

Chapter 2

Art of the Ancient Near East

Learning Objectives

- 2.a Identify the visual hallmarks of early Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian art for formal, technical, and expressive qualities.
- 2.b Interpret the meaning of works of early Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian art based on their themes, subjects, and symbols.
- 2.c Relate early Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian artists and art to their cultural, economic, and political contexts.
- 2.d Apply the vocabulary and concepts used to discuss ancient Near Eastern art, artists, and art history.
- 2.e Interpret ancient Near Eastern art using appropriate art historical methods, such as observation, comparison, and inductive reasoning.
- 2.f Select visual and textual evidence in various media to support an argument or an interpretation of ancient Near Eastern art.

In public works such as this stone **stele** (upright stone slab), the artists of Mesopotamia developed a sophisticated symbolic visual language—a kind of conceptual art—that both communicated and celebrated the political stratification that gave order to their world. Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin (ruled 2254–2218 BCE) is pictured proudly here (Fig. 2-1). His preeminence is signaled by his size: he is by far the largest person in the scene, conforming to an artistic practice we call **hierarchical scale**, where relative size indicates relative importance. Naram-Sin is also elevated well above the other figures and boldly silhouetted against blank ground. Even the shape of the stone slab is an active part of the composition. Its tapering top perfectly accommodates the carved mountain within it, and Naram-Sin is posed to reflect the profile of both, increasing his grandeur. He clasps a full arsenal of weaponry—spear, battleaxe, bow, and arrow—and his helmet sprouts horns, an attribute previously reserved for gods. By wearing such a helmet, he is claiming divinity for himself. Art historian Irene Winter has gone even further, pointing to his eroticized pose and well-formed body. In ancient Mesopotamian culture, male potency and vigor were

directly related to mythical heroism and kingship. Thus every aspect of the representation of this ruler supports his authority as leader of the state.

This stele is more than an emblem of Naram-Sin's divine right to rule, however. It also tells the story of one of his important military victories. The ruler stands above a crowded scene of smaller figures. Those to the left, dressed and posed like Naram-Sin, represent his army, marching in diagonal bands up the hillside into battle. The artist has included identifiable native trees to heighten the sense that this portrays an actual event rather than a generic battle scene. In front of and under Naram-Sin are the enemy; in this case the Lullubi people from eastern Mesopotamia (present-day Iran). One has taken a fatal spear to the neck, while others beg for mercy.

Taller than most viewers who might stand in front of it and carved of eye-catching pink stone, this sumptuous work of art communicates with us forcefully and directly even after more than four millennia. Powerful symbolism and dynamic storytelling are not unique to this stele; they are key characteristics of royal art in the ancient Near East.

Early Mesopotamia

How do early Mesopotamian art and architecture develop through the Sumerian and Akkadian empires?

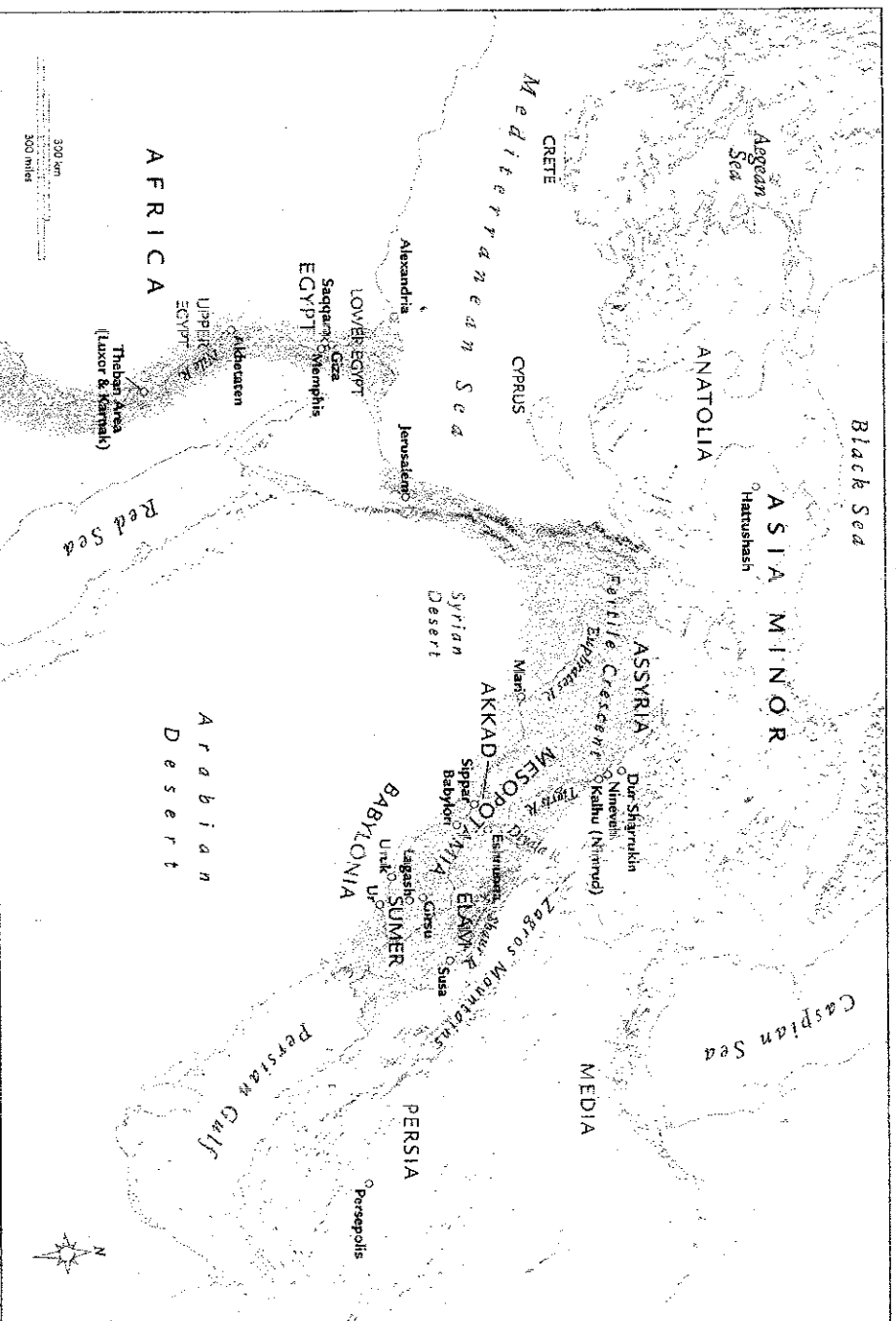
In the sixth or fifth millennium BCE, well before farming communities appeared in Europe, people in Asia Minor and the ancient Near East were already domesticating grains in an area known today as the Fertile Crescent (MAP 2-1). These alluvial plains between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which the Greeks called *Mesopotamia*, meaning the “land between the rivers,” are now in present-day Iraq. Because of problems with periodic flooding as well as drought, there was a need for large-scale systems to control and supply water. Meeting this need may have contributed to the development of the first cities.

Between 4000 and 3000 BCE, a major cultural shift seems to have taken place. Agricultural villages in both northern and southern Mesopotamia evolved into cities simultaneously and independently. These prosperous cities joined with their surrounding territories to create what are

known as city-states, each with its own gods and government. As people developed specialized skills beyond those needed for agricultural work, social hierarchies emerged that divided rulers and workers. To grain mills and ovens were added kilns for brick and pottery, and workshops for textiles and metals. With extra goods and increasing wealth came more trade and contact with other cultures.

Organized religion played an important role, and the people who controlled rituals and sacred sites eventually became full-time priests. Numerous gods and goddesses were worshiped. (The names of comparable deities varied over time and place—for example, Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of fertility, love, and war, was equivalent to the Babylonians’ Ishtar.) Every city had its special protective deity, and the fate of the city was seen as dependent on the power of that deity. Large complexes of religious, administrative, and service buildings developed in each city as centers of worship and government.

Although the stone-free alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia was prone to floods and droughts, it was a fertile bed for agriculture, which supported successive,



MAP 2-1 THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

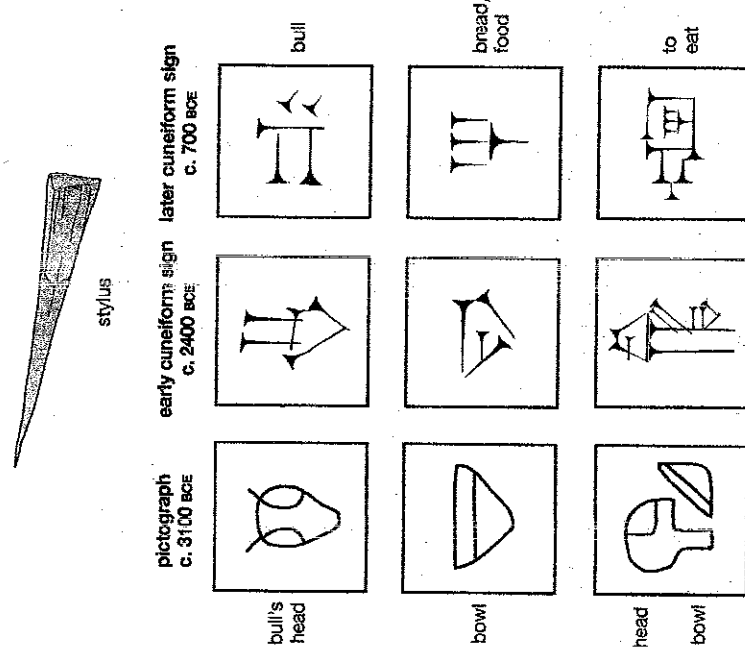
The green areas represent fertile land that could support early agriculture, notably the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the strips of land on either side of the Nile in Egypt.

interlinked societies. But Mesopotamia's wealth and agricultural resources, as well as its few natural defenses, made it vulnerable to political upheaval. Over the centuries, the balance of power shifted between north and south and between local powers and outside invaders. First the Sumerians controlled the south, filling their independent city-states with new technology, developed literacy, and impressive art and architecture. But their neighbors to the north, the Akkadians, eventually eclipsed them. When invaders from farther north in turn conquered the Akkadians, the Sumerians regained power locally. During this period the city-states of Ur and Lagash thrived. The Amorites were next to dominate the south. Under them and their king, Hammurabi, a new, unified society arose with its capital in the city of Babylon.

Sumer

The cities and city-states that developed along the rivers of southern Mesopotamia between about 3500 and 2340 BCE are known collectively as Sumer. The Sumerians are credited with important technological and cultural advances. They may have invented the wagon wheel and the plow. But perhaps their greatest contribution was the invention in 3400–3200 BCE of the first form of written script.

WRITING The Sumerians appear to have invented writing as a business accounting system for traded goods. The symbols were pictographs, simple pictures cut into moist clay slabs with a pointed tool called a stylus. Eventually the symbols evolved from pictures into a writing system known as cuneiform (“wedge-shaped”),



composed of phonograms—representations of syllable sounds—and thus became a writing system comparable to ours.

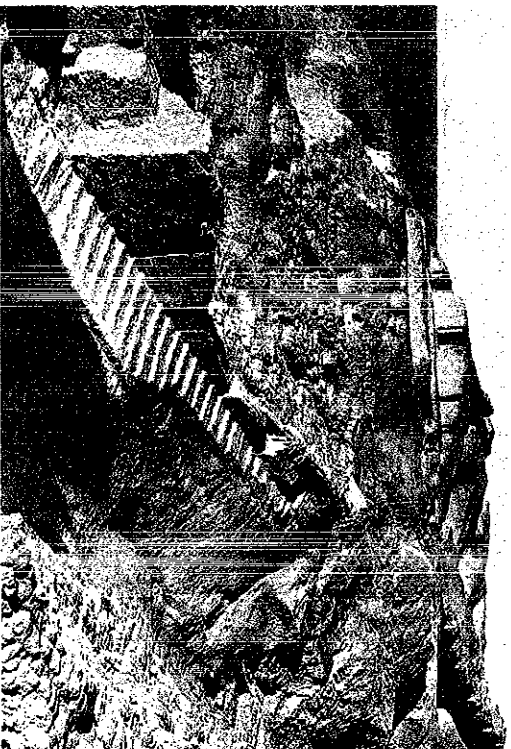
Thousands of surviving Sumerian tablets have allowed scholars to trace the gradual evolution of writing and arithmetic, another tool of commerce, as well as the Sumerians' organized system of justice. The world's first literary epic is Sumerian in origin, although the fullest surviving version of this tale is written in Akkadian, the language of Sumer's neighbors to the north. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* records the adventures of Gilgamesh, a legendary Sumerian king of Uruk, and his companion Enkidu. When Enkidu dies, the despondent Gilgamesh sets out to find the secret of eternal life from the only man and woman allowed by the gods to survive a great flood. Gilgamesh ultimately accepts his own mortality, abandons his quest, and returns to Uruk, recognizing the majestic city as his lasting accomplishment.

THE ZIGGURAT The Sumerians' most impressive surviving archaeological remains are ziggurats, huge, usually stepped structures with a temple or shrine on top. The first ziggurats may have developed from the practice of repeated rebuilding at a sacred site, with rubble from one structure serving as the foundation for the next. Elevating the buildings also protected the shrines from flooding.

Whatever the origin of their design, ziggurats towering above the flat plain proclaimed the wealth, prestige, and stability of a city's rulers and glorified its gods. Ziggurats also functioned symbolically as bridges between the earth and the heavens—a meeting place for humans and their gods. They were given names such as “House of the Mountain” and “Bond between Heaven and Earth.”

TEMPLES Two large temple complexes in the 1,000-acre city at Uruk (present-day Warka, Iraq) mark the first independent Sumerian city-state. One was dedicated to Inanna, the goddess of love and war, while the other belonged to the sky god Anu. The temple platform of Anu, built up in stages over the centuries, ultimately became a ziggurat about 40 feet high. Around 3400 BCE, the priests of Uruk erected on top of the platform a whitewashed mud-brick temple that modern archaeologists refer to as the White Temple (FIG. 2-2). This now-ruined structure was a simple rectangle with an off-center doorway that led into a large chamber containing an altar; smaller spaces opened to each side.

Statuses of gods and donors were placed in Sumerian temples. A striking life-size marble face from Uruk (FIG. 2-3) may represent a temple goddess. It could have been attached to a wooden head on a full-size wooden body. Now stripped of its original paint, wig, and the inlay set in for brows and eyes, it appears as a



2-2A RUINS OF THE ANU ZIGGURAT AND WHITE TEMPLE

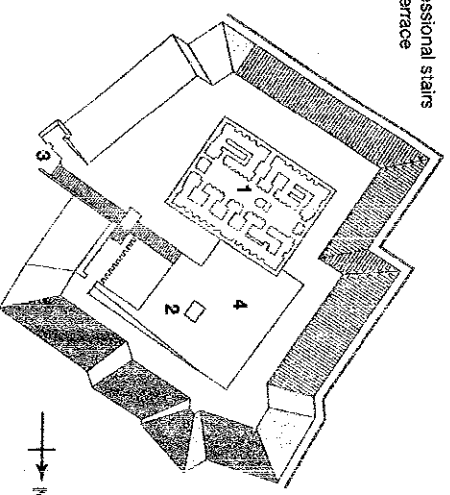
Uruk (present-day Warka, Iraq), c. 3400–3200 BCE.

Many ancient Near Eastern cities still lie undiscovered. In most cases an archaeological site in the region is signaled by a large mound—known locally as a *tell*, *tepe*, or *huyuk*—that represents the accumulated debris of generations of human habitation. When properly excavated, such mounds yield evidence about the people who inhabited the site.

Credit: World Tourism Organization, Iraq

Anu District of Uruk

1. White Temple
2. altar
3. processional stairs
4. NW terrace



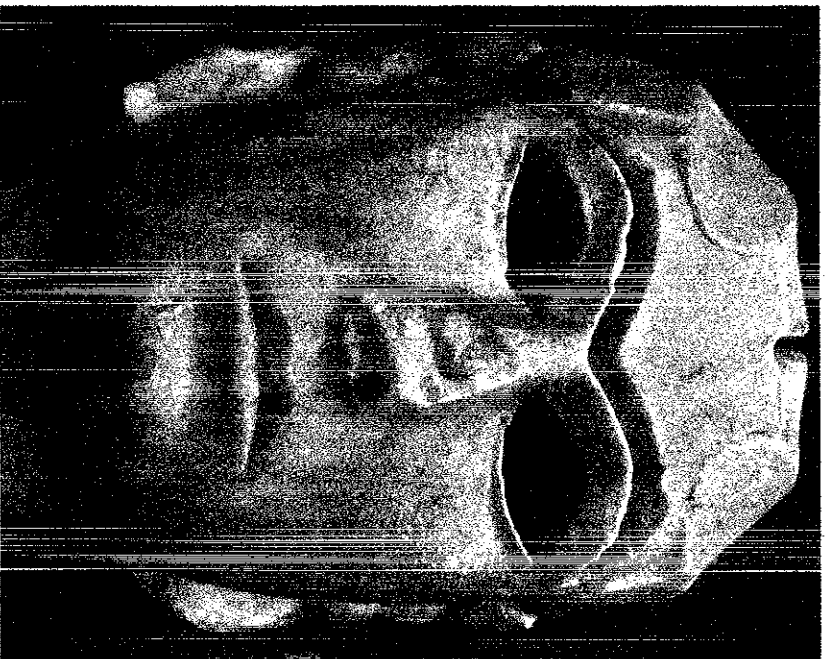
2-2B PLAN OF THE ANU ZIGGURAT AND WHITE TEMPLE

Uruk (present-day Warka, Iraq), c. 3400–3200 BCE.

stark white mask. Shells may have formed the whites of the eyes, and lapis lazuli the pupils. The hair may have been gold.

A tall vessel of carved alabaster (a fine-grained, white stone) found in the temple complex of Inanna at Uruk (FIG. 2-4) shows how early Mesopotamian sculptors told stories in stone with great clarity and energy. They organized this visual narrative in three registers, or horizontal bands, and condensed the story to its essential elements.

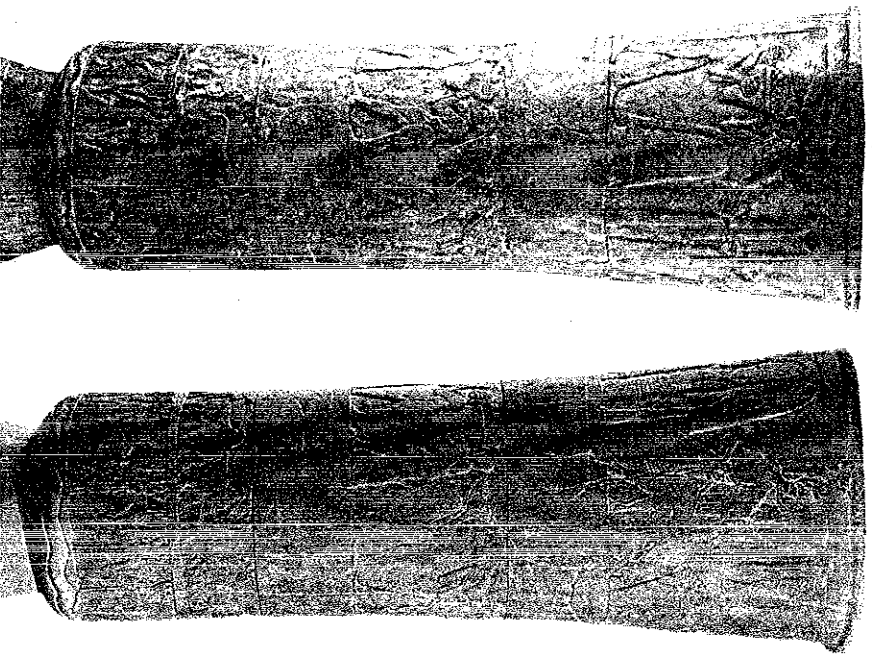
The lowest register shows the sources of life in the natural world, beginning with water and plants (variously identified as date palm and barley, wheat and flax) and continuing in a superimposed upper strip, where alternating rams and ewes march single file along a solid groundline. In the middle register naked men carry baskets of foodstuffs, and in the top register, the goddess Inanna accepts an offering from two standing figures. Inanna stands in front of the gate to her richly filled shrine and storehouse, identified by two reed door poles hung with banners. The two men who face her are probably a naked priest or acolyte presenting an offering-filled basket, followed by a partially preserved, ceremonially dressed figure of the priest-king (not visible in FIG. 2-4). The scene may be a re-enactment of the ritual marriage between the goddess and Dumuzi, her consort—a role taken by the priest-king—that took place during the New Year's festival to ensure the fertility of crops, animals, and people, and thus the continued survival of Uruk.



2-3 HEAD OF A WOMAN

From Uruk (present-day Warka, Iraq), c. 3300–3000 BCE. Marble, height approx. 8" (20.3 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

Credit: © 2016, Photo Scala, Florence/bpk, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin



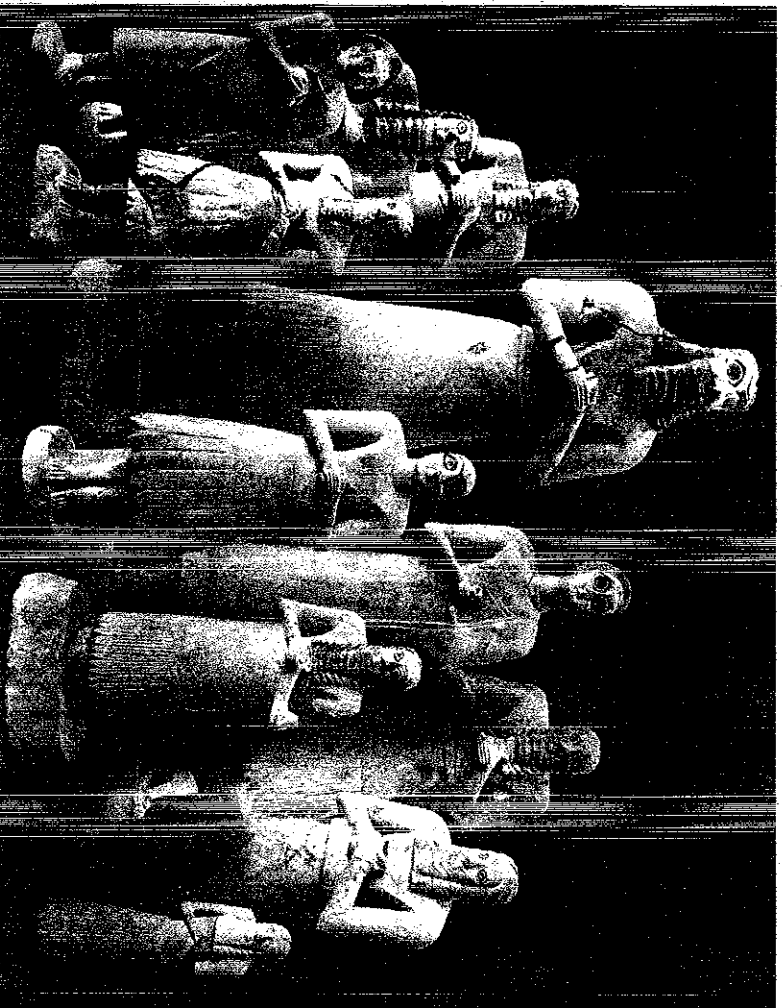
2-4 CARVED VESSEL

From Uruk (present-day Warka, Iraq), c. 3300–3000 BCE
Alabaster, height 36" (91 cm), Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

Credits: (left) © 2016, Photo Scala, Florence/dpk, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin; (right) © 2016, Photo Scala, Florence

VOTIVE FIGURES Limestone statues dated to about 2900–2600 BCE from the Square Temple in Eshnunna (fig. 2-5), excavated in 1932–1933, reveal another aspect of Sumerian religious art. These votive figures—images dedicated to the gods—of men and women are directly related to an ancient Near Eastern devotional practice in which individual worshippers could set up images of themselves in a shrine before a larger, more elaborate image of a god. A simple inscription might identify a votive figure as “one who offers prayers.” Longer inscriptions might recount in detail all the things a donor had accomplished in a god’s honor. Each sculpture served as a stand-in for the donor, locked in eye contact with the god, perpetually in the act of worship.

The sculptors of these votive statues followed conventions (traditional ways of representing forms) that were important in Sumerian art. Figures have stylized faces and bodies and are dressed in clothing that emphasizes pure cylindrical shapes. They stand solemnly, hands clasped, perhaps a posture expected in devotional contexts. The huge, wide-open eyes may relate to contemporary Sumerian texts that advise worshippers to approach their gods with an attentive gaze. As in the face of the woman from Uruk, arched brows were inlaid with dark shell, stone, or bitumen that emphasized the eyes. The male figures, bare-chested and dressed in what appear to be sheepskin skirts, are stocky and muscular, with heavy legs, large feet, big shoulders, and cylindrical bodies. The female figures are as massive as the men. Their long sheepskin skirts reveal sturdy legs and feet.



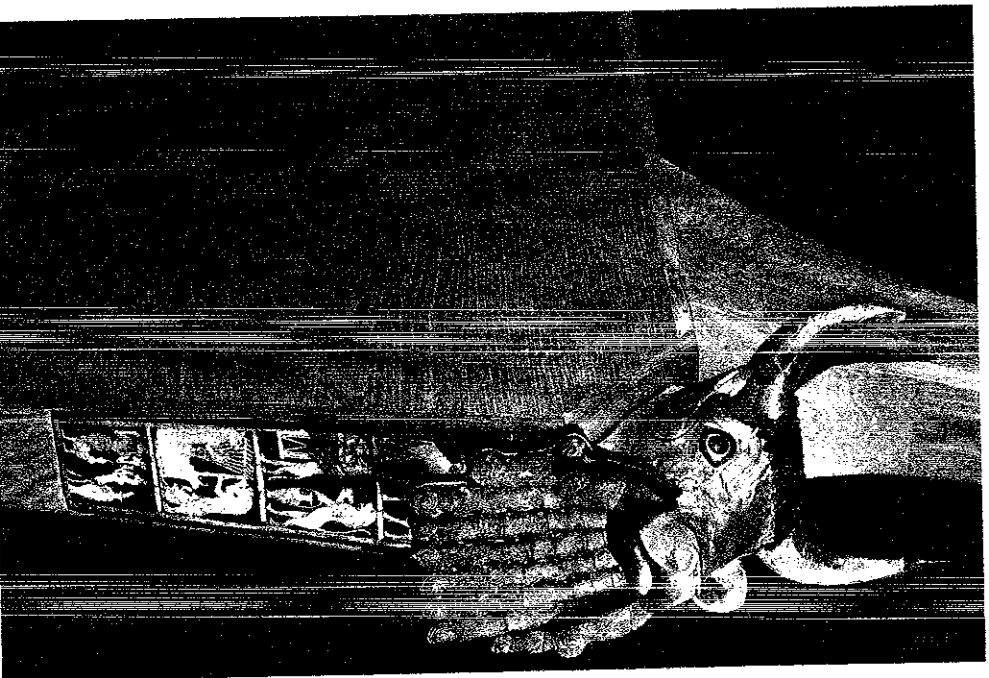
2-5 TWELVE VOTIVE FIGURES

From the Square Temple,
Eshnunna (present-day Tell
Asmar, Iraq), c. 2900–2600 BCE.
Limestone, alabaster, and
gypsum, height of largest
figure approx. 30" (76.3 cm).
The Oriental Institute Museum,
University of Chicago.

Credit: Courtesy of the Oriental
Institute of the University of Chicago

ROYAL TOMBS The British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur (present-day Muqaiyir, Iraq), south of Uruk during the 1920s initially garnered international attention because of the association of this ancient Mesopotamian city with the biblical patriarch Abraham. It was not long, however, before Woolley's exciting discoveries themselves moved to center stage. Sixteen royal burials yielded spectacular gold objects and lurid evidence of the human sacrifices associated with Sumerian royal burial practices, when retainers were seemingly buried with the rulers they served.

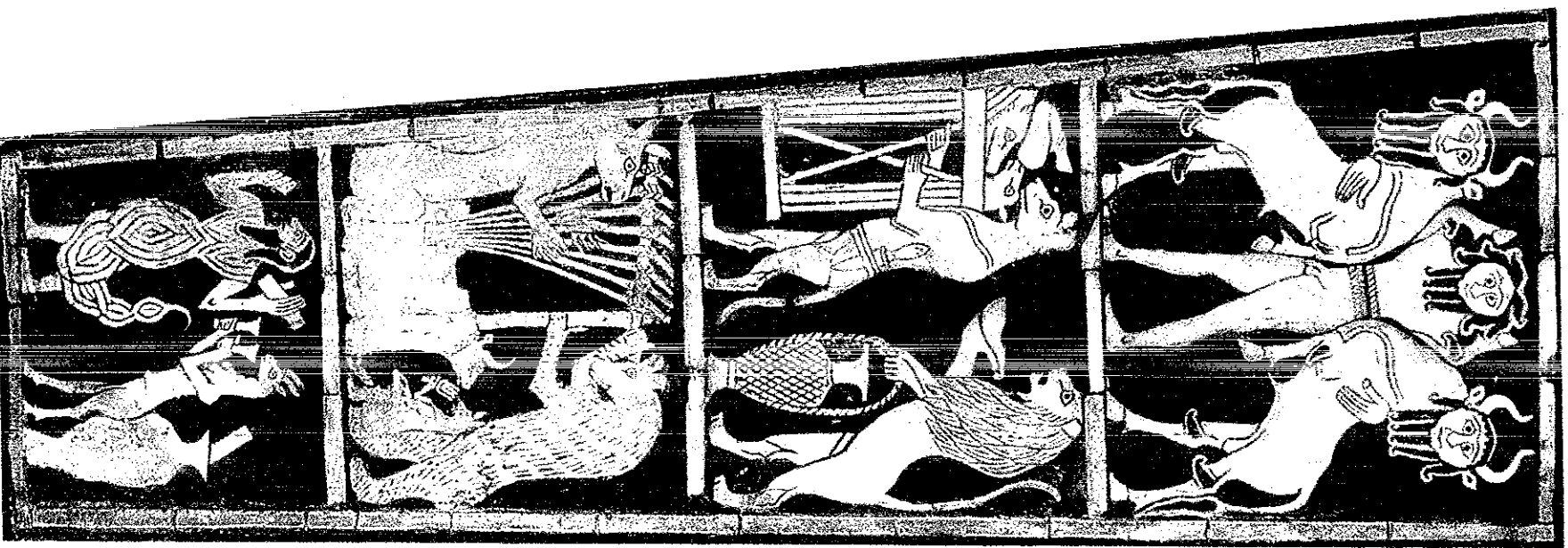
Woolley's work at Ur was a joint venture of the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia and the British Museum in London. To conform with Iraq's Antiquities Law of 1922, the uncovered artifacts were divided between



2-6A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GREAT LYRE WITH BULL'S HEAD

From Royal Tomb (PG 789), Ur (present-day Muqaiyir, Iraq), c. 2600–2500 BCE. Wood with gold, silver, lapis lazuli, bitumen, and shell, reassembled in modern wood support; height of head 14" (35.6 cm); height of front panel 13" (33 cm); maximum length of lyre 55½" (140 cm); height of upright back arm 46½" (117 cm). University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.

Credit: Courtesy of the Penn Museum, image #1160104



2-6B FRONT PANEL ON SOUND BOX OF THE GREAT LYRE WITH BULL'S HEAD

Credit: Courtesy of the Penn Museum, image #150898

the sponsoring institutions and Iraq itself. Although Woolley worked with a large team of laborers and assistants during 12 seasons of digging at Ur, he and his wife Katherine reserved for themselves the painstakingly delicate process of uncovering the most important finds. Woolley's own account of work within one tomb outlines the practice: "Most of the workmen were sent away ... so that the final work with knives and brushes could be done by my wife and myself in comparative peace. For ten days the two of us spent most of the time from sunrise to sunset lying on our tummies brushing and blowing and threading beads in their order as they lay.... You might suppose that to find three-score women all richly bedecked with jewelry could be a very thrilling experience, and so it is, in retrospect, but I'm afraid that at the moment one is much more conscious of the toil than of the thrill" (quoted in Zettler and Horne, p. 31).

One of the most spectacular discoveries in the royal burials at Ur was an elaborate lyre—a kind of harp—which rested over the body of the woman who had presumably played it during the funeral ceremony for the royal figure buried nearby (FIG. 2-6A). Like nine other lyres Woolley found at Ur, the wooden sound box of this one had long since deteriorated and disappeared, but an exquisitely crafted bull's-head finial of gold and lapis lazuli survived, along with a plaque of carved shell inlaid with bitumen, depicting at the top a heroic image of a man interlocked with and in control of two bulls, and below them three scenes of animals mimicking the activities of humans (FIG. 2-6B). On one register, a seated donkey plucks the strings of a bull lyre—similar to the instrument on which this set of images originally appeared—stabilized by a standing bear, while a fox accompanies him with a rattle. On the register above, upright animals bring food and drink for a feast. A hyena to the left—assuming the role of a butcher with a knife in his belt—carries a table piled high with meat. A lion follows, toting a large jar and pouring vessel.

The top and bottom registers are particularly intriguing in relation to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a 3,000-line poem that is Sumer's great contribution to world literature. Rich in descriptions of heroic feats and fabulous creatures, Gilgamesh's story probes the question of immortality and expresses the heroic aim to understand hostile surroundings and to find meaning in human existence. Gilgamesh encounters scorpion-men like the one pictured in the lowest register, and it is easy to see the hero himself in the commanding but unprotected bearded figure centered in the top register controlling the two human-headed bulls that flank him. Because the poem was first written down 700 years after this lyre was created, this plaque may document a very long oral tradition.

On another level, because we know lyres were used in funeral rites, this imagery might depict a heroic image

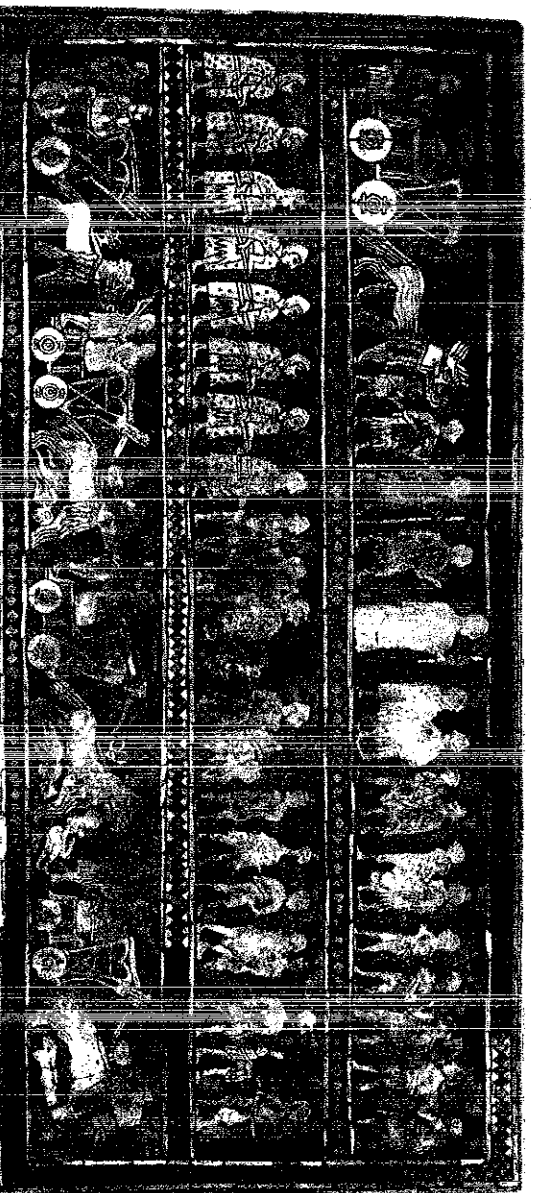
of the deceased in the top register and a funeral banquet in the realm of the dead at the bottom. Cuneiform tablets preserve songs of mourning, perhaps chanted by priests accompanied by lyres at funerals. One begins, "Oh, lady, the harp of mourning is placed on the ground," a particularly poignant statement considering that the lyres of Ur may have been buried on top of the sacrificed bodies of the women who originally played them.

Sumerian artists worked in various precious metals and in bronze, often combining them with other materials. Many of these creations were decorated with or shaped like animals or composite animal-human-bird creatures. Archaeologists discovered superb examples of their skill during the excavations of the 16 royal burials from the city of Ur. As we have seen, among the most impressive is the lyre combining wood, gold, lapis lazuli, and shell. Projecting from the base is a wood-sculpted head of a bearded bull overlaid with gold, intensely lifelike despite the blue beard created from the semiprecious gemstone lapis lazuli. Since lapis lazuli had to be imported from Afghanistan, the work documents widespread trade in the region at this time.

The Standard of Ur (FIG. 2-7)—a wooden box from the royal tombs at Ur—employs the same techniques and sumptuous materials. Here the theme is Sumerian success in battle on one side and the subsequent banquet celebrating victory on the other. The function of this box is uncertain, but its three registers of scenes are among the best surviving examples of the kind of pictorial narrative that captured the Sumerian imagination and conveyed the culture's most important messages.

The story begins on one of the plaques with a battle scene spread across the bottom register (see FIG. 2-7A). The action increases in intensity from left to right as the chariot animals (onagers, or wild asses) progress from a calm walk to a run, trampling over the fallen enemy soldiers. In the middle register, rows of Sumerian soldiers move in locked formation toward the removal of armor from the enemy at center, while the defeated shuffle toward the right with conspicuously less order and disjointed postures. The defeated army arrives from the right of the top register, moving toward the Sumerian ruler, easily recognized because hierarchic scale makes him the largest figure in the scene as well as the central figure within the frieze.

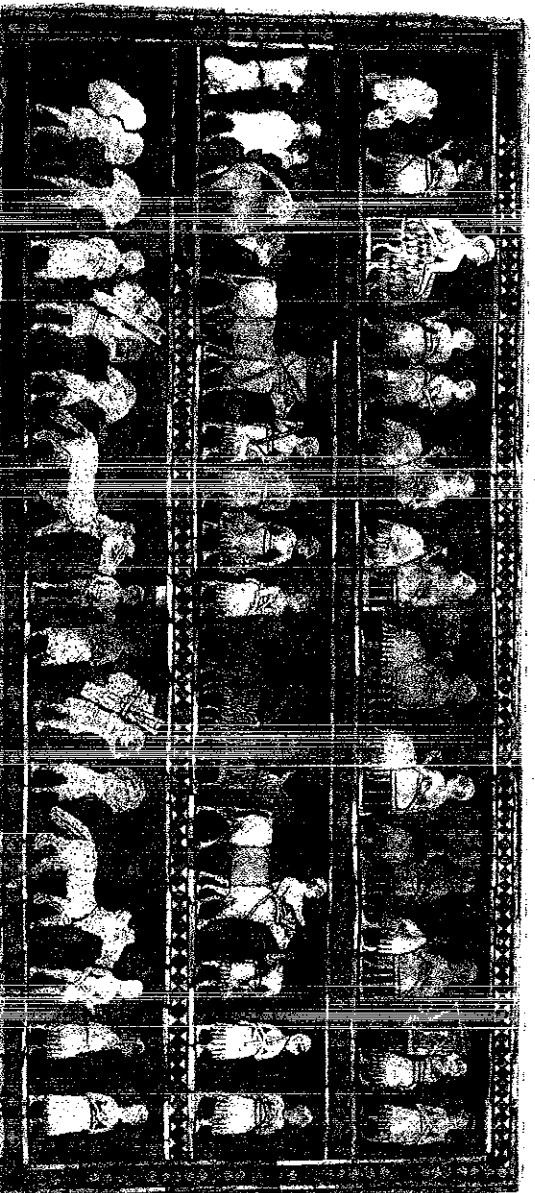
On the bottom two registers of the other side of the box (see FIG. 2-7B), servants carry the provisions necessary for a large celebration banquet. Across the top register, the ruler—this time placed off center, but clearly singled out by hierarchic scale—presides over the banquet, facing his guests, each of whom hoists a drinking cup. At far right, a woman sings to entertain the royal guests, accompanied by the playing of a bull's head lyre similar to the one in Figure 2-6A.



2-7A SCENES OF WAR

The front of a box known as the Standard of Ur, c. 2600–2500 BCE. Shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone inlaid in bitumen, originally attached to the large sides of a rectangular wooden box, each 8 × 19" (20.3 × 48.3 cm). British Museum, London.

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2-7B SCENES OF THE CELEBRATION OF VICTORY

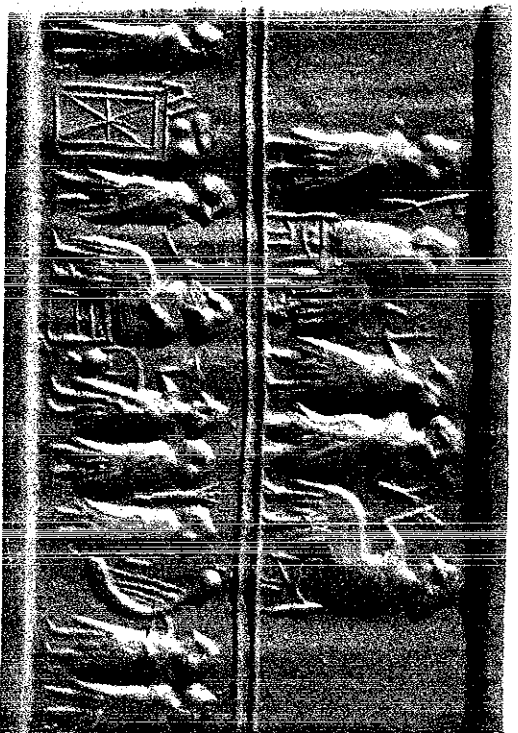
The back of a box known as the Standard of Ur, c. 2600–2500 BCE. Shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone inlaid in bitumen, originally attached to the large sides of a rectangular wooden box, each 8 × 19" (20.3 × 48.3 cm). British Museum, London.

Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

CYLINDER SEALS About the time written records appeared, Sumerians developed stamp seals for identifying documents and establishing property ownership. By 3300–3100 BCE, record keepers redesigned the stamp seal as a cylinder. Sumerian cylinder seals, usually less than 2 inches high, were generally made of a hard stone so that their tiny but intricate scenes would not wear away during repeated use. Rolled across documents on clay tablets or over the soft clay applied to a closure that needed sealing—a jar lid, a knot securing a bundle, or a door to a room—the cylinders left a raised mirror image of the design incised (cut) into their surface. Such sealing

proved the authenticity or accuracy of a text or made sure that no unauthorized person could gain access to a room or container. Individuals often acquired seals as signs of status or an appointment to a high administrative position, and the seals were buried with them along with other important possessions. The lapis lazuli **CYLINDER SEAL** (FIG. 2-8) is one of over 400 found in excavations of the royal burials at Ur.

This seal comes from the tomb of a powerful royal woman known as Puabi and was found leaning against the right arm of her body. The modern clay impression of its incised design shows two registers of a convivial banquet



2-8 CYLINDER SEAL AND ITS MODERN IMPRESSION

From the tomb of Queen Puabi (PG 800), Ur (present-day Mugayyir, Iraq), c. 2600–2500 BCE. Lapis lazuli, height $1\frac{1}{8}$ " (4 cm), diameter $\frac{25}{32}$ " (2 cm). University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.

Credit: Courtesy of the Penn Museum, image #10872

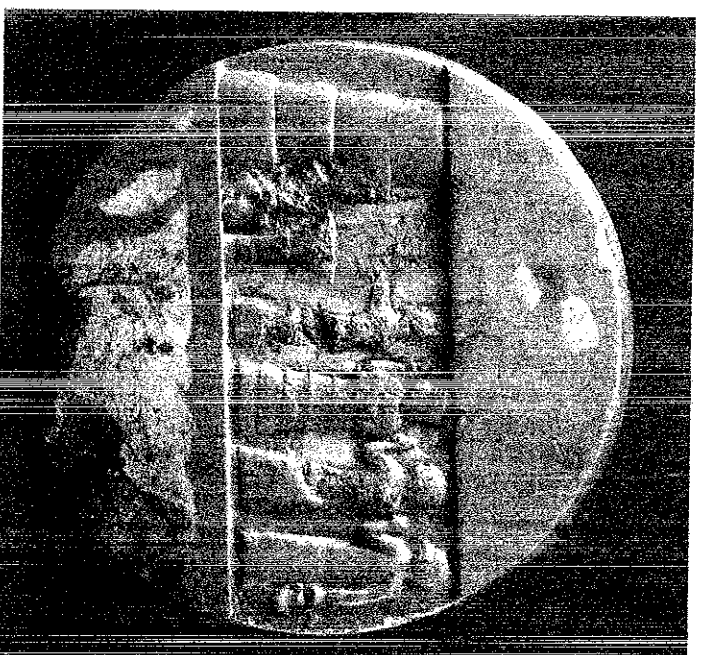
at which all the guests appear to be women, with fringed skirts and long hair gathered up in buns. Two seated figures in the upper register raise their glasses, accompanied by standing servants, one of whom, at far left, holds a fan. The single seated figure in the lower register sits in front of a table piled with food, while a figure behind her offers a cup of drink presumably drawn from the jar she carries in her other hand, reminiscent of the container held by the lion on the lyre plaque (see fig. 2-65). Four women standing to the far right provide background music.

Akkad

A people known as the Akkadians inhabited an area north of Uruk. During the Sumerian period, they adopted Sumerian culture, but unlike the Sumerians, the Akkadians spoke a Semitic language (the family of languages that includes Arabic and Hebrew). Under the powerful military and political figure Sargon I (ruled c. 2332–2279 BCE), they conquered most of Mesopotamia. For more than half a century, Sargon, “King of the Four Quarters of the World,” ruled this empire from his capital at Akkad, the actual site of which is yet to be discovered.

DISK OF ENHEDUANNA A partially preserved circular relief sculpture in alabaster, another of the many objects excavated at Ur by Woolley, is one of the most extraordinary surviving works of ancient Near Eastern art (fig. 2-9). An inscription on the back identifies the central figure on the front—slightly larger than the others and wearing a flounced wool garment and the headgear of a high priestess—as Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon I and high priestess of the moon god Nanna at his temple in Ur. Enheduanna’s name also appears in other surviving Akkadian inscriptions, most notably as the author of a series of poems and hymns dedicated to the gods Nanna and Inanna. Hers is the earliest recorded name of an author in human history.

The procession on the front of the disk commemorates the dedication of a dais (raised platform) donated by Enheduanna to the temple of Inanna in Ur. The naked man in front of her pours a ritual libation in front of a zigaret, while Enheduanna and her two followers—probably female attendants—raise their right hands before their faces in a common gesture of pious greeting (see fig. 2-12). Sargon’s appointment of his daughter to this important religious office followed an established tradition, but it may also have been the ruler’s attempt to bolster his support and assert dynastic control in the southern part of his domain, largely populated by Sumerians.



2-9 DISK OF ENHEDUANNA

From Ur (present-day Mugayyir, Iraq), c. 2300–2275 BCE. Alabaster, diameter 10" (25.6 cm). University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia.

Credit: Courtesy of the Penn Museum, image #150424

HEAD OF A RULER A life-size bronze head (FIG. 2-10) found in the northern city of Nineveh (present-day Ninua, Iraq) and thought to date from the time of Sargon is the earliest known work of hollow-cast sculpture using the lost-wax casting process (see “Lost-Wax Casting” in Chapter 14 on page 428). Its artistic and technical sophistication is spectacular.

The facial features and hairstyle may reflect a generalized ideal rather than the unique likeness of a specific individual, although the sculpture was once identified as Sargon himself. The enormous curling beard and elaborately braided hair (circling the head and ending in a knot at the back) indicate both royalty and ideal male appearance. The deliberate damage to the left side of the face and eye suggests that the head was symbolically mutilated at a later date to destroy its power. The ears and the inlaid



eyes appear to have been removed to deprive the head of its ability to hear and see.

THE STELE OF NARAM-SIN The concept of imperial authority was literally carved in stone by Sargon’s grandson Naram-Sin (see FIG. 2-1). This stele memorializing one of his military victories is one of the first works of art created to celebrate a specific achievement of an individual ruler. The original inscription—framed in a rectangular box just above Naram-Sin’s head—states that the stele commemorates his victory over the Lullubi people of the Zagros Mountains. Watched over by sun gods (symbolized by the rayed suns at the top of the stele) and wearing the horrid helmet-crown previously associated only with gods, the hierarchically scaled king stands proudly above his soldiers and his fallen foes, silhouetted against the sky next to the smooth surface of a mountain.

This expression of physical prowess and political power was erected by Naram-Sin in the courtyard of the temple of the sun god Shamash in Sippar, but it did not stay there permanently. During the twelfth century BCE—over a thousand years after the end of Akkadian rule—the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte conquered Sippar and transported the stele of Naram-Sin back to his own capital in Susa, where he rededicated it to an Elamite god. Shutruk-Nahhunte also added a new explanatory inscription in a diagonal band on the mountain in front of Naram-Sin, recounting his own victory and claiming the monument as a statement of his own military and political prowess. The stele remained in Susa until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was excavated by a French archaeologist and taken once more, this time for exhibition in Paris at the Louvre.

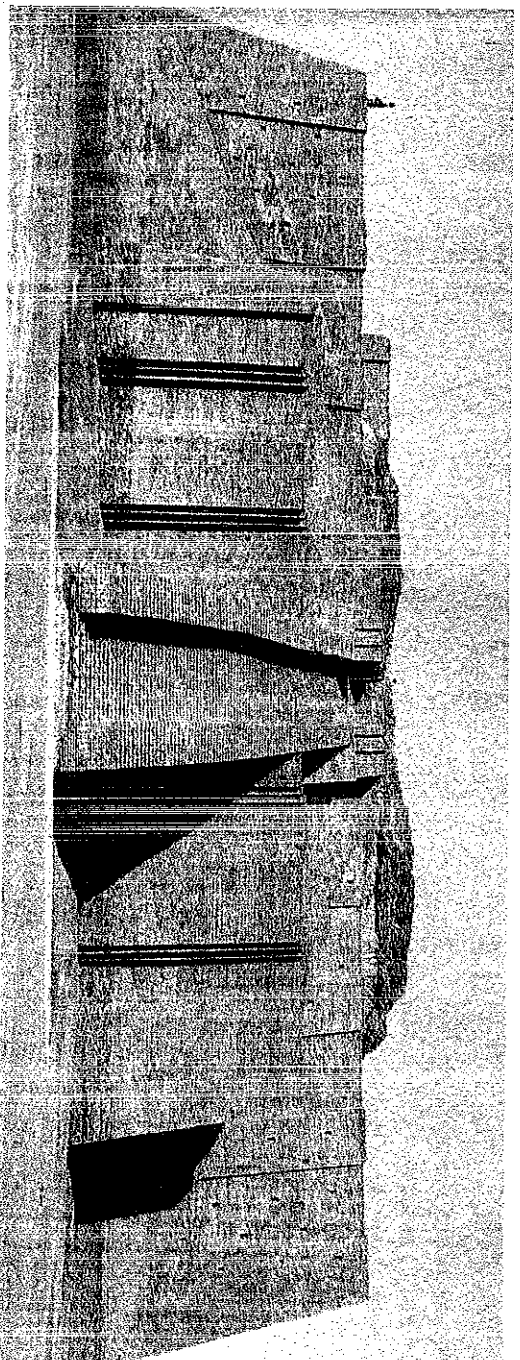
Ur and Lagash

The Akkadian Empire fell around 2180 BCE to the Gutu, a mountain people from the northeast. For a brief time, the Gutu controlled most of the Mesopotamian plain, but ultimately Sumerians under the leadership of King Urammu of Ur regained control of the region and expelled the Gutu in 2112 BCE. Urammu sponsored magnificent building campaigns, notably a ziggurat dedicated to the moon god Nanna, also called Sin (FIG. 2-11). Although located on the site of an earlier temple, this imposing structure—mud-brick faced with kiln-dried brick set with bitumen—was not the accidental result of successive rebuilding. Its base is a rectangle of 205 by 141 feet, with three sets of stairs converging at an imposing entrance gate atop the first of what were three platforms. Each platform’s walls slope outward from top to base, probably to prevent rainwater from forming puddles and eroding the mud-brick pavement below. The first two levels of the ziggurat and their retaining walls are recent reconstructions.

2-10 HEAD OF A MAN (KNOWN AS AN AKKADIAN RULER)

From Nineveh (present-day Ninua, Iraq), c. 2300–2200 BCE. Copper alloy, height 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (36.5 cm). Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

Credit: © 2016 Photo Scala, Florence



2-11 NANNA ZIGGURAT

Ur (present-day Muqaiyir, Iraq), c. 2100–2050 BCE.

Credit: © Michael S. Yameshita/CORBIS

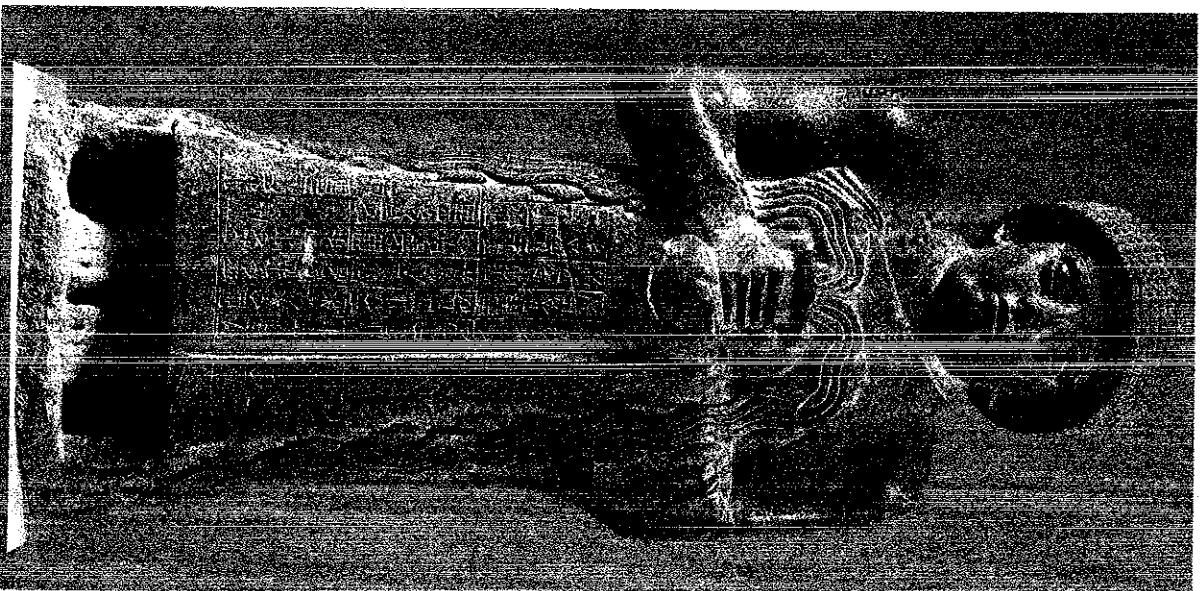
One large Sumerian city-state remained independent throughout this period: Lagash, whose capital was Girsu (present-day Telloh, Iraq), on the Tigris River. Lagash's ruler, Gudea, built and restored many temples, and within them, following the venerable Mesopotamian tradition, he placed votive statues representing himself as governor and embodiment of just rule (FIG. 2-12). The statues are made of diorite, a very hard stone; the difficulty of carving it may have prompted sculptors to use compact, simplified forms for the portraits. Or perhaps it was the desire for powerful, stylized images that inspired the choice of this imported stone. Twenty of the statues survive, making Gudea a familiar figure in the study of ancient Near Eastern art.

Images of Gudea present him as a strong, peaceful, pious ruler worthy of divine favor. Whether sitting or standing, he wears a long garment, which provides plenty of smooth space for long cuneiform inscriptions. In this imposing statue, only 2½ feet tall, his right shoulder is bare, and he wears a cap with a wide brim carved with a pattern to represent fleece. He holds a vessel in front of him from which life-giving water flows in two streams, each filled with leaping fish. The text on his garment states that he dedicated himself, the statue, and its temple to the goddess Geshinanna, the divine poet and interpreter of dreams. The sculptor has emphasized the power centers of the human body: the eyes, head, and arms. Gudea's face is youthful and serene, and his eyes—oversized and wide open—perpetually meet the gaze of the deity with intense concentration.

2-12 VOTIVE STATUE OF GUDEA

From Girsu (present-day Telloh, Iraq), c. 2090 BCE. Diorite, height 29" (73.7 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Credit: Photo © RMN/D. Arnaudet/Louvre, Paris

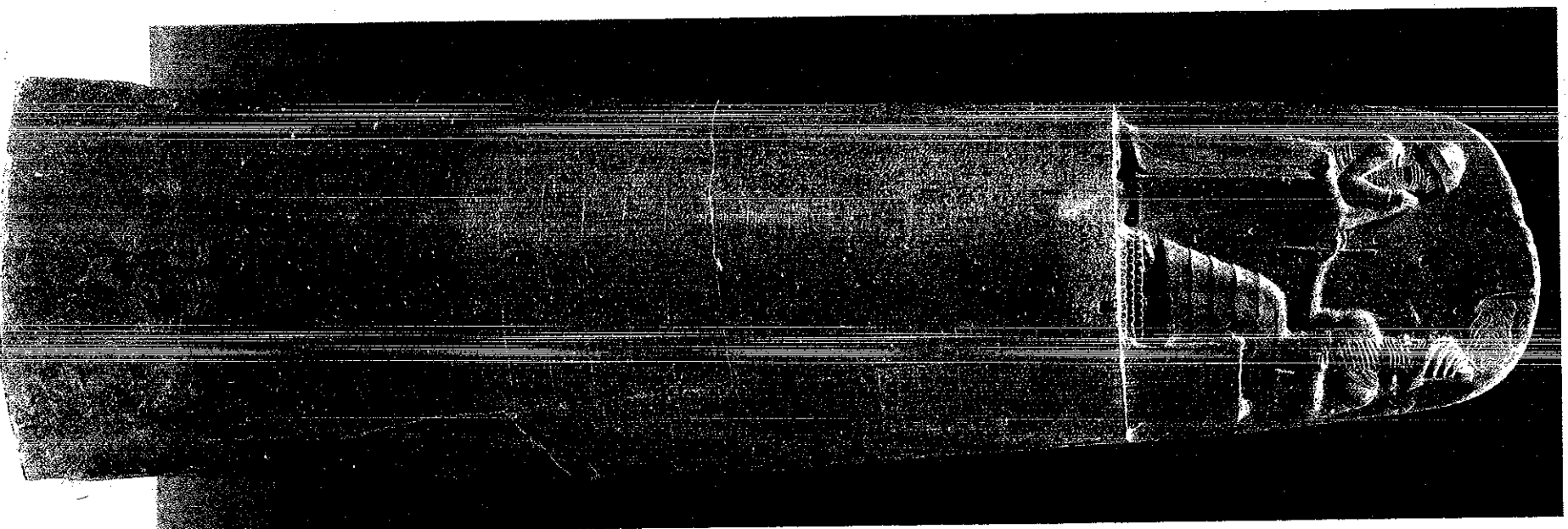


Babylon

For more than 300 years, political turmoil and stable government alternated in Mesopotamia, until the Amorites (a Semitic-speaking people from the Syrian desert to the west) reunited the region under Hammurabi (ruled 1792–1750 BCE). Hammurabi's capital city was Babylon, and his subjects were called Babylonians. Among Hammurabi's achievements was a written legal code that detailed the laws of his realm and the penalties for breaking them.

THE CODE OF HAMMURABI The Babylonian ruler Hammurabi's systematic codification of his people's rights, duties, and punishments for wrongdoing was engraved on a black basalt slab known as the **STELE OF HAMMURABI** (FIG. 2-13). This imposing artifact, therefore, is both a work of art that depicts a legendary event and a precious historical document.

At the top of the stele, we see Hammurabi standing in an attitude of prayer before Shamash, the sun god and god of justice. Rays rise from Shamash's shoulders as he sits on a backless throne, crowned by a conical horned cap and holding additional symbols of his power—the measuring rod and the rope circle. Shamash gives the law to the king, his intermediary, and the codes of justice flow forth underneath them in horizontal bands of exquisitely engraved cuneiform signs. The idea of god-given laws engraved on



2-13 STELE OF HAMMURABI

Probably from Sippar, found at Susa (present-day Shush, Iran), c. 1792–1750 BCE. Basalt, height of stele approx. 7'4" (2.25 m), height of figural relief 28" (71.1 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Credit: Photo © RMN/Hervé Lewandowski

stone tablets will have a long tradition in the ancient Near East. About 500 years later, Moses, the lawgiver of Israel, received two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:19).

A prologue on the front of the stela lists the temples Hammurabi has restored, and an epilogue on the back glorifies him as a peacemaker, but most of the stela “publishes” the laws themselves, guaranteeing uniform treatment of people throughout his kingdom. Within the inscription, Hammurabi declares that he intends “to cause justice to prevail in the land and to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak nor the weak the strong.” Most of the 300 or so entries that follow deal with commercial and property matters. Only 68 relate to domestic problems, and a mere 20 deal with physical assault.

The wealth, class, and gender of the parties determine the nature of their punishment—the rights of the wealthy are favored over the poor, citizens over slaves, men over women. Most famous are instances when punishments are specifically tailored to fit crimes—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a broken bone for a broken bone. Crimes such as stealing from a temple or palace, helping a slave to escape, or being insubordinate in the army merit the death penalty. Trial by water and fire could also be imposed, such as when an adulterous woman and her lover were thrown into the water; if they did not drown, they were considered innocent. Although some of the punishments may seem excessive today, Hammurabi was breaking new ground by regulating laws and punishments rather than leaving them to the whims of rulers or officials.

Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians

How do the design, ornament, and meaning of great palace complexes and urban development projects express the power of Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian rulers?

Around 1400 BCE, a people called the Assyrians rose to dominance in northern Mesopotamia. After about 1000 BCE, they began to conquer neighboring regions. By the end of the ninth century BCE, the Assyrians controlled most of Mesopotamia, and by the early seventh century BCE they had extended their influence as far west as Egypt. Soon afterward they succumbed to internal weakness and external enemies, and by 600 BCE their empire had collapsed.

Assyrian rulers built huge palaces atop high platforms inside a series of fortified cities that served at one time or another as Assyrian capitals. They decorated these palaces with shallow stone reliefs of battle and hunting scenes, Assyrian victories, presentations of tribute to the king, and religious imagery.

Assurnasirpal II

During his reign (883–859 BCE), the Assyrian ruler Assurnasirpal II established his capital at Kalhu (present-day Nimrud, Iraq), on the east bank of the Tigris River, and undertook an ambitious building program. His architects



2-14 ASSURNASIRPAL II KILLING LIONS

From the palace complex of Assurnasirpal II, Kalhu (present-day Nimrud, Iraq), c. 875–860 BCE. Alabaster, height approx. 39" (99.1 cm).
British Museum, London.

Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

fortified the city with mud-brick walls 5 miles long and 42 feet high, and his engineers constructed a canal that irrigated fields and provided water for the expanded population of the city. According to an inscription commemorating the event, Assurnasirpal gave a banquet for 69,574 people to celebrate the dedication of the new capital in 863 BCE.

Most of the buildings in Kalhu were made from mud bricks, but limestone and alabaster slabs—more impressive and durable—covered the walls with architectural decoration. Colossal guardian figures flanked the grand and often decorated major portals, and the panels covering the brick walls were carved with scenes in low relief (sculpted relief that projects only slightly from a recessed

background) of the king participating in religious rituals, war campaigns, and hunting expeditions.

In a vivid lion-hunting scene (FIG. 2-14), Assurnasirpal II stands in a chariot pulled by galloping horses and draws his bow against an attacking lion, advancing from the rear with arrows already protruding from its body. Another expiring beast collapses on the ground under the horses. This was probably a ceremonial hunt, in which the king, protected by men with swords and shields, rode back and forth killing animals as they were released one by one into an enclosed area. The immediacy of this image marks a shift in Mesopotamian art away from a sense of timeless solemnity and toward a more dramatic, even emotional, involvement with the event portrayed.

A Closer Look

ENEMIES CROSSING THE EUPHRATES TO ESCAPE ASSYRIAN ARCHERS

These Assyrian archers are outfitted in typical fashion with protective boots, short “kilts,” pointed helmets, and swords, as well as bows and quivers of arrows. Their smaller scale conveys a sense of depth and spatial positioning in this relief, reinforced by the size and placement of the trees.

The detailed landscape setting documents the swirling water of the river, its rocky banks, and the airy environment of the trees, one of which is clearly a palm.

The oblique line of the river bank and the overlapping of the swimmers convey a sense of depth.

If this is the ruler of the enemy *clade*, he seems shocked into powerlessness by the Assyrian invasion. Note the contrast between his lowered weapon and those of the archers of the Assyrian vanguard.



The long robes of the three enemy swimmers show their high status. They are not ordinary foot soldiers.

The two lower swimmers were clearly taken by surprise. Already in retreat, they are still blowing through tubes to inflate their flotation devices, made from sewn animal skin.

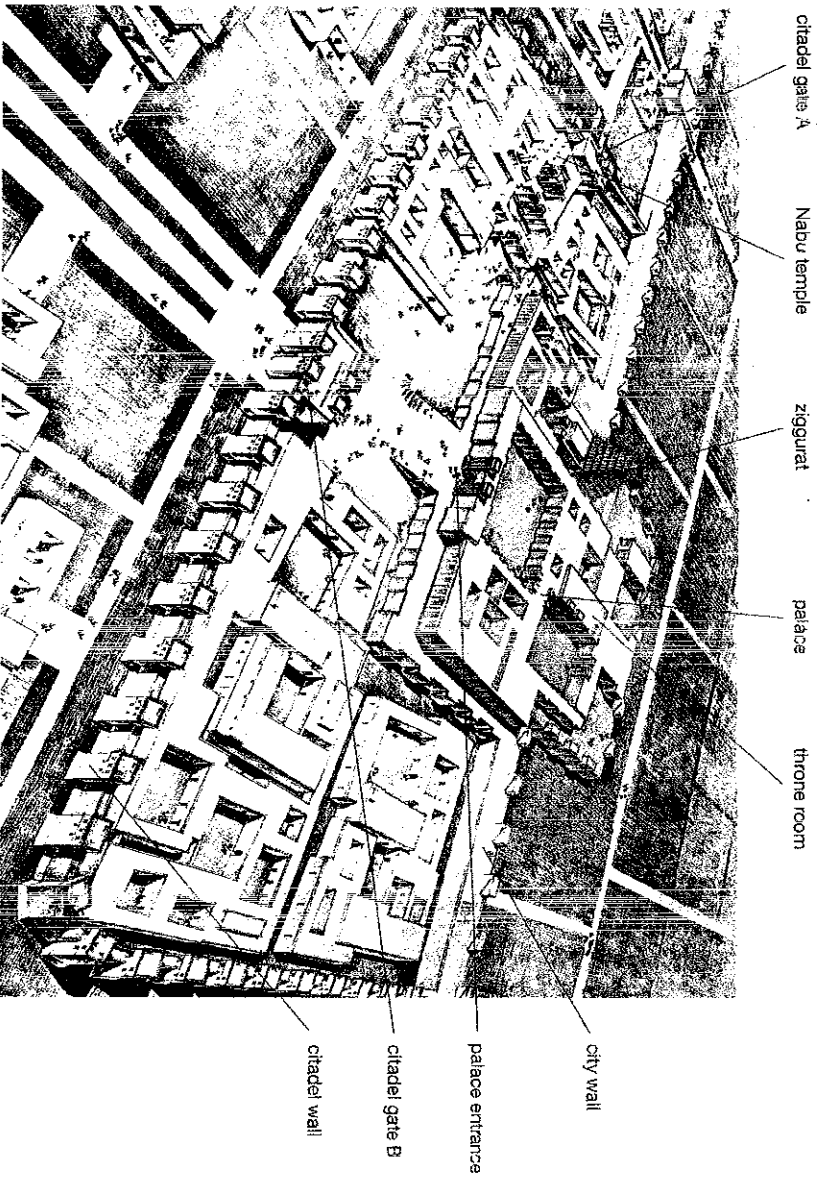
This beardless swimmer is probably a eunuch, many of whom served as high officials in ancient Near Eastern courts.

Two figures raise their hands in despair, reacting to the fate of their arrow-riddled comrades.

2-15 ENEMIES CROSSING THE EUPHRATES TO ESCAPE ASSYRIAN ARCHERS

Palace complex of Assurnasirpal II, Kalhu (present-day Nimrud, Iraq), c. 875–860 BCE. Alabaster, height approx. 39" (99.1 cm).
British Museum, London.

Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



2-16 RECONSTRUCTION DRAWING OF THE CITADEL AND PALACE COMPLEX OF SARGON II

Dur Sharrukin (present-day Khorsabad, Iraq), c. 721–706 BCE. The Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago.

Credit: Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

In another palace relief, the scene shifts from royal ceremony to the heat of battle, set within a detailed landscape (see “Closer Look” opposite). Three of the Assyrians’ enemies—two using flotation devices made of inflated animal skins—swim across a raging river, retreating from a vanguard of Assyrian archers who kneel at its banks to launch their assault. The scene evokes a specific event from 878 BCE described in the annals of Assurnasirpal. As the Assyrian king overtook the army of an enemy leader named Kudurru near the present-day town of Anu, both leader and soldiers escaped into the Euphrates River in an attempt to save their lives.

Sargon II

Sargon II (ruled 721–706 BCE) built a new Assyrian capital at Dur Sharrukin (present-day Khorsabad, Iraq). On the northwest side of the capital a walled citadel, or fortress, straddled the city wall (Fig. 2-16). Within the citadel Sargon’s palace complex (the group of buildings where the ruler governed and resided) stood on a raised, fortified platform about 40 feet high—demonstrating the use of art as political propaganda.

Guarded by two towers, the palace complex could be entered only by a wide ramp leading up from an open

square, around which the homes of important government and religious officials were clustered. Beyond the ramp was the main courtyard with service buildings on the right and temples on the left. The heart of the palace lay past the main courtyard, protected by a reinforced wall with only two small, off-center doors. Within the inner compound was a second courtyard lined with narrative relief panels showing tribute bearers. Visitors would have waited to see the king in this courtyard that functioned as an open-air audience hall: once granted access to the royal throne room, they would have passed through a stone gate flanked, like the other gates of the citadel and palace (Fig. 2-17), by awesome guardian figures. These colossal beings, known as *Iamassus*, combined the bearded head of a man, the powerful body of a lion or bull, the wings of an eagle, and the horned headdress of a god.

In an open space between the palace complex and temple complex at Dur Sharrukin rose a ziggurat declaring the might of Assyria’s kings and symbolizing their claim to empire. It probably had seven levels, each about 18 feet high and painted a different color (see Fig. 2-16). The four levels still remaining were once white, black, blue, and red. Instead of separate flights of stairs between the levels, a single, squared-off spiral ramp rose continuously around the exterior from the base.



2-17 GUARDIAN FIGURES AT GATE A OF THE CITADEL OF SARGON II DURING ITS EXCAVATION IN THE 1840S
 Dür Sharrukín (present-day Khorsabad, Iraq), c. 721–706 BCE.

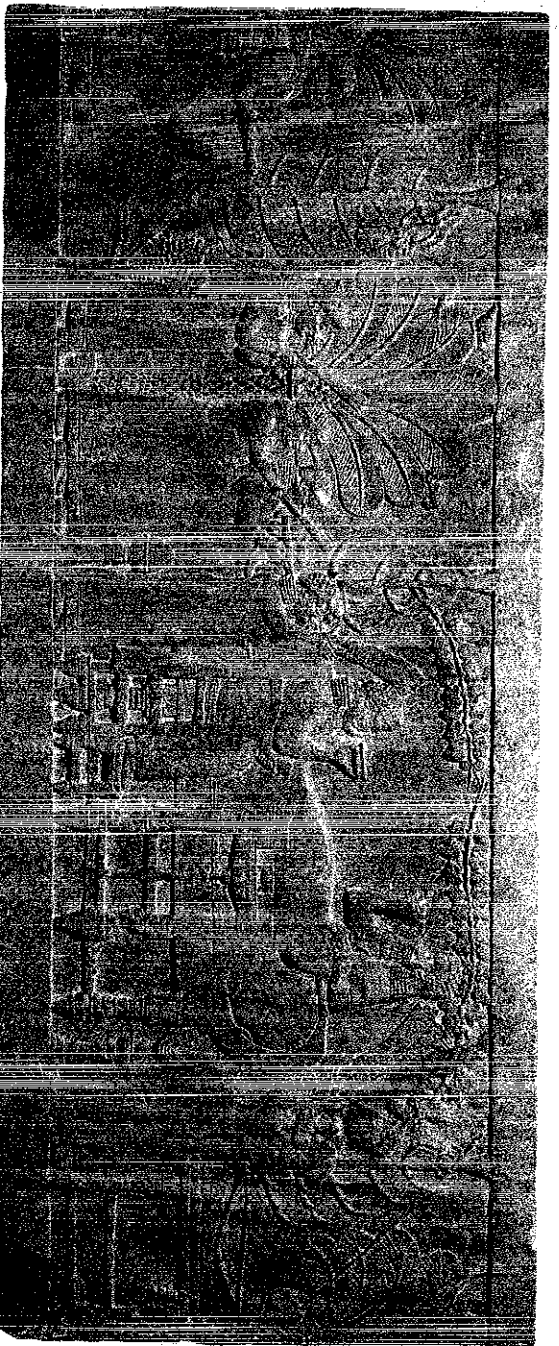
Credit: World Tourism Organization; Iraq

Assurbanipal

Assurbanipal (ruled 669–c. 627 BCE), king of the Assyrians three generations after Sargon II, maintained his capital at Nineveh. Like that of Assurnasirpal II two centuries earlier, his palace walls were faced with alabaster panels carved with pictorial narratives in low relief. Most show Assurbanipal and his subjects in battle or hunting.

Occasionally, there are also scenes of palace life. An unusually peaceful example shows the king and queen relaxing in a pleasure garden (fig. 2-18). The king reclines

on a couch, the queen sits in a chair at his feet, and a musician plays at far left. Three servants arrive from the left with trays of food, while others wave whisks to protect the royal couple from insects. The king has taken off his rich necklace and hung it on his couch, and he has laid his weapons—a sword, a bow, and a quiver of arrows—on the table behind him. However, this apparently tranquil domestic scene is actually a victory celebration. The severed head of his vanquished enemy hangs from a tree at the far left.



2-18 ASSURBANIPAL AND HIS QUEEN IN THE GARDEN

From the palace at Nineveh (present-day Ninua, Iraq), c. 647 BCE. Alabaster, height approx. 21" (53.3 cm). British Museum, London.

Credit: © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

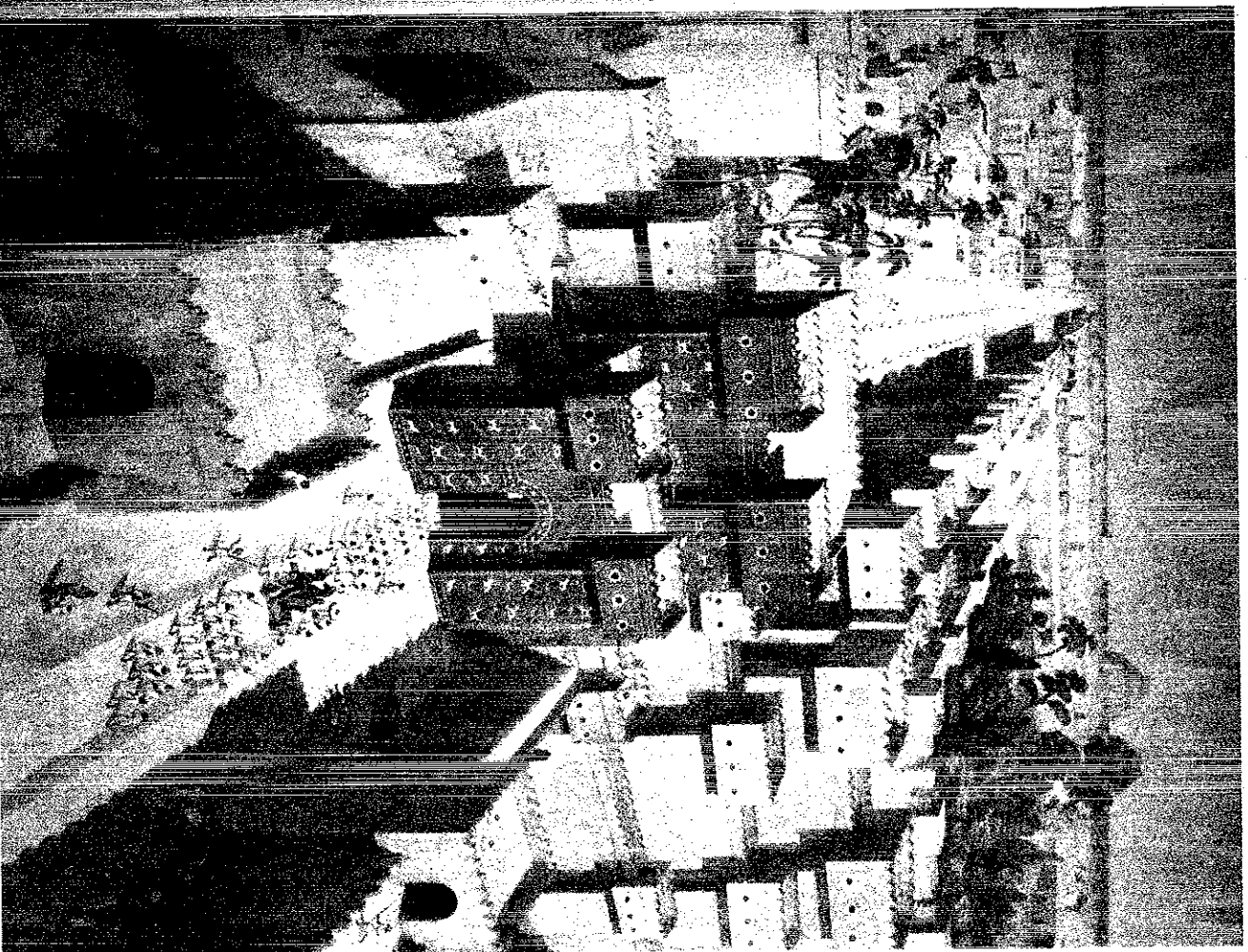
Neo-Babylonia

At the end of the seventh century BCE, Assyria was invaded by the Medes, a people from western Iran who were allied with the Babylonians and the Scythians, a nomadic people from northern Asia (present-day Russia and Ukraine). In 612 BCE, the Medes' army captured Nineveh. When the dust had settled, Assyria was no more and the Neo-Babylonians—so named because they recaptured the splendor that had marked Babylon 12 centuries earlier under Hammurabi—controlled a region that stretched from present-day Turkey to northern Arabia and from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean Sea.

The most famous Neo-Babylonian ruler was Nebuchadnezzar II (ruled 605–562 BCE), notorious today for his

suppression of the Jews as recorded in the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible, in which he may have been confused with the final Neo-Babylonian ruler, Nabonidus. A great patron of architecture, Nebuchadnezzar II built temples dedicated to the Babylonian gods throughout his realm and transformed Babylon—the cultural, political, and economic hub of his empire—into one of the most splendid cities of its day.

Babylon straddled the Euphrates River, its two sections joined by a bridge. The older, eastern sector was traversed by the Processional Way, the route taken by religious processions honoring the city's patron god, Marduk (FIG. 2-19). This street, paved with large stone slabs set in a bed of bitumen, was up to 66 feet



**2-19 RECONSTRUCTION
DRAWING OF BABYLON IN
THE 6TH CENTURY BCE**
The Oriental Institute Museum,
University of Chicago.

The palace of Nebuchadnezzar II, with its famous Hanging Gardens, can be seen just behind and to the right of the Ishtar Gate, west of the Processional Way. The Marduk Ziggurat looms in the far distance on the east bank of the Euphrates.

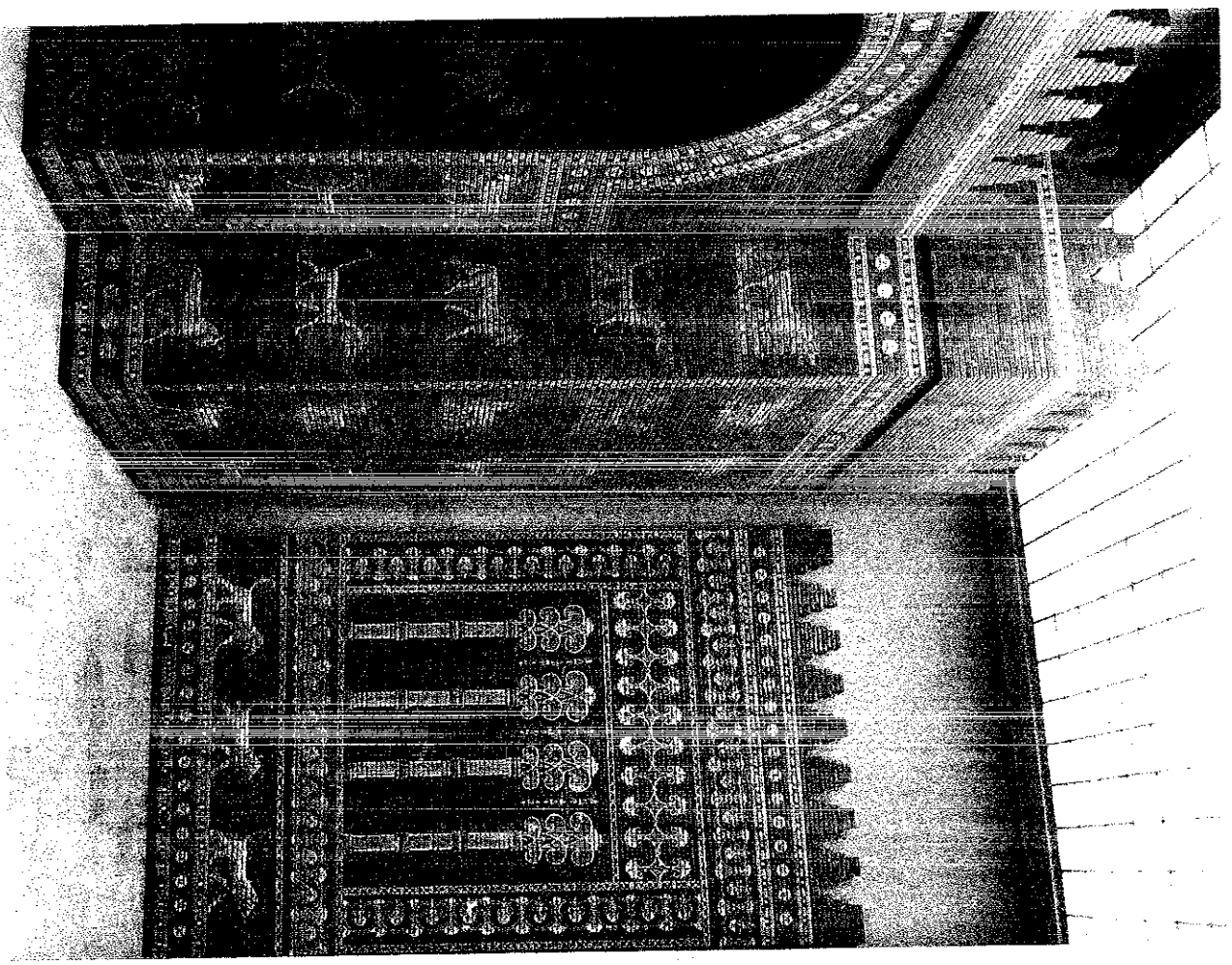
Credit: Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

2-20 ISHTAR GATE AND THRONE ROOM WALL

Reconstruction; originally from Babylon (present-day Babil, Iraq), c. 575 BCE. Glazed brick, height of gate originally 40' (12.2 m) with towers rising 100' (30.5 m). Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz.

The Ishtar Gate is decorated with tiers of dragons (with the head and body of a snake, the forelegs of a lion, and the hind legs of a bird of prey) that were sacred to Marduk; bulls associated with Adad, the storm god; and lions associated with Ishtar. Now reconstructed in a Berlin museum, it is installed next to a panel from the throne room in Nebuchadnezzar's nearby palace, in which lions walk beneath stylized palm trees.

Credit: © 2016 Photo Scala, Florence/bpk, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin



wide at some points. It ran from the Euphrates bridge through the temple district and palaces and finally through the Ishtar Gate, the ceremonial entrance to the city.

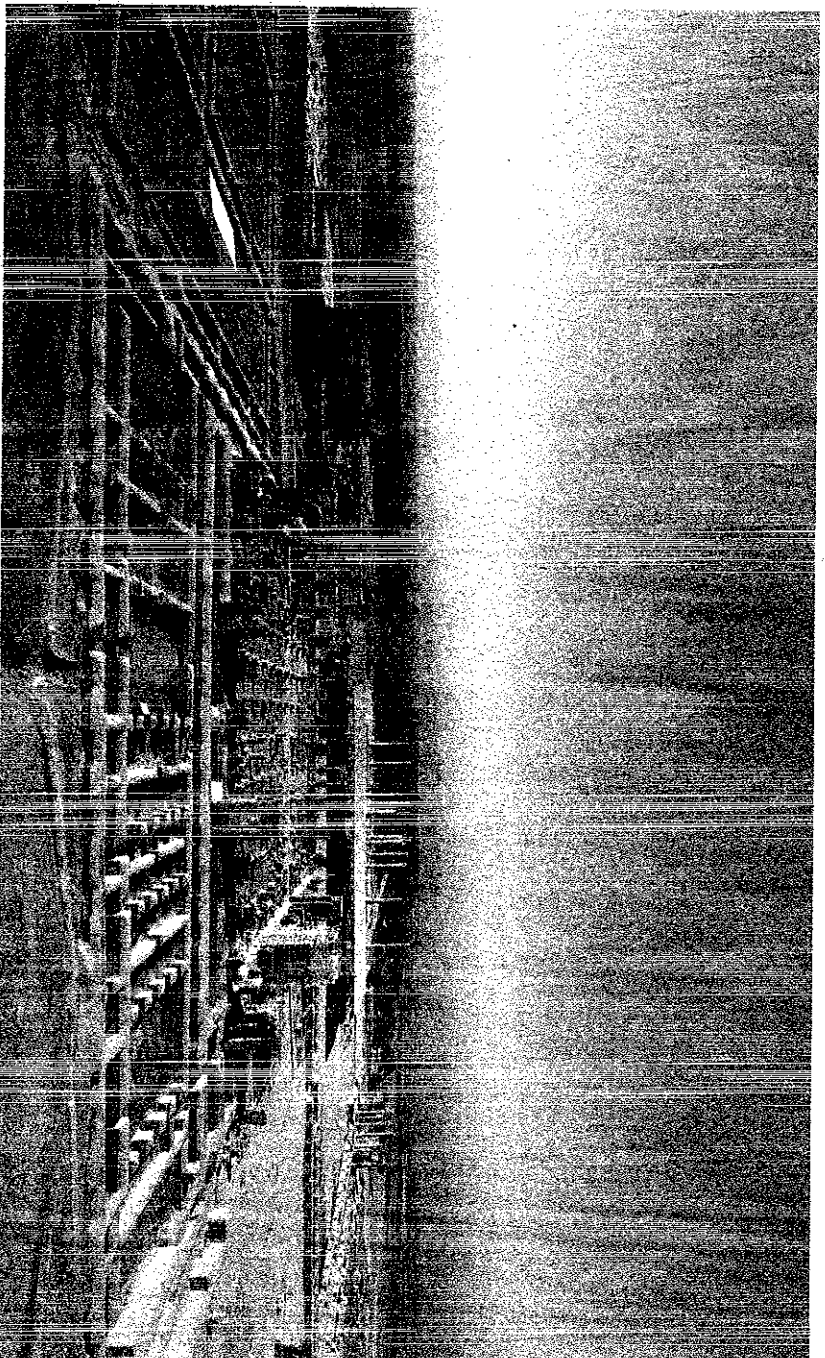
The Ishtar Gate's four crenellated towers (crenellations are notched walls for military defense) symbolized Babylonian power (fig. 2-20). Beyond the Ishtar Gate, dark blue glazed bricks covered the walls on either side of the route. The glaze on the bricks was a film of colored glass adhered to their surface after firing, a process used since about 1600 BCE. Against that blue background, specially molded turquoise-, blue-, and gold-colored bricks formed images of striding lions, mascots of the goddess Ishtar, as well as the dragons that were associated with Marduk.

Persia

What is the impact of the Persian conquest on the history of ancient Near Eastern architecture?

In the sixth century BCE the Persians, a formerly nomadic Indo-European-speaking people, began to seize power in Mesopotamia. From the region of Parsa, or Persis (present-day Fars, Iran), they established a vast empire. The rulers of this new empire traced their ancestry to a semilegendary Persian king named Achaemenes, and consequently they are known as the Achaemenids.

The dramatic expansion of the Achaemenids began in 559 BCE with the ascension of a remarkable leader, Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great, ruled 559–530 BCE). By the



2-21 AERIAL VIEW OF THE CEREMONIAL COMPLEX, PERSEPOLIS

Iran, 518–c. 460 BCE

Credit: Arazu/Photoia

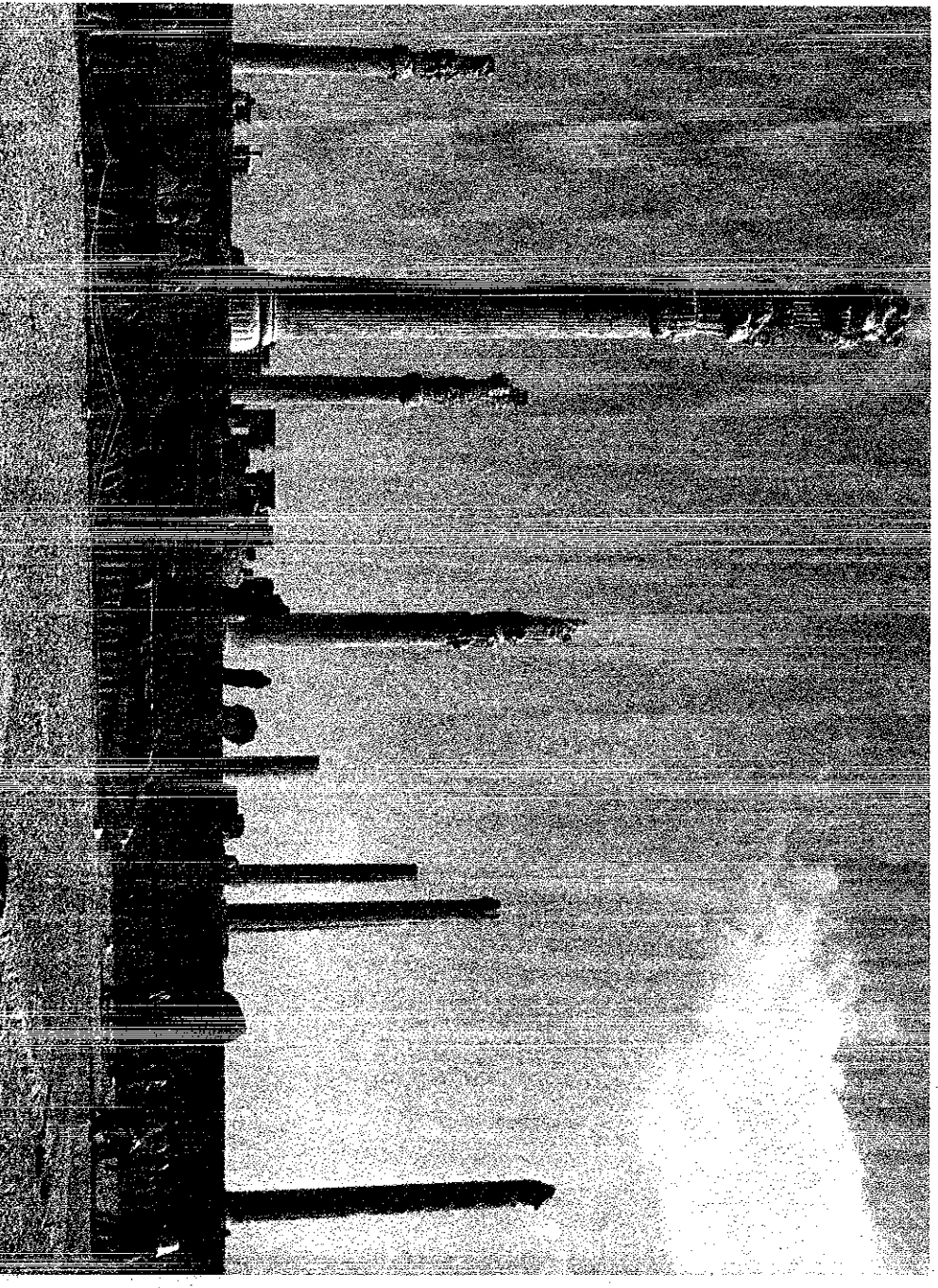
time of his death, the Persian Empire included Babylonia, Media (which stretched across present-day northern Iran through Anatolia), and some of the Aegean islands far to the west. Only the Greeks stood fast against them (see Chapter 5). When Darius I (ruled 521–486 BCE) took the throne, he could proclaim, “I am Darius, great King, King of Kings, King of countries, King of this earth.”

An able administrator, Darius organized the Persian lands into 20 tribute-paying areas under Persian governors. He often left local rulers in place beneath the governors. This practice, along with a tolerance for diverse native customs and religions, won the Persians the loyalty of large numbers of their subjects. Like many powerful rulers, Darius created palaces and citadels as visible symbols of his authority. He made Susa his first capital and built a 32-acre administrative compound there.

In about 515 BCE, Darius began construction of Parsa, a new capital in the Persian homeland, today known by its Greek name: **PERSEPOLIS**. It is one of the best-preserved and most impressive ancient sites in the Near East (fig. 2-21). Darius imported materials, workers, and artists from all over his empire. He even ordered work to be executed in Egypt and transported to his capital. The result was a new multicultural style of art that combined many different traditions—Persian, Median, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek.

In Assyrian fashion, the imperial complex at Persepolis was set on a raised platform 40 feet high and measuring 1,500 by 900 feet, accessible only via a single approach made of wide, shallow steps that could be ascended on horseback. Its rectangular grid plan is comparable to Egyptian and Greek cities. Darius lived to see the completion only of the Apadana (audience hall), a treasury, and a very small palace for himself. The **APADANA**, set above the rest of the complex on a second terrace (fig. 2-22), had open porches on three sides and a square hall large enough to hold several thousand people. Darius’s son Xerxes I (ruled 485–465 BCE) added a sprawling palace complex for himself, enlarged the treasury building, and began a vast new public reception space, the Hall of 100 Columns.

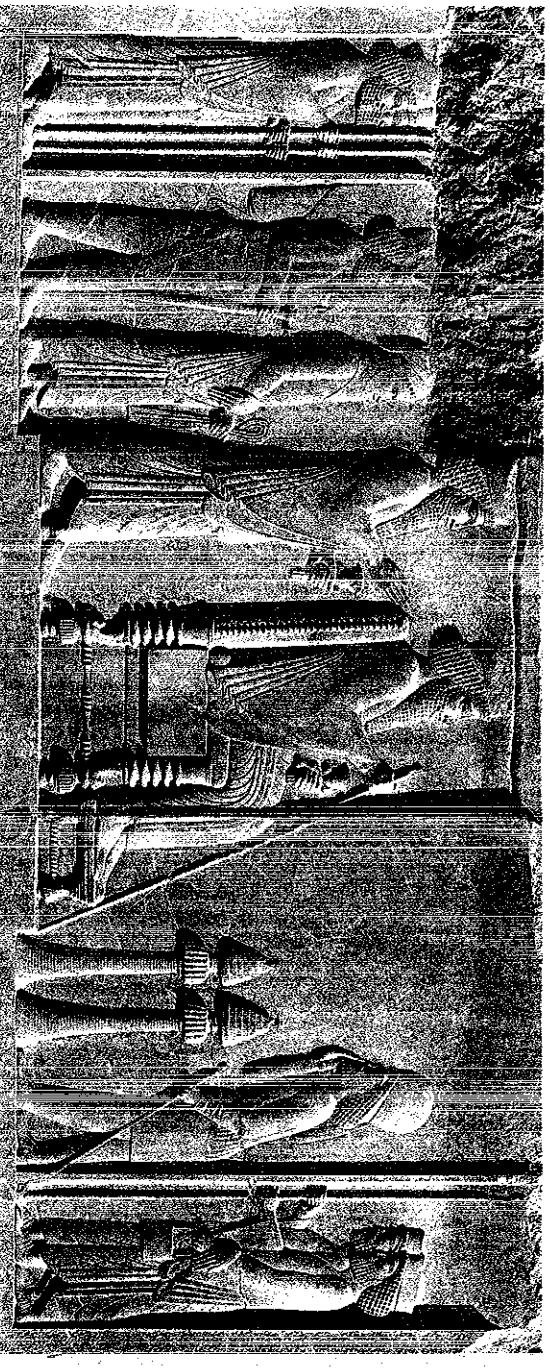
The central stair of Darius’s Apadana displays reliefs of animal combat, tiered ranks of royal guards (the “10,000 Immortals”), and delegations of tribute-bearers. Here, lions attack bulls on either side of the Persian generals. Such animal combats (a theme found throughout the Near East) emphasize the ferocity of the leaders and their men. Ranks of warriors cover the walls with repeated patterns and seem ready to defend the palace. The elegant drawing, balanced composition, and sleek modeling of figures reflect the Persians’ knowledge of Greek art and perhaps the use of Greek artists. Other reliefs throughout



2-22 APADANA (AUDIENCE HALL) OF DARIUS AND XERXES

Ceremonial complex, Persepolis, Iran, 518–c. 460 BCE.

Credit: © Melba Photo Agency/Alamy Stock Photo



2-23 DARIUS AND XERXES RECEIVING TRIBUTE

Detail of a relief from the stairway leading to the Apadana, Persepolis, Iran, 491–486 BCE. Limestone, height 8'4" (2.54 m). The Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago.

Credit: Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Persepolis depict displays of allegiance or economic prosperity. In one example, once the centerpiece, Darius holds an audience while his son and heir, Xerxes, listens from behind the throne (FIG. 2-23). Such panels would have looked quite different when they were freshly painted in bright colors, with metal objects such as Darius's crown and necklace covered in gold leaf (sheets of hammered gold).

At its height, the Persian Empire extended from Africa to India. From Persepolis, Darius in 490 BCE and Xerxes in 480 BCE sent their armies west to conquer Greece, but

mainland Greeks successfully resisted the armies of the Achaemenids, preventing them from advancing into Europe. Indeed, it was a Greek who ultimately put an end to their empire. In 334 BCE, Alexander the Great of Macedonia (d. 323 BCE) crossed into Anatolia and swept through Mesopotamia, defeating Darius III and nearly destroying Persepolis in 330 BCE. Although the Achaemenid Empire was at an end, Persia eventually revived. The Persian style in art continued to influence Greek artists (see Chapter 5) and ultimately became one of the foundations of Islamic art (see Chapter 9).

Think About It

- 1 Describe and characterize the way human figures are represented in the Sumerian votive figures of Eshnunna. What are the potential relationships between style and function?
- 2 Discuss the development of relief sculpture in the ancient Near East. Choose two specific examples, one from the Sumerian period and one from the Assyrian period, and explain how symbols and stories are combined to express ideas that were important to these two cultures.
- 3 Select two rulers discussed in this chapter and explain how each preserved his legacy through commissioned works of art and/or architecture.
- 4 How did the excavations of Sir Leonard Woolley contribute to our understanding of the art of the ancient Near East?

Crosscurrents

Both of these works depict a social gathering involving food and drink, but they are vastly different in scale, materials, and physical context. How do the factors of scale and materials contribute to the visual appearance of the scenes? How does physical context and audience affect the meaning of what is portrayed?



FIG. 2-8



FIG. 2-18

