BCE, which were later gathered into a longer Akkadian poem.

It follows the story of Gilgamesh, the mythological hero-king of Uruk, and his half-wild friend, Enkidu, as they undertake a series of dangerous quests and adventures, and then Gilgamesh’s search for the secret of immortality after the death of his friend.
Statuettes of two worshipers
Votive figureds from temple at Eshnunna, Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE.

Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone, tallest figure approx. 2’ 6” high.
Votive figures from the temple at Eshnunna, Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE.
Votive figures from the temple at Eshnunna, Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE.
Sir Leonard Woolley, 1880-1960, British archaeologist who directed the joint British Museum and Univ. of Pennsylvania expedition at Ur in Mesopotamia (1922-34). Woolley oversaw the excavation of the cemetery at Ur, which included 16 royal tombs with treasures of gold and lapis lazuli and evidence of large-scale human sacrifice.
Standard of Ur, Peace side
Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE
Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli (semiprecious blue stone from Afghanistan), red limestone, approx. 8” x 1’ 7”. British Museum. London
Hierarchical Scale:
The representation of more important figures as larger than less important figures.

**Standard of Ur, War side**, Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE
Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone, approx. 8” x 1’ 7”.
Standard of Ur, Peace side, Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE
Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone, approx. 8” x 1’ 7”.
Standard of Ur
Detail: lyre player
The **Lyres of Ur** or **Harps of Ur** are considered to be the world's oldest surviving stringed instruments.

Bull-headed lyre (restored), Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Gold leaf and lapis lazuli over a wooden core, approx. 5’ 5” high. University of Pennsylvania.

Sir Leonard Woolley with the triangular frame of an excavated Sumerian harp, 1920s. (Plaster cast.)

[https://youtu.be/Jge9uIUBdYc](https://youtu.be/Jge9uIUBdYc)

8:52
Bull-headed lyre (restored), Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Gold leaf and lapis lazuli over a wooden core, approx. 5’ 5” high. University of Pennsylvania.
Heraldic composition: a composition that is symmetrical on either side of a central figure.

Soundbox of a lyre from the Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Wood with inlaid gold, lapis lazuli, and shell, approx. 1’ 7” high.
Ram Caught in a Thicket, From Ur, southern Iraq, about 2600-2400 BCE. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, copper, shell, red limestone, and bitumen. H. 42.6 cm. Penn Museum
Ram (or Goat) in a Thicket

From Ur, southern Iraq, about 2600-2400 BCE. British Museum
Sacred tree on Sumerian seals
L. - c. 3000 BCE
B. - c. 2500 BCE
**Cylinder Seal:** A small stone cylinder incised with reversed designs so that when it was rolled over a soft surface the design appeared in relief. These seals were used to mark property and to legalize documents.

**Banquet scene,** cylinder seal (left) and its modern impression (right), from the tomb of Puabi, Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE. Lapis lazuli, approx. 2” high.
Cylinder seal with Banquet Scene, from tomb of Puabi, Royal Cemetery, Ur 2600BCE. Lapis Lazuli, 2” high. British Museum, London
Akkadian Art
2332-2150 BCE
A map of the Akkadian Empire, its dependent territories, and conquests.
Victory Stele of Naram-Sin,
From Susa, Iran (probably came originally from Sippar, an Akkadian city and brought by the Elamites to Susa), 2254–2218 BCE
Pink sandstone, approx. 6’ 7” high.
Louvre, Paris.
Comparison: Ishtar (Queen of heaven/morning and evening star) and Shamash (sun god). Akkadian cylinder seal

Victory Stele of Naram-Sin. Detail
Victory Stele of Naram-Sin. Detail
Victory Stele of Naram-Sin. Detail
Victory Stele of Naram-Sin,
From Susa, Iran, 2254–2218 BCE
Pink sandstone, approx. 6’ 7” high.
Louvre, Paris.

Discussion Question 5: Compare the Sumerian style with the Akkadian style. Notice the themes; organization of the space; proportions of figures; order vs. chaos; level of realism etc.

Standard of Ur, War side, Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE
Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone, approx. 8” x 1’ 7”.
Head of an Akkadian ruler, from Nineveh, Iraq, ca. 2250–2200 BCE. Copper, 1’ 2 3/8” high.
Neo Sumerian and Babylonian Art
2150-1600 BCE
Neo Sumerian Art
Seated statue of Gudea holding temple plan, Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE. Diorite, approx. 2’ 5” high. Louvre, Paris.
Gudea of Lagash

c. 2100 BCE, Diorite
Comparison: Statuettes of two worshipers

Votive figurateds, Iraq, ca. 2700 BCE.
Gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone, tallest figure approx. 2’ 6” high.

Gudea of Lagash. c. 2120 BCE,
Diorite. 73.7 cm. (29 inches) tall.
Louvre, Paris.
**Ziggurat:** a monumental platform for a temple. The ziggurat was a pyramidal structure, built in receding tiers upon a rectangular or square platform, with a shrine at the summit.

**Nanna** (the moon god) **Ziggurat**, Ur (present day Muqaiyir) Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE. Mud bricks. 50’ high. (Restored by the Neo-Babylonians, 6th BCE)
Model of the Ziggurat at Ur.

Aerial view of the ziggurat
Ziggurat, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2100 BCE. Mud bricks. 50’ high.
(Restored by the Neo-Babylonians, 6th BCE)
Babylonian Art
Stele of Hammurabi, from Susa, Iran, ca. 1780 BCE. Basalt, approx. 7’ 4” high. Louvre, Paris.

https://youtu.be/f-cDzzIn6Mc
17:38 (skip the “ordeal” to 21:00)
Comparison:
Shamash rises from Mount Mashu to bring the dawn. Babylonian cylinder seal.

Stele of Hammurabi from Susa, Iran, ca. 1780 BCE. Basalt, approx. 7’ 4” high.
Compare the *Victory Stele of Naram Sin* with the stele depicting the Code of Hammurabi. Consider the type of stone used, the compositional format, relative size of figures, and treatment of divine figures or sacred ground. How do these images reinforce the authority of the leaders who are depicted?
Assyrian and Neo Babylonian Art
900-539 BCE
Assyrian Art
• The city's fortification walls form an almost perfect square, covering a surface of about 3 sq km.

• The citadel with palaces and temples towers above the lower town on an artificially erected platform.

• The length of the walls was 16280 Assyrian units, which corresponded to the numerical value of Sargon's name.

Plan of Dur-Sharruken by the French excavator Victor Place

• “Sargon, King of the World, has built a city, Dur Sharuki (citadel of Sargon) he had named it…”
Reconstruction drawing of the citadel of Sargon II
Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE. 25 acres; more than 200 courtyards and rooms; the length of the walls was 16280 Assyrian units, which corresponded to the numerical value of Sargon's name.

“Sargon, King of the World, has built a city, Dur Sharukin (citadel of Sargon) he had named it…”
Fortified walls enclose this complex, access to which came by a twisting path through a sequence of courtyards and smaller chambers.

The seven stage ziggurat representing the cosmic order of the seven planets

Reconstruction drawing of the citadel of Sargon II
Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE.
Lamassu (winged, human-headed bull), from the citadel of Sargon II, Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE. Limestone, approx. 13’ 10” high. Louvre, Paris.
Side view. Lamassu from the citadel of Sargon II, Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE.
Detail. Lamassu from the citadel of Sargon II, Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE.
Detail. Lamassu from the citadel of Sargon II, Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE.
Comparison: Gilgamesh kills the heavenly bull
3rd millennium BCE
Sumerian ceramic relief

Hero
(Izdubar/Gilgamesh?)
Overpowering a Lion
Citadel of Sargon II.
721-705 BC
Alabaster with traces of paint.
H. 5.52 m
Paris, Louvre
Ashurbanipal hunting lions, relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq, ca. 645–640 BCE. Gypsum, 5’ 4” high.
Ashurbanipal hunting lions, Detail. relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq, ca. 645–640 BCE. Gypsum, 5’ 4” high.
Detail. Ashurbanipal hunting lions, relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq
Ashurbanipal hunting lions. Detail. relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq
Ashurbanipal hunting lions. Detail. Relief from the Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq
Comparison: Standard of Ur, War side
Royal Cemetery, Ur, Iraq, ca. 2600 BCE
Wood inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone, approx. 8” x 1’ 7”.

Ashurbanipal hunting lions, relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Iraq, ca. 645–640 BCE. Gypsum, 5’ 4” high.
Traces of black, white, red, and blue paint were visible when the reliefs were first uncovered.

Hair, beards, sandals – painted black

Eyes - white with black pupils;

Daggers, bows, tongues of bird-headed divinities – red.

The mud-brick walls above the reliefs were plastered and painted with floral, geometric, and figural designs in the same four colors.
Eagle Headed Spirits by Sacred Tree

c. 884-859 BCE. Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. Nimrud. Iraq
Two carved figures of Ashurnasirpal II, facing a stylized sacred tree, from Northwest palace at Nimrud.
Comparison:
Sacred tree on Sumerian seals
L.- c. 3000 BCE
B.-c. 2500 BCE
https://youtu.be/wGiY7ZDKZSE

Isis video shows complete destruction of ancient city of Nimrud in Iraq
Neo-Babylonian Art
Crenellation: a parapet (short wall) with open spaces that surmounts a wall and is used for defense or decoration.

https://youtu.be/U2iZ83oIZH0

Ishtar Gate, Processional Way, Hanging Gardens and Murduk Ziggurat. Reconstruction drawing of Babylon.
Ishtar Gate & Processional Way
(also called – “May the Enemy not Have Victory.”)
Model of Ishtar Gate. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
Ishtar Gate (restored), Babylon, Iraq, ca. 575 BCE. Glazed brick. 47’ high 32’ wide Staatliche Museen, Berlin.
Marduk: The chief god of the Babylonians. The creator of mankind and the god of light and life.

Dragon (Associated with the chief god Marduk) from Ishtar Gate
Babylon, Iraq, ca. 575 BCE. Glazed brick.
Bull (Associated with the storm god Adad) from Ishtar Gate, Babylon, Iraq, ca. 575 BCE. Glazed brick.
Throne Room Wall (restored).
Babylon
Lion from the Processional Way (Associated with the goddess Ishtar). c. 575 BCE. Molded and glazed brick. Babylon. Iraq.
Ishtar. 300 BCE - 100 BCE. Alabaster

Comparison: Woman holding a bison horn from Laussel, Dordogne, France, ca. 25,000–20,000 BCE. Painted limestone 1’ 6” high
Persian: Achaemenid Art
559-330 BCE
The Persians are an Iranian people who speak the Persian language and share a common culture and history.

Cyrus the Great (ca. 576 or 590 BCE — 529 BCE): The founder of the Persian Empire under the Achaemenid dynasty. As leader of the Persian people, he conquered the Medes and unified the two separate Iranian kingdoms.

Darius the Great (ca. 549 BCE – 486/485 BCE): Divided the Persian Empire into twenty provinces, each under the supervision of a governor or satrap. The satrap position was autonomous, allowing each province its own distinct laws, traditions, and elite class. Every province, however, was responsible for paying a gold or silver tribute to the emperor. Many building projects were initiated during the reign of Darius, with the largest being the building of the new capital of Persepolis.
The Persian Empire

“I am Darius, great King, King of Kings, King of countries, King of this earth.”
Persepolis (royal audience hall in the background), Iran, ca. 521–465 BCE.

https://youtu.be/QgcT1FqMRao (17:10)
• This great complex was created by at least three Persian monarchs as one of the capitals of the Persian empire.

• Its ruins reveal architectural influences from other cultures in Mesopotamia, notably the Hittites and Assyrians, as well as the Egyptians.

• Plan of the palace at Persepolis, begun ca. 518 B.C.E.
• The Apadana had 36 columns, about 64 feet high. They carried the weight of the vast and heavy ceiling.

• The columns were joined to each other with the help of oak and cedar beams, which were brought from Lebanon.

**Capital:** Decorative element at the upper part of a column or pier.

*Double griffin* (lion and eagle together)
Processional frieze. Detail. On the terrace of the royal audience hall (apadana), Persepolis, Iran, ca. 521–465 BCE.
**Processional frieze.** Detail. On the terrace of the royal audience hall (apadana), Persepolis, Iran, ca. 521–465 BCE.

**Comparison: Kore**, from the Acropolis, Athens, Greece, ca. 520–510 BCE. Marble, approx. 1’ 9 1/2” high. Acropolis Museum, Athens.
Darius celebrating victory over enemies. 521-465 BCE. Persepolis. Iran.
Ahura Mazda ("Wise Lord"): The chief deity of Zoroastrianism, the creator of the world, the source of light, and the embodiment of good. Ahura Mazda is not omnipotent, but will ultimately prevail. Until then, the role of mankind is to maintain the order - by resisting chaos - through good thoughts, words and actions.

Ahriman (Angra Mainyu): Ahura Mazda's adversary, the chief spirit of darkness and evil in Zoroastrianism.
Comparison: Two carved figures of Ashurnasirpal II, facing a stylized sacred tree, from Northwest palace at Nimrud.

Comparison: Victory Stele of Naram-Sin,
From Susa, Iran (probably came originally from Sippar, an Akkadian city and brought by the Elamites to Susa), 2254–2218 BCE
Pink sandstone, approx. 6’ 7” high.
Louvre, Paris.

Darius celebrating victory over enemies. 521-465 BCE. Persepolis. Iran.
Scene from Persian mythology in Apadana Hall: Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) kills the primeval bull, whose seed is rescued by Mah, the moon, as the source for all other animals.
Lamassi
from Persepolis
Comparison: Lamassu from the citadel of Sargon II, Khorsabad, Iraq, ca. 720–705 BCE. Alabaster. Louvre, Paris
Winged sphinx from the palace of Darius at Susa.

Marduk’s Dragon. Ishtar Gate, Babylon, Iraq, ca. 575 BCE. Glazed brick.
Persian: Sassanian Art
224-636 CE
Head of a Sasanian king
(Shapur II?), ca. 350 CE. Silver with mercury gilding, 1’ 3 3/4” high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Shapur I Triumphing Over the Emperors Philippus the Arab and Valerian
rock-cut relief, Bishapur, Iran, ca. 260 CE.
Discussion Question 6:
Rulers used art for propaganda since the early days of civilization. Examine the depictions of rulers in the art of the Ancient Near East. Notice the messages that are being conveyed and the relationships between rulers and gods. Discuss Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian art and give specific examples.

Sumerian: Standard of Ur, War side, ca. 2600 BCE

Akkadian: Victory Stele of Naram-Sin, 2254–2218 BCE

Babylonian: Stele of Hammurabi, ca. 1780 BCE. Basalt, approx. 7’ 4” high.

Persian: Darius celebrating victory over enemies. 521-465 BCE. Persepolis, Iran.

Assyrian: Ashurbanipal hunting lions, relief, ca. 645–640 BCE. Gypsum, 5’ 4” high.

Assyrian: Two figures of Ashurnasirpal II with sacred tree